

## Article

# God of Montaigne, Spinoza, and Derrida—The Marrano (Crypto)Theology of Survival

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**Abstract:** In this essay I offer an outline of a theology of survival as it emerges from the writings of the three modern Marrano thinkers: Michel de Montaigne, Baruch Spinoza, and Jacques Derrida. I will argue that, in their thought which is deeply concerned with the apology of life, the Marrano choice of living on over the martyrological death becomes affirmed as the right thing to do despite the price of forced conversion—and that this choice, once reflected and accepted, modifies the Jewish doctrine of life (*torat hayim*), by adding to it a new messianic dimension. In my interpretation, the Marranos will emerge as the agents of the messianic inversion, leading from the tragic predicament of the victims of coercion to the radical hope of the “rejected stones” and capable of once again reinventing and rejuvenating the messianic message of the Abrahamic religions, conceived as God’s superior commandment to choose life. From Montaigne, through Spinoza, to Derrida, life understood primarily as survival becomes an object of a new affirmation: it begins to glow as a secret treasure of Judaism which the Marranos simultaneously left behind and preserved in a new messianic-universal form.

**Keywords:** Marranism; survival; choice of life; modern cryptotheology; Montaigne; Spinoza; Derrida



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I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing. Therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live.

Deuteronomy 30:19

In this essay I want to offer an outline of a theology of survival as it emerges from the writings of the three modern Marrano thinkers: Michel de Montaigne, Baruch Spinoza, and Jacques Derrida. I will argue that, in their thought which is deeply concerned with the apology of life, the Marrano choice of living on over the martyrological death becomes affirmed as the right thing to do despite the price of forced conversion—and that this choice, once reflected and accepted, modifies the Jewish doctrine of life (*torat hayim*), by adding to it a new messianic dimension. In my interpretation, the Marranos will emerge as the agents of the messianic inversion leading from the tragic predicament of the victims of coercion to the radical hope of the “rejected stones” and capable of once again reinventing and rejuvenating the messianic message of the Abrahamic religions, conceived as God’s superior commandment to choose life.<sup>1</sup> The *conversos*, seemingly excluded from the Judaic tradition, would thus—paradoxically—come closer to the messianic core of Judaism, understood by them as the highest imperative of *u-baharta ba-hayim*—“Choose life!” (Deut 30:19)—that overrules every possible choice of death, including also the glorious death of *kiddush ha-Shem*, which the Jewish tradition designated as the privileged form of faithfulness (although, as it will soon become clear, also with some reservations). Marranos, choosing to live on, would merely break free from the “chain of tradition” (*shalshet ha-kabbalah*), unfetter themselves from the obligation to transmit the Teaching overtly in the form of the halakhic law—but would not break with the secret core of this Teaching, which they in fact continued by the very fact of their determined survival. From Montaigne, through Spinoza, to Derrida, life understood primarily as survival gradually becomes an

object of a new affirmation: it begins to glow as a secret treasure of Judaism which the Marranos simultaneously left behind and preserved in a new messianic-universal form. The Marrano sublation of the Judaic tradition results thus in a highly innovative and paradigmatically modern (crypto)theology of living-on, the aim of which is to transform sheer *survie*, the daily and unheroic toil of survival, into *sur-vie*, the “most intense life possible” (Derrida 2011, p. 52), here championed as the “inaugural sacramentum” (Derrida 2005b, p. 83) or the hidden truth of the Abrahamic revelation.

This is not to say, however, that this daring reinterpretation of *u-baharta ba-hayim* can be found already in Montaigne and Spinoza; the sequence in the title of my essay is also a historical one, pointing to a slow and rather painful process of working through the Marrano experience, a true effort of the Freudian *Durcharbeiten*, in which the tables turn gradually and reach the full messianic inversion *only* in Derrida. The imperative of *u-baharta ba-hayim* has been widely discussed in the Jewish tradition and in various contexts: from the conservative halakhic one, in which God enjoins his chosen people to choose the right kind of life filled with His commandments, to the messianic-revolutionary one in which it became translated as a permanent “call for revolt”<sup>2</sup>—but in the Derridean reading, it begins to signify something else. Derrida interprets *u-baharta ba-hayim* in the context of the Marrano experience as an imperative that points to “the other testament” as the original “Sinai Saying.” His late self-reflected *marranismo* thus sheds a new light on Montaigne and Spinoza, whose Marrano connection appears stronger in Derrida’s hindsight, focusing on the unconditional affirmation of life conceived of in terms of survival. Yet, apart from the life-affirming affinity, there is also a difference which concerns the concept of religion, Judaism included: while for Montaigne and Spinoza, the early witnesses of the Marrano tragedy, the choice of life leads to the sceptical weakening of their religious commitment, for Derrida it means its strengthening—though only via a radical gesture of transvaluation. Neither Montaigne nor Spinoza are yet able to contemplate a new Judaism that would centre around the imperative to choose life as the most essential content of the revelation. With Derrida’s help, however, some elements of their doctrines can be shown to anticipate the Derridean messianic inversion which not only relieves the Marrano descendants from the guilt of survival, but puts them, the “rejected stones” excluded from both Judaism and Christianity, in the centre of a new religious insight that, at the same time, reveals itself as the most “inaugural.” In what follows, I will thus read Montaigne and Spinoza as harbingers of Derrida’s daring reversal with constant reference to the latter’s Marrano variant of *messianicité*.

One must, however, keep in mind another important precursor in the Marrano debate on the significance of Deuteronomy 30:19, coming not from the heterodox outskirts, but from the very centre of normative Judaism: Moses Maimonides. In his “Epistle on Martyrdom” (*Iggeret ha-Shemad*), written around 1160, when the pressure to convert was exerted on the Jews mostly by the Muslim hegemony, he takes a strong stand on the forced conversion, by appealing to God’s superior will that Israel should choose life and thus survive. He thus engages in a heated polemic with an anonymous Moroccan rabbi who argued that the Jew under duress has an obligation to choose death over transgression and, in that manner, sanctify the Name as it had been commanded by the martyrs in the Maccabean age. Full of indignation with the rabbi’s ruthless call to sacrifice, Maimonides opposes it, by calling it pagan and therefore heretic, completely amiss with the monotheistic prohibition of idol worship, for to wish to sacrifice oneself in the service to God is an unmistakable sign of *avoda zara*:

I found him saying toward the end of his missive that heretics and Christians likewise assume that they will choose death rather than grant his apostleship. When I learned this I was struck with amazement and wondered: “Is there no God in Israel?” [2 Kings 1:3, 6]. If an idol-worshiper burns his son and daughter to his object of worship, do we even more certainly have to set fire to ourselves for service to God?<sup>3</sup>

Maimonides does not deny that there were and continue to be cases of noble martyrdom, but he strongly opposes the martyrological passion which actively seeks *kiddush ha-Shem* or imposes it on others, because it shows a disregard for life that is explicitly forbidden by God:

By word of mouth and the use of his tongue, he surrenders himself to death and claims to have sanctified God's name. But by his actions he is a sinner and rebellious, and *he makes himself guilty against his life*, because God, exalted be He, established *by the pursuit of which man shall live* [Lev. 18:5: "Keep my decrees and laws, for the person who obeys them will live by them"], and not die. (Hartman 1985, p. 30; emphasis added)

Hence, Maimonides concludes, "if anyone comes to ask me whether to surrender his life or acknowledge, I tell him to confess and *not choose death*" (Hartman 1985, p. 30; emphasis added). At the same time, however, the person in question "should not continue to live in the domain of that ruler" (ibid.) and migrate as soon as possible in order to be able to return fully to the observance of the Jewish law.

Maimonides' letter had then become a paradigmatic point of reference during the later Marrano crisis, in which some rabbinical authorities took the side of the anonymous Moroccan rabbi, and some followed his argument on favour of lenience and reissued his injunction: "a forced convert must 'abandon everything he possesses and walk day and night until he finds a place where he can reconstitute his [Jewish] religion'; meanwhile, he should keep a maximum of Jewish laws in secret" (Yovel 2009, p. 43). Although Deuteronomy 30:19 does not figure explicitly in Maimonides' scriptural evidence, Simon Schama's contemporary description of his argument focuses precisely on the imperative force of *u-baharta ba-hayim* as central to his polemic:

No, no, no, *choose life*, Moses Maimonides thought. It wasn't that he disrespected the sacrifice of the martyrs, but the simplicity of absolute ideals, across all religions, he found alien and disrespectful of the injunction to save life clearly enjoined in the Torah. What moved him most, as he made clear near the beginning of his great reworking of the Mishnah, the Mishneh Torah, was the passage in Leviticus 18:5 that required Jews (or Israelites as Maimonides liked to call them) to live by the commandments, not die by them. Intrinsic to the gift of the Law was free will; the possibility of choice. To those who insisted there were circumstances in which no choice was possible, he invoked Deuteronomy 30:19, the keystone to the arch of his philosophy which was built to support both faith and reason: "I have this day set before you a blessing and a curse; life and death; therefore choose life." There was another way to "sanctify the Name" and that was to live a decent life in accordance with the precious gift of the Law [ . . . ] Unless the demanded transgression was murder, idolatry or coerced sexual congress, the young Maimonides wrote, saving of life was the highest obligation. *How else could Jews be saved for God who wished Jews to live the Torah?* To take one's own life rather than transgress under duress made one the author of one's own killing, the profaner, rather than the sanctifier of the Name". (Schama 2014, pp. 328, 330; emphasis added)

Indeed, in order to *live the Torah*, one must first *live*: not just abide, but choose life deliberately, turning it into an object of reflexive affirmation.<sup>4</sup> It is precisely this yes to life that puts in question the "martyrological passion" which scorns the bare necessities of survival and, by *choosing* death and thus disobeying God's highest decree, profanates the divine Name. Formulated in the time of the first *conversos* crisis, Maimonides' letter contains the Marrano strategy of self-defense in a nutshell. In what follows, I will attempt to demonstrate how the critique of martyrology as an unholy "choice of death", figuring very strongly in Montaigne's *Essays*, as well as in Spinoza's conceptualisation of the *conatus*, historically prepares the Derridean messianic inversion in which the tables, already shifting

in Maimonides' epistle, turn completely: at the end of the process of reversal, it is the Marrano who emerges as truly faithful to the supreme commandment to choose life.

### 1. Against Martyrology: Montaigne

What do we know about Montaigne's Marrano ancestors? As it is often the case with the Iberian *conversos* who kept their Jewish origin secret, not much. The biographers nonetheless confirm that he was the son of Pierre Eyquem and Antoinette de Louppes de Villaneuve, the descendant of the New Christians from Spain, who migrated to France and converted to Protestantism. According to Sophie Jama, the author of *L'Histoire juive de Montaigne*, the Marrano secret played a significant role in shaping young Michel's views on religion. Although officially Catholic, Montaigne's idea of Christianity preserves a whole plethora of features that can be traced back to Judaism:

Montaigne rejected the idea of the original sin. In accordance with Judaism, he downplayed it and defended carnal love. The only sin which he denounced was the one of the spirit: vanity. The body, on the other hand, does not sin; one can never notice in Montaigne a hatred for carnal affairs [ . . . ] *He also advocated a "sanctity of life" [ . . . ] for him the earthly life possessed the highest value and everything should be undertaken for the sake of its preservation.* (Jama 2000, pp. 108–9; emphasis added)<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, there are many fragments in *The Essays* that extoll the most unheroic survival of the body wishing to preserve itself in life as infinitely more preferable to martyrological death in which Montaigne suspiciously senses a spiritual sin of vainglory. One of them juxtaposes the story of the Greeks ready to die for their laws with the story of the Iberian Jews ready to die for their religion:

Any opinion is powerful enough for somebody to espouse it at the cost of his life. The first article in that fair oath that Greece swore—and kept—in the war against the Medes was that every man would rather exchange life for death than Persian laws for Greek ones. In the wars of the Turks and the Greeks how many men can be seen *preferring to accept the cruellest of deaths rather than to renounce circumcision for baptism?* (De Montaigne 2003, p. 59; emphasis added)

Seemingly full of respect for the Greek notion of martyrology, Montaigne refuses to affirm it unconditionally. While comparing the two historical contexts, he immediately penetrates into the very gist of the Marrano tragedy, by asking the most essential question: is it acceptable to renounce circumcision for baptism and survive or should one rather accept the cruelest of deaths and die faithful to their religion? Montaigne does not have a ready answer. In the next few adjacent fragments, he moves directly to more recent events in the 16th century Iberia, where the two kings, Castillan and Portugal, faced the escaping Jews with a fatal choice: either conversion or slavery.

This deed is said to have produced a dreadful spectacle, as the natural love of parents and children together with their zeal for their ancient faith rebelled against this harsh decree: it was common to see fathers and mothers killing themselves or—an even harsher example—throwing their babes down wells out of love and compassion in order to evade that law. Meanwhile the allotted time ran out: they had no resources, so returned to slavery. Some became Christians: even today a century later few Portuguese trust in their sincerity or in that of their descendants. (De Montaigne 2003, p. 61)

By offering a morale for this horrific story, Montaigne concludes: "That is an example which *all* religions are capable of" (De Montaigne 2003, p. 59; emphasis added). Having described the cruelty of the Christian Iberian rulers, he nonetheless accuses *all* religions as capable of similar violence, Judaism included. Does he imply that the traditional Jewish religion may also be held responsible for this "dreadful spectacle", by pushing the faithfuls to embrace martyrology with the same "absolute force" which Christianity used in order to produce *Nevos Cristianos*?<sup>6</sup> Perhaps this is the hidden message. Although depicting

the fate of the wronged Iberian Jews with “love and compassion”, Montaigne refrains from their “zeal for their ancient faith”: the Zealotism of those Jewish martyrs who would “prefer to accept the cruellest of deaths” to survival is completely alien to his life-affirming sensibility.<sup>7</sup> Montaigne cannot accept this “preference” which he interprets as a perverse desire to negate one’s life in the all too eager gesture of self-sacrifice. The whole Marrano thread in *The Essays* ends with a warning against those who, akin to ancient and modern Zealots, “pursued death with a real passion”:

I witnessed one of my friends energetically pursuing death with a real passion, rooted in his mind by many-faceted arguments which I could not make him renounce; quite irrationally, with a fierce, burning hunger, he seized upon the first death which presented itself with a radiant nimbus of honour. (De Montaigne 2003, p. 61)

Suspicious of any fascination with glorious death, Montaigne tells us that, ultimately, life counts more than the “radiant nimbus of honour”: it is better to be an ordinary living man than a dead “saint” with an ascetic aura above his head.<sup>8</sup> Though full of “love and compassion” for those Jews who refused conversion and died, he is also free of any contempt for those who converted in order to live on. He rather pours scorn on the Christians who compelled the Jews to enter the Church by “absolute force” and then doubted the sincerity of their conversion: the pinnacle of the most perverse cruelty. For him, the surviving New Christians are to be pitied even more than the Jews who died, because they landed in the desert of non-belonging: in the nowhere between Judaism and Christianity, the two official religions, both capable of cruelty and violence. Yet, at the same time, Montaigne slowly prepares himself to a shift of perspectives, in which the tragic fate of the Iberian Marranos begins to show a different face: a face of hope and promise. Could it be that the Marranos, having no place in the traditional religious communities, offer also a chance of a renewal that would reform modern religious sensibility and make it more attentive to its former disdain for ordinary life? Montaigne states: “Anything can be hoped for while a man is still alive” (De Montaigne 2003, p. 398) and this stoic sentence brings to mind the Marrano experience with which, as Sophie Jama claims, he secretly identifies. As long as there is a choice of life, hope is also in play, which can compensate for the tragic loss of the traditional religious belonging. As long as a person is alive, the perspectives may still shift, revealing possibilities that could not be intimated before. It is thus better to survive and hope than “pursue death with a real passion” in order to demonstrate one’s fidelity to the sacrificial logic of old religions.

According to Jama, it is precisely this hope that fuels the project of *The Essays*: the “attempts” to distill a new meaning from the apparent chaos of ordinary life which, despite all slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, chooses to “stay alive.” What emerges from these attempts is a shape of a new, paradigmatically modern, subjectivity based on the constant effort of survival. While the new subject survives the trauma of radical dispossession—the Marrano loss of identity, traditional belonging, and religious roots—it must find a home in the exile. Hence Jama’s conclusion: “Perhaps, following the example of Jews perpetually chased away from all places, Montaigne found his home *in the world* as such. His model was Socrates, but another one: the Socrates who preferred exile to death” (Jama 2000, p. 121). Following the way of those Marranos who declined to die “with *Sh’ma* on their lips” and chose life in the exile of the world, Montaigne sets his innovative pursuit for a subject-survivor on the hope that he would be able to convert the brutal force of life events into a new signification, a new symbolic form: a philosophical autobiography.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Derrida’s Montaigne: Critique of Sublimation

In *Other Within*, Yirmiyahu Yovel concludes his section on Montaigne by saying: “Whether or not Montaigne had acted as Marrano, a Marrano (of a certain kind) would have acted like Montaigne” (Yovel 2009, p. 329). Indeed, his phrase, “Marrano of a certain kind”, perfectly fits Jacques Derrida who not only often “acted like Montaigne”, but also regarded him as a powerful precursor to the enterprise of religious deconstruction. Derrida, too, saw

himself as “a kind of Marrano”, which he openly confessed in his half-Augustinian and half-Montaignesque 1993 philosophical autobiography called *Circumfession*.<sup>10</sup> A few years later, in the *Death Penalty* seminar from 2001, Montaigne emerges again, this time as a strenuous apologist of survival: a position Derrida sees as deriving from “the Marrano Judaism that haunted his filiation on the side of his mother” (Derrida 2014, p. 276). According to Derrida, it is precisely this Marrano filiation which makes Montaigne reject the sacrificial religious logic and choose instead an unconditional love of life: “he preferred to love life, to live while loving, and to die while loving, *to die while loving life, to die alive*, in short, *to die in his lifetime, to die while preferring life*, or even *die from loving life*” (Derrida 2014, pp. 277–78; emphasis added). Derrida joins Montaigne in his critique of *all* religions as the systems based on sacrifice which transform their believers into either virtual or actual martyrs: “Every religion is *capable* of preferring something else to life, at the cost of life [ . . . ] the religious of religion is always the acceptance of sacrificial death and the death penalty” (Derrida 2014, p. 279). Further, similarly to Montaigne, he also suggests that there could be another “religious of religion”, capable of something completely else: of awakening *another* tradition which, led by the messianic choice of life, would proclaim the principle of “no more sacrifices” and another theology—not of glorious death, but of survival. The last paragraphs of the seminar indeed suggest such a possibility: a religion of *u-baharta ba-hayim* and the leading thread of the Song of Songs, *love strong as death*, as confirming the supreme choice of life: “love as love of life, of my life, of the ‘my life’” (Derrida 2014, p. 283), situating itself at the very core of the Abrahamic revelation.

By siding with Montaigne and the Marranos, Derrida daringly opposes the perennial vision of the tradition based on the vertical sublimation: the spirit soaring above the body in order to reach the divine regions of the Absolute and find its identity among the eternal paradigms. In all sublimatory traditions, both religious and philosophical, there is an implied contempt for self-preservation as a priori doomed: a blind drive of life to maintain itself in physical existence, which gets inevitably thwarted by death. As in Slavoy Žižek’s recent rephrasing of this perennial prejudice, survival is regarded as nothing but a “stupid self-contained life-rhythm” or an “imbecilic particularity of one’s immediate existence”, which cannot ever realise its inner aporia and, because of that, does not even deserve to become a concept.<sup>11</sup> By claiming that “I am precisely *not* my body: the Self can only arise against the background of the death of its substantial being” (Žižek 2014), Žižek insists on the exclusion of the irredeemably “stupid” life from the act of subjective sublimation. It is precisely against this foundational exclusion that Montaigne and Derrida protest the loudest, by asserting the reverse: the necessity to include life, understood as the ordinary survival preserving our individual “substantial being”, into the very process of becoming a subject.

For Derrida, Montaigne was the first thinker *ever* to resist the denigration of sheer survival and made it a *thema regium* of his *Essays*, that is, truly original *attempts* to rethink the idea of *survie* as a new ground of *vita nova* and modern subjectivity conceived structurally as a survivor. Montaigne’s attempts thus bring a crucial change that marks the true birth of modernity: a possibility of a different politics beyond the deadlock of sovereignty and martyrology—the Lord who demands offerings, on the one hand, and the Subject who subjects itself as a sacrificial lamb, on the other. The goal of this genuinely modern politics, which Derrida wishes to continue, is to expel the last traces of the sublime thanatic sovereignty to which “anyone who wants to live, to survive, to cling to their animal existence, becomes suspect” (Bradley 2019, p. 235) and boldly transform all those suspect, guilty, rogue *survivors* into fully legitimate new citizens of the “democracy to come” or the future “*Khora* of the political”: a merciful “nursing” biophilic space where all the living will be able to exercise their inalienable “right to live” (Derrida 2005a, p. 44).<sup>12</sup> Thus, while Maximilien Robespierre, extolled by Žižek, states in his speech condemning Deputy Philippe Briez, a survivor of the Siege of Valenciennes, precisely because he dared to survive—“I would have wanted to share the fate of those brave defenders who preferred an honourable death to a shameful capitulation” (Bradley 2019, p. 240)—the Marrano Derrida

replies after Montaigne (but also after Maimonides): you, Robespierre and the likes of you, are just one of those “energetically pursuing death with a real passion [ . . . ] with a fierce, burning hunger to seize upon the first death which presented itself with a radiant nimbus of honour” (De Montaigne 2003, p. 61). What he has in mind is a different modernity: not the one that would try to neutralize the “unbearable life” and subordinate it to the revolutionary-totalitarian projects, conceived by the sublime minds existing in the Platonic realm of pure concepts, but the one that would “learn to live finally”—that is, appreciate the idea of finite *survie* as not only “bearable” but *essential* for modern politics. If it is to be truly modern, says Derrida, it must break with the pre-modern “thanatopolitical imagery” and redefine survival in an affirmative manner.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in his last interview, *Learning to Live Finally*, Derrida vigorously dispels all the claims that deconstruction locates itself on the side of death—be it the Heideggerian *Sein-zum-Tode* or the glorious death of *pereat vita, sed fiat iustitia*, advocated by the Incorruptibles of all traditions—and in the spirit of the universal Marranism declares that . . .

*We are structurally survivors* [ . . . ] But, having said that, I would not want to encourage an interpretation that situates surviving on the side of death and the past rather than life and the future. No, deconstruction is always on the side of the *yes*, on the side of the affirmation of life. Everything I say—at least from *Pas* (in *Parages*) on—about survival as a complication of the opposition life/death proceeds in me from an *unconditional affirmation of life* [ . . . ] my discourse is not a discourse of death, but, on the contrary, the affirmation of a living being who prefers living and thus surviving to death, because *survival is not simply that which remains but the most intense life possible*. (Derrida 2011, pp. 51–52; emphasis added)

It is precisely this messianic reversal, attempting to transform bare and precarious *survie* or “mere life”, thus far a target of philosophical and religious contempt, into a desired *sur-vie* or “more life” that lies at the core of the modern Marrano politics, from Montaigne to Derrida. In the latter’s interpretation, the Marranos entered Western modernity, by imbuing it with its unique secretly religious content based on a new hope: the defense of survival as the “inalienable right to live”, beyond the traditional double bind of sancti-sacrificiation. The new theology—or rather, more in line with the Marrano crypto-Judaism, *cryptotheology*—of survival was inaugurated by the Marrano *conversos*: the radical turn due to which the singular finite life is not to be sacrificed for the sake of the tradition, but the other way around—tradition is to serve the individual life and its inalienable right to exercise the inner *conatus* as the desire to survive, grow, and crave “the most intense life possible”, which the liberal doctrine would soon call “the pursuit of happiness.” The Marranos, therefore, were the primary modern people who refused the call to sacrifice of their “stupid life” and followed instead a compromise path of survival. It was first in their choice to rather live than die—the choice initially surrounded by guilt, repression, and silence—that the survival has gradually become a concept and an argument forming a new political philosophy, no longer focused on the identitarian communal belonging. In the beginning, it was just a *bare life* which could not find an expression, having fallen away from all traditional symbolic systems, either Jewish or Christian.<sup>14</sup> Yet, it eventually found it: first, in Montaigne’s insistence on the value of survival, then in Spinoza’s notion of *conatus* and finally, in those most progressive tendencies of modern liberal legislation, increasingly more biophilic and protective of the singular right to live.

### 3. The Marrano *Conatus*: Spinoza’s Distress

According to Edward Feld, it was precisely the importance of survival, forming the indelible part of the Marrano condition, which inspired Spinoza’s ethics based on the notion of *conatus*:

Spinoza sees the effort to survive to be the fundamental energy pushing the universe through time. Surely this view—seeing survival itself as the essential motivating force of all activity and especially descriptive of human behavior—

represents a translation of the Marrano experience to universal dimensions. Life under the Inquisition meant that one's daily concern as a Marrano centered on the question of survival. One had given up one's religious practice, and outward manifestation of Judaism in order to continue to live in the land of one's birth. Spinoza understands the instinct for survival as the central principle around which we construct even our ethics, and it is clear that this principle is derived from the central experience of Marrano life. (Feld 1989, p. 115)

In Feld's opinion, for Spinoza the *auto da fé* of Jewish faithfuls constituted a traumatic event which he attempted to counteract by creating an alternative anti-martyrological ethics, firmly grounded in the value of survival as the supreme choice of life. At the same time, however, Spinoza, similarly to Montaigne, does not condemn either the martyrs or the *conversos*; although mistrustful towards the religious orthodoxies that would demand of their faithfuls the highest sacrifice, he nonetheless admires those who chose the heroic path. In his letter to Albert Burgh, who had just converted to Catholicism, Spinoza, displeased with this fact, reminds him of a Jewish martyr who died at the hands of the Spanish Inquisition:

I myself, know, among others, of a certain Judah, whom they call the Faithful [Don Lope de Vera y Alarcon, burnt at Valladolid, June 25, 1644], who in the midst of the flames, when he was believed to be dead already, began to sing the hymn which begins *To thee, O God, I commit my soul* [Psalm 31:4], and died in the middle of the hymn.<sup>15</sup>

In his seminal classic on Spinoza the "Marrano of reason", Yirmiyahu Yovel reads this letter as "a symptom of Spinoza's profound ambiguity in the face of martyrdom":

As a rationalist philosopher, he was not only repulsed by religious fanaticism but was unable, as he avowed, to fathom suicide and self-denial [ . . . ] After all, from a Jewish standpoint, was not he, Spinoza, the very *antithesis of martyrdom*? Shortly before Spinoza's ban, the Amsterdam congregation was shocked by yet another case of Marrano martyrdom, when Abraham Nunez Bernal was burnt at the stake in Spain. The contrast was manifest to everyone—not in the least to Spinoza himself. He, the heretic, must leave the congregation as a traitor; the other gives his life for his faith and is hailed as a hero. (Yovel 1989a, pp. 187–88)

In Yovel's interpretation, Spinoza the "nonbeliever" maintained this ambivalence until the end: while he himself rejected religious fanaticism demanding sacrifices, he nonetheless felt "an irritated awe and a mixture of repulsion and fascination" (Yovel 1989a, p. 187) towards the "superstitious imagination" of the Jews "prepared to perform acts of fanatical daring and sublimity" (Yovel 1989a, p. 188). Yovel's conclusions, therefore, are different than Feld's: while the latter perceives the Marrano ordeal of survival under extreme distress as decisive for Spinoza's coinage of the concept of *conatus*, emphatically centred on self-preservation, Yovel makes the connection as if at the other end of the Marrano experience, where it is not the ordinary *survivors*, but the sublime *martyrs* that made a lasting impact on his thought, even if it made him leave Judaism and become "the first secular Jew": "Without mitigating his revulsion of religious fanaticism, it [fidelity to their religious superstition] heightened the sense of affinity and empathy which Spinoza would share with anyone who can recognize sublimity even while rejecting its wellsprings" (Yovel 1989a, pp. 186–87).

Yet, regardless of Spinoza's own mixed feelings, the philosophical meaning of *conatus* goes precisely against such high recognition of sublimity: just as Montaigne's sceptical debunking of the martyrological "nimbus of honour", it is deliberately *desublimatory*. Spinoza's attack on sublimation implied by the notion of *conatus* was immediately spotted by Nietzsche, who could not accept its down-to-earth definition of life as mere survival. In the polemic that Yovel relates in the second volume of his work on Spinoza, *Adventures of Immanence*, Nietzsche discusses the Spinozist legacy in highly ambivalent terms: on the one hand, he would like to adopt *conatus* as the protoplast of his own concept of the

will-to-power; on the other, however, he feels repelled by its lack of the sublime dimension of risking one's life in order to "become more" and open oneself to "self-transcendence":

What especially disproves Spinoza's thesis are the frequent cases (which Spinoza is unable to explain except as "folly") in which one is ready to risk one's life for the sake of expanding and transcending oneself. Even the *conatus*, Spinoza's most naturalistic principle, is exposed as "the symptom of a condition of distress", because in stressing self-preservation it puts an unhealthy limitation on will to power, the actual principle of life. No wonder, Nietzsche surmises, that the survival principle has been advanced by sick philosophers "such as the tuberculosis-stricken Spinoza", since these people "indeed suffered distress". (Yovel 1989b, p. 133)

Nietzsche does not link this distress, which he rightly senses in Spinoza's emphasis on self-preservation, with the Marrano legacy of his ancestors—nor does, more surprisingly, Yovel, for whom the Marrano influence on Spinoza brings associations with the glorious sublime death rather than the mundane survival. However, what if Nietzsche's intuition is at least partly correct and it is indeed the Marrano duress which became captured and eternalised in Spinoza's definition of *conatus* as most of all a constant effort to survive?

Indeed, despite all his ambivalent awe, Spinoza endeavours to construct an altogether new ethics that would *not* demand sacrifice of life, by locating in its very centre the highest value of survival, defined as individual *conatus* or striving: a will to live and live on which constitutes the principal core of each and every singular being, as in Montaigne's notion of "that true life which is our essence" (De Montaigne 2003, p. 714) and which, precisely because of that, cannot be dismissed at any level of the subjective constitution (as, for instance, by Lacan or Žižek, the representatives of the "sublime" option which excludes survival from the essential core of the subject). As Proposition 6 and 7 in Book III of *Ethics* state: "Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being. The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is *nothing but the actual essence of the thing*" (De Spinoza 1994, p. 159; emphasis added). The Scholium to Proposition 9 may even be said to contain an oblique reference to the figure of a Marrano as an individual particularly determined to promote his preservation in the condition of extreme distress:

When this striving is related only to the mind, it is called will; but when it is related to the mind and body together, it is called appetite. This appetite, therefore, is nothing but the very essence of man, from whose nature there necessarily follow those things that promote his preservation. And so man is *determined* to do those things. (De Spinoza 1994, p. 160; emphasis added)

Thus, contrary to the followers of the sublime "thanatopolitical imagery", who would claim that our subjectivity is constituted by the exclusion of our carnal life and its drive for self-preservation ("I am precisely *not* my body"), Proposition 9 emphasizes that "the first and principal [tendency] of the striving of our mind is *to affirm the existence of our body*" (De Spinoza 1994, p. 160; emphasis added)—that is, affirm and consciously embrace survival. The Derridean modern lesson of "learning to live, finally" begins here: in accepting our mundane will to survive, which forms the essential core of our subjectivities as "structural survivors."

#### 4. The Marranos in Jewish Perspective: Derrida versus Fackenheim

In Derrida's account, supported by Montaigne and Spinoza, the Marranos are the paradigmatic *subjects-survivors*: they choose to live on rather than die for the sake of their religious identity and, in their Spinozist determination to promote their preservation, indeed achieve a kind of a positive mastery that leads towards a revolution of modern symbolic and political forms. Yet, for the adherents of traditional Judaism, the Marranos constitute an uneasy subject. Sometimes they are perceived as traitors and sinners, sometimes as unheroic cowards, sometimes as victims of historical misfortune, but despite the varying degrees of compassion, the accusation remains the same: instead of choosing *kiddush ha-*

*Shem*, a glorious death which sanctifies the Name, they chose life—life as living-on, the sheer *survie*. Judaism may, in fact, be more lenient towards life than other religions exalting in martyrdom, but still, to betray one's own kind for a purely pragmatic reason of staying alive and carrying on one's business/livelihood is certainly not a model of a good life that could be recommended by any, even the most tolerant and compassionate, tradition.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, Derrida dares to do precisely that. He recommends nothing short of betrayal: "Everything that I say can be interpreted as arising from the best Jewish tradition and at the same time as an absolute betrayal. I have to confess: this is exactly what I feel" (Derrida 2007, p. 83). This, however, is not a simple betrayal: it is a truly "high treason" that deliberately chooses the *antinomian* path against the sanctioned and sanctified straight paths of all orthodoxies, yet not against "the religious of the religion", but for its sake: the deep "truth" of the tradition hidden behind the façade of the official *tradendum*.<sup>17</sup> The last words of Derrida, which he scribbled right before his death, reveal what for him substituted this most essential holy of holies: "Always prefer life and constantly affirm survival" (*Préférez toujours la vie et affirmez sans cesse la survie*) (Mitchell 2007, p. 244). This was his own private confession of *u-baharta ba-hayim*.

It is precisely the decision to keep himself steady on the antinomian path of deliberate betrayal and not to allow for its orthodox correction that differentiates Derrida's position from Emil Fackenheim's seemingly similar and, as he himself admitted, equally "revolutionary" choice of life which rewrites the Jewish codex around the new term, *kiddush ha-hayim*, the sanctification of life.<sup>18</sup> In *Jewish Return into History*, in the chapter called "The 614th Commandment", Fackenheim famously explains his proposal by emphasizing the significance of Jewish survival in continuing distress:

... we are, first, commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish. We are commanded, secondly, to remember in our very guts and bones the martyrs of the Holocaust, lest their memory perish. We are forbidden, thirdly, to deny or despair of God, however much we may have to contend with him or with belief in him, lest Judaism perish. We are forbidden, finally, to despair of the world as the place which is to become the kingdom of God, lest we help make it a meaningless place in which God is dead or irrelevant and everything is permitted. To abandon any of these imperatives, in response to Hitler's victory at Auschwitz, would be to hand him yet other, posthumous victories. (Fackenheim 1980, pp. 23–24)

After the Holocaust, claims Fackenheim, the Jews must learn to cherish their life, "lest Judaism perish": *kiddush ha-hayim*, as opposed to the traditional *kiddush ha-Shem*, which meant martyrdom for the sake of keeping the Jewish faith, is now Judaism's sole chance of survival. Fackenheim locates this historical reversal in the writings of Isaac Nissenbaum, the chief rabbi of the Warsaw Ghetto, who saw in it a new hope resurrecting for Jewish people after the *Shoah*:

A statement of his spread like wildfire, inspiring believers and nonbelievers alike. This, he taught, was not a time for *kiddush ha-shem*, the sanctification of the divine Name through Jewish martyrdom. It was a time for *kiddush ha-hayim*, the sanctification of life. Formerly, he explained, the enemy wanted the Jewish soul, and Jews gave their lives. But now that the enemy wanted Jewish lives, it was a Jewish duty to defend them. (Fackenheim 1994, p. xliii)

Prima facie it would seem that Derrida and Fackenheim speak *unisono*: by questioning the martyrological imperative, they both lean towards survival as a higher value which can be identified as such also within the Jewish tradition. While Fackenheim makes it a role of the Holocaust witness/survivor to spread Nissenbaum's message, Derrida projects it back into the past and sees the first Marranos, the 15th century "Hebrew citizen of Toledo", who first chose life instead of death, as already playing it.<sup>19</sup> However, there is also an obvious difference. Whereas for Fackenheim, the choice of life as the 614th Commandment constitutes an *addition* to the traditional codex of Halakhah, for Derrida, the Marrano gesture of opting for survival constitutes a *subversion* of the life spent under surveillance of

the Jewish Law. Whereas for Fackenheim, the life chosen instead of death is the *Jewish* life, conceived as a miracle capable of resurrecting Judaism, Derrida stakes on the antinomian logic of a more radical reversal which disturbs the dualism of the sacred and the profane and thus no longer allows for the gesture of sanctification. In Derrida's take on the Marrano as a witness—the ambivalent figure oscillating between *marturion* and *testis*: the one who survived one's own death and testifies to his further living-on—the survival cannot be a *sacrosanctum* which inescapably links itself to the sacrificial logic. The Marrano witness must resist the fetishization of survival which turns it into the next Big Thing: a new *sacrum* demanding new sacrifices and commanding life according to a new law. While Fackenheim's *kiddush ha-hayim* requires that every new Jewish life, sanctified as life, should nonetheless sacrifice itself to the prolongation of Judaism—"lest it perish"—Derrida's choice of life wishes to go beyond the sacrificial logic of obedience to any sublime Absolute. Survival simply cannot be the object of any cult; to affirm survival means to go beyond any form of cultic behaviour. Instead of deciding for martyrology and the ultimate sacrifice in the name of the Jewish God, the Marranos do not invent a symmetrical gesture of *kiddush ha-hayim*: rather, they prefer to indulge in their *conatus*, their mundane drive-to-life in which life, as Derrida describes it in *The Death Penalty* seminar in the Spinozist manner, always simply "prefers itself": it has no higher goal than itself, it is autoperferential and autoteleological, and it just wants more of what it already is. It is not a *Jewish* life as the Agambenian *bios* qualified and justified by the traditional symbolic structure, but a life conceived as *survie* which can survive any tradition.

For Derrida, therefore, the Marrano choice of life is not a pitiful transgression, something to be eternally ashamed of in the never-ending tragedy of the Marrano existence. On the contrary, it is rather what Gershom Scholem identified as the antinomian "treason of tradition", which is capable of revealing the hidden—repressed—dimension of the Jewish revelation itself. It is precisely this antinomian moment in Derrida's reasoning which differentiates him from even the most tolerant orthodox reactions to the Marrano dilemma, including Maimoides, whose aim "was to limit the guilt felt by the Moroccan community and to prevent that guilt from turning into a paralyzing, destructive form of self-recrimination" (Hartman 1985, p. 77) or, for that matter, Fackenheim, who also wished to relieve the Jewish survivors after the Holocaust of the burden of guilt felt towards those who did not survive, so they did not become too "paralyzed", that is, dead while alive, and thus offering Hitler his posthumous victory. In Derrida's reversal, the guilt is not to be "limited", but thoroughly deconstructed, in order to reveal the unconditional affirmation of life, no longer to be thought of ashamedly as a "guilty pleasure."<sup>20</sup>

"Religion of the living: is this not a tautology?" (Derrida 2002a, p. 85)—Derrida asks rhetorically, by answering this question in the emphatic affirmative: yes, it is a tautology, for religion in its very essence is the unconditional affirmation of life in every living thing or, more precisely, a re-affirmation of life's own biophilic self-preference: the first symbolic articulation of "love as love of life, of my life, of the 'my life'" (Derrida 2014, p. 283). However, why does it not *appear* as such and produce a cultic *tradendum* which is often based on the self-sacrificial obedience to the sublime divine sovereignty? According to Derrida, this religious "double bind"—the Scholemian aporetic tension between the inaugural truth and the outer appearance—is due to the dialectic of life itself: its inner tendency to negate its precarious finitude ("I am precisely *not* my body") and then erroneously embark on the path of sublimation which creates an eternal Absolute that, only seemingly immortal, constitutes the ultimate negation of life. Paradoxically, therefore, at the end of the sublimatory path of life rejecting its finite condition of "mere survival", life negates itself: God conceived of as a lifeless infinity inevitably turns against the living and demands sacrifices of that same frail life which had first created the idea of God for its own loving protection. The Marrano gesture of betraying the divine Sovereign cuts into this self-thwarting dialectics, as it reminds "the religious of religion" of its more original secret source, which is life affirming itself: life that already *prefers itself*—chooses itself—and thus needs no higher sanctification in the concept of a deadened Absolute. Marranos, therefore, *chose life* precisely

in accordance with the *other* divine imperative: “I put in front of you life and death—choose life!” (Deut 30:19): while they oppose the sacrificial logic, characteristic of the religions of the Absolute, they simultaneously recall the more original message of life-affirming hope. At the same time, however, their choice of life as a finite mundane survival arrests the aporetic evolution of religion—from the “religion of the living” to the religion of the “unscathed Absolute” (*l’absolu indemne*)—by blocking the path of sublimatory vertical transport. The same desublimatory argument, therefore, which formed a part of the sceptical critique of religion in Montaigne and Spinoza, here finds his way back into a mediation *on* religion as inherently “doubled”, but not irreversibly so. Derrida’s Marrano intervention assists Abrahamic revelation on its path of desublimation, which is to reverse it to the inaugural “religion of the living.”

### 5. Choose Life!—The Inaugural Sacramentum

Derrida describes the antinomian “high treason” of the witness-survivor as opposed to the witness-martyr in his essay on Paul Celan, “Poetics and Politics of Witnessing”, where the Marrano betrayal lends an implicit background to Celan’s wrestling with his own guilt of having survived the Shoah. Although the term “Marrano” does not appear here, the whole fragment on the perjury, in which the witness renounces his sacramental oath of belonging to his tradition in order *not* to become martyr, can only be understood in the context of the *conversos* lying about their Jewishness in order to survive. For, what could be more aporetic than a situation in which a Jew forced to embrace Christianity swears that he is no longer Jewish by laying his fingers on the Christian Holy Bible which may or may not, precisely at this very moment, be a sacred document for him? If he is (already) Christian, he does not lie and does not commit a sacrilege—but if he is (still) Jewish, he lies but does not profanate the sacred text which, for him, would (still) be the Tanakh. But who *really* knows if he is *still* Jewish or *already* Christian? Only himself in his secret heart, or not even that: for, as Celan famously states, “there is no witness to the witness.” The path of enquiry ends here, just like in the case of Schrödinger’s box: it is forever undecidable whether the cat is dead or alive or whether the Marrano under oath is Christian or Jewish. Perhaps—and this is what Derrida wants to imply—in this secret moment of undecidability, the Marrano is *neither Christian nor Jewish*, but transports himself beyond the fences of all traditions into another—and at the same time more original—dimension of the messianic promise. There and then, in this vertiginous instant, the Marrano is promised “more life” in his act of betrayal, which, seemingly paradoxically, has the power to renew the oath as the most original *sacramentum* of faith, even more “inaugural” than the Torah or the New Testament:

Perjury itself implies this sacralization in sacrilege. The perjurer commits perjury as such only insofar as he keeps in mind the sacredness of the oath. Perjury, the lie, the mask, only appear as such [ . . . ] where they confirm their belonging to this zone of sacral experience. To this extent, at least, the perjurer remains faithful to what he betrays; he pays the homage of sacrilege and perjury to the sworn word; in betrayal, he sacrifices to the very thing he is betraying; he does it on the altar of the very thing he is thereby profaning. Whence at the same time the wiliness and the desperate innocence of the who would say: “*in betraying, in betraying you, I renew the oath, I bring it back to life, and I am more faithful to it than ever, I am even more faithful than if I were behaving in an objectively faithful and irreproachable way, but was all the while forgetting the inaugural sacramentum*”. (Derrida 2005b, p. 83; emphasis added)

Understood that way, the Marrano would indeed be a *converso*: when he turns away from his previous religion in order to become nominally Christian, he, in fact, converts to the *true* religion or “the inaugural *sacramentum*” which is the original “religion of the living” and which can come to the fore *only* in the perjury of the former as *another testament*. By betraying his God, by not being true to his “true” God, the Marrano “traitor” actually proves to be more faithful to the secret *true* core of his tradition than all the martyrs who died with

*Sh'ma* on their lips. Despised or, at best, commiserated by both “true” Jews and “genuine” Christians, the Marrano thus becomes the bearer of “this life” as deliberate survival: the finite ordinary life which always takes the form of *survie*; the life which had traversed all religious fantasies of sanctification and all symbolic identifications, but is still a life, a surviving remnant—literally—*life-after-all*. Poised in between the Jewish covenant and the Christian authenticity, the Marrano is neither true nor genuine, yet he *lives*. The moment he chooses life, he is left only with his *conatus* which, already in Spinoza’s definition, is to make up for his lost symbolic essence: “a sur-vival, not symbolizable” (Derrida 2002b, p. 276) or the “enigma of survival” which, as in Montaigne, from now on will become a sole object of his quest for a new form of subjectivity.<sup>21</sup> Abandoned by God(s), stuck in between the two institutional religions, the Marrano has nothing but his bare life on his hands, the sole content of which is the task of survival, the Spinozist autotoelic striving. However, says Derrida after Scholem, this is not a bad thing at all: by betraying the cultic *tradendum*, Marranos only prove to be faithful to the secret *truth* of the “religion of the living”, which had been overshadowed and repressed by the former. What thus initially appears as a curse, eventually can and will turn into a blessing: precisely the one which God promises as the part of his imperative of *u-baharta ba-hayim*. The Marranos—who seemingly have lost themselves, yet *in truth* “dispersed, multiplied” (Derrida 2002a, p. 100)—take modern earth into their possession; they and their “seed” survive. By turning away from sacrificial demands, they challenge religions in their cultic forms and force them to change. Thus, just as we may justifiably talk about the Marrano modernity, starting with Montaigne and Spinoza, we can also talk about the Marrano variant of secularization which does not reject or destroy religions, but forces them to transmute internally: abandon the sacrificial cults of the Absolute and come closer to the biophilic core of the “inaugural *sacramentum*”—the *u-baharta ba-hayim* as the most original truth of the Abrahamic revelation.<sup>22</sup>

Yet, does this conclusion sound truly so shockingly antinomian to modern Jewish ears? Not necessarily: just recall Simon Schama’s interpretation of Maimonides’ “Epistle on Martyrdom” as the earliest harbinger of those changes, drawing on the overruling force of Deuteronomy 30:19. In the light of Maimonides’ critique of the Zealot imitators, the martyrological passion is nothing but an *avoda zara*, a remainder of the cruel pagan cult of merciless idols: “If an idol-worshiper burns his son and daughter to his object of worship, do we even more certainly have to set fire to ourselves for service to God?” (Hartman 1985, p. 17). Daniel Boyarin confirms this diagnosis: the “unheroic conduct” which chooses life instead of persecution and death is the defining feature of Judaism as such. Would it thus be too far-fetched to apply his phrase to the Marrano anti-martyrological choice of life? Even if Boyarin often declared his mistrust towards Derrida and his “modern rewriting of ancient Judaism”, his rabbinic apology of a gentle and effeminate Jewish male, as opposed to the Roman military model of virility, chimes well with the latter’s defense of *u-baharta ba-hayim* as more adequate to the Judaic *torat hayim* than a heroic choice of death. It is precisely the emphasis on survival at the expense of more virile virtues as honour, fidelity, and glorious death, that, Boyarin argues, had sealed the association of the Jewish unheroic conduct with the feminine “weapons of the weak.” For Boyarin, however, who locates the topos of the feminization of the Jews in the Roman Empire, there is absolutely nothing wrong with it, since “it is this counterphobic rejection of the charge of effeminacy that produces the most toxic political (gender and sexual) effects within dominated male populations, as opposed to its alternative, *enjoyment of feminization*” (Boyarin 1997, p. 97; emphasis added). Contrary to this forced and alien mode of, as Lacan would call it, sublime male sexuation, Boyarin advocates “the ‘female’ mode of resistance, renunciation of the phallus, as being the highly honored option [ . . . ] What I am postulating is that within the culture the ‘weapons of the weak’ were valued, not despised” (Boyarin 1997, p. 98). Further, although there is no mention of the *conversos* in Boyarin’s book, his analysis easily lends itself to such extrapolation: the Marranos represent the “feminine arts of survival” (ibid.) in a manner even more pronounced than the Jewish male population falling into the “gender patterning” of its own tradition. The conclusions concerning the shame and guilt,

experienced by the Marranos—the most feminine among the already effeminate race—are also very much in harmony with Derrida’s intentions.<sup>23</sup> The shaming should not come from the core of Judaism since it *traditionally* values survival; if Marranos experience shame and guilt themselves, and if they are shamed and despised by Jewish orthodoxy, it is mostly due to the influence of the Christian host culture, deeply rooted in the Roman concepts of honorable virility and glorious death. It thus makes perfect sense to call this guilt an “original sin”, as Yovel notices in his description of the Marrano *Yom Kippur* rites, where he stresses the Catholic structure of the shame which Marrano felt because of the forced conversion:

Yom Kippur was the most revered day of the year. Four centuries of Marranos have known it under such names as *dia puro* (the Pure Day, or Day of Purification) *ayuno mayor* (Great Fast) or simply *Quipur* (distorted into *equipur*, *antepur*, and *cinquepur*) [ . . . ] Seen from a different angle, *ayuno mayor* came to express a Marrano variation of the Christian theme of original sin. The Judaizing Marranos lived in a state of ‘fallenness’ caused by their fathers’ betrayal of Judaism. The brunt of this guilt passed to the children, who failed to emigrate from the peninsula when they could, and whose form of life—the Marranesque mode of existence—was marred by ongoing idolatry, duplicity, and *failure to be Jews even when Judaizing*. Such a sense of fallenness and guilt, which adheres to one’s very existence (the rudiments of the consciousness of original sin) is a *Catholic sensibility basically*; but it fitted the Judaizing Marranos’ situation and penetrated into their self-feeling, where it was buried under the humdrum of daily life, but emerged to the surface on special occasions, in particular on Yom Kippur, the greatest Jewish moment of the year [ . . . ] those who kept the flame of their ancient religion were excluded from the essence they willed and imagined for themselves by those who embodied its seamless continuity—the Jews. (Yovel 2009, pp. 240–41, 61; emphasis added)

Yovel’s portrayal of the Marrano rite of Yom Kippur is kept in a deeply tragic register, emphasizing guilt, failure, trauma of multiple dispossessions, and hopelessness of the Marrano condition, only thinly covered by “the humdrum of daily life” or the toil of survival: however stubbornly the *conversos* try to remain Jewish, they are always bound to fail “even when Judaizing.” As a historian of the Iberian *conversos*, Yovel is certainly right: most of the Marranos and their descendants could not escape a stifling guilt of having failed to respond to the sublime call to sacrifice, additionally exacerbated by the even more inculcating “Catholic sensibility”; hence the continuing sense of hopeless failure in their every attempt to Judaize and thus return to the forever lost fold. Yet, in the process of the working-through of the Marrano trauma as we have witnessed in those Marranos who rebelled against the tragic predicament of guilt: Montaigne, Spinoza, and particularly Derrida, the traumatic aspect of *marranismo* as *semitismo atormentado* (Castro 1954, p. 565) gradually wanes and paves way towards a surprising reversal of perspectives, transforming the curse of the “tormented Judaism” into a messianic blessing; as it is often the case with the messianic narratives, the tragic victim becomes a new type of hero, a “harbinger” of the world to come.<sup>24</sup> This new blessing is now addressed universally to all inhabitants of modernity who would soon follow the Marrano fate and the loss of the “seamless continuity” of their respective traditions: “the others recognized as mortal, finite, in a state of neglect, and deprived of any horizon of hope” (Derrida 1998, p. 68). That is, all of us imagined as the Derridean “universal Marranos”: men and women of the late-modern, globalized and secularized era which disintegrated old traditional symbolic forms of life and left us with a sheer “survival, the not symbolizable” on our hands.

My aim here was to follow and elaborate on Derrida’s insight according to which the Marranos were the paradigmatic modern people, inaugurating new ways of thinking about tradition, religion, subjectivity, and politics. They were the first subjects wrestling with the trauma of detraditionalization and the resulting “enigma of survival”, split between the death of their tradition and the mystery of living on as anonymous *nonadas*,

survivors without a name or form. Derrida's project, which crowns the long process of the working-through the Marrano condition, had begun with Montaigne and Spinoza: the early "harbingers" of his future messianic reversal which aims at transforming *survie*, the troublesome remnant fallen out from the symbolic system, into *sur-vie*, the secret promise of more life, laid by the Abrahamic tradition that, thanks to this endeavour, can once again renew itself in the conditions of late modernity. For, while *marranismo* on the surface represents nothing but the "death of Judaism", it may, in fact, offer the Jewish revelation "its one chance of survival" (Derrida 2004, p. 42): surviving as the original "religion of the living" together with all the survivors, finally exonerated from the crippling yoke of guilt. It may not be the *one and only* chance, but it certainly offers modern Judaism a way to live on and not to perish in the process of secularization.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I follow the succinct definition of messianic inversion offered by Jan Assmann, according to whom Mosaism originated on the basis of "the principle of normative inversion [which] consists in inverting the abominations of the other culture into obligations and *vice versa*" (Assmann 1997, p. 31). Derrida's intuition chimes close with Assmann: if Mosaism, the most "inaugural" form of Jewish religion, derived from the series of normative reversals, especially in reference to the Egyptian polytheism, the Marrano messianic inversion, turning the "abomination" of treason into a new "obligation" of choosing life, merely follows the long established pattern. In this reading, the messianic inversion is not a marginal aspect of monotheistic faith, but constitutes its very essence—a fact well attested by Moses Maimonides in his *Epistle to Yemen*, concerning the function of messianism and the Messiah in Judaism: "He declares: Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth [Gen. 28:14], that is to say, although they will be abased like the dust that is trodden under foot, they will ultimately emerge triumphant and victorious. And, as the simile implies, just as the dust settles finally upon him who tramples upon it and remains after him, so will Israel outlive its oppressors" (Hartman 1985, p. 102). In Derrida's variant of the messianic inversion, it is the Marrano who is cast in the role of the dust that survives his oppressor.
- <sup>2</sup> On the former, see most of all Emmanuel Lévinas who interprets the choice of life in conjunction with another saying of God: "If you accept the Torah, all the better; if not, it will be your grave", and reads the two together as a divine injunction to embrace a better life, shaped by the obedience to the Law (Lévinas 1990, p. 39). On the latter, see most of all Erich Gutkind in his *Choose Life: The Biblical Call to Revolt*: "Genuine religion is a call to revolt [ . . . ] The 'Good Book' is the primal pattern for revolution. But 'religion' has become the way to evade the confrontation with God's incandescent presence [ . . . ] 'Religion' has become a device to leave things unchanged. To wrest Man's most powerful tool from the hands of its usurpers is the way still open to save Man [ . . . ] It has been proclaimed that 'God is dead.' The God of the theologians certainly is. But where the people are on their exodus from bondage there the fiery pillar will be mightily in their midst" (Gutkind 1952, p. 1). When compared to both Lévinas and Gutkind, Derrida's messianic inversion comes definitely closer to the latter's biblical call to revolt as revealing a deeper and more inaugural message of the Jewish revelation than the "religion" as the construct of theologians.
- <sup>3</sup> Moses Maimonides, "Epistle on Martyrdom" (Hartman 1985, pp. 16–17).
- <sup>4</sup> On the existentialist meaning of this reflexive choice that emphatically affirms what is already given, see the philosophical commentary of Brayton Polka, which chimes well with Derrida's doctrine of pra-affirmation: "To exist is so to interpret your existence that existence is revealed as the gift of interpretation. The command—Choose life! [ . . . ]—expresses the paradox that life is both given yet is a gracious choice to be made: we both are and are not as we choose to be ourselves, as we recognize that we cannot choose to be unless we exist and that existence is not found outside of the choice to be" (Polka 1986, p. 169).
- <sup>5</sup> For the full argument in favour of the significance of the Marrano background for Montaigne's thought, see her *L'Histoire juive de Montaigne* (Jama 2001). On Montaigne's *marranismo*, see also Harry Friedenwald, "Montaigne's Relation to Judaism and the Jews" (Friedenwald 1940), which points to those fragments in Montaigne's *oeuvre* that could be interpreted as betraying a secret of hidden Jewish belonging.
- <sup>6</sup> On the concept of absolute force as applied by the Spanish Inquisition, see Marina Rustov, "Yerushalmi and the Conversos" (Rustov 2014, p. 39).
- <sup>7</sup> That Montaigne's anti-martyrological scepticism could be associated with his Marrano background did not escape Richard Popkin, the great historian of modern sceptical thought, who, in his intellectual autobiography, admits that he "began to explore and consider [ . . . ] why four early sceptics, Montaigne his cousin Francisco Sanchez, the Jesuit priest Juan Maldonado, and Pedro Valencia, all of Spanish background, and all descended from Jewish forced converts to Christianity, were the ones who made scepticism a living issue in the late sixteenth century" (Popkin 1988, p. 117). However, the doubt in the sublime call to sacrifice is

a sentiment that quite often appears also on the Jewish side, as already attested by Maimonides's "Epistle on Martyrdom." In the same vein, Hans Jonas argued that this form of proving one's fidelity to God emerged as the most radical option only in the times of extreme duress: first, "the Maccabean age, which bequeathed to posterity the concept of the martyr" and then, in the Middle Ages, when "whole communities met their death by sword and fire with the *Sh'ma Jisrael*, the avowal of God's Oneness on their lips", but ultimately it should be resisted (Jonas 1996, pp. 132–33). The humane solution proposed by Maimonides has indeed a good standing in the Talmud which, as Daniel Boyarin convincingly shows, does not advocate a heroic and possibly lethal confrontation, but essentially an unheroic art of evasion that puts first the value of survival: "The appropriate form of resistance that the Talmud recommends for Jews in this place is *evasion* [ . . . ] The central Babylonian talmudic myth of the foundation of rabbinic Judaism involves such an act of evasion and trickery, the 'grotesque' escape in a coffin of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai from besieged Jerusalem, which the Rabbis portray as the very antithesis of the military resistance of the Zealots who wanted to fight to the very last man and preserve their honor. Here we find the same political theory—*Get out of there!*" (Boyarin 1997, p. 94). According to Boyarin, the Rabbis do not really recommend martyrdom, but even if it occurs, the Jewish variant of martyrology appears different, somewhat "sweeter" than the Roman-Christian model of a bloody painful death as continuation of the ascetic mortification of the body (Boyarin 1997, p. 115). I shall return to the martyrological dilemma in Judaism in the last section.

8 Montaigne's mistrust towards a martyrological passion is, again, well reflected in Maimonides who clearly distinguishes between the two types of *kiddush ha-Shem*: the wrong one which is propelled by the self-sacrifician zeal, and the right one which simply could not have been avoided. According to David Hartman's commentary: "In the *Mishneh Torah* he regards a person who chooses death when halakhically required to evade it as being guilty of a serious violation of Halakhah: 'When one is enjoined to transgress rather than be slain, and suffers death rather than transgress he is to blame for his death. Where one is enjoined to die rather than transgress, and suffers death so as not to transgress, he sanctifies the name of God' (MT *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 5:4). Thus, Maimonides was clearly opposed to a person choosing to be a martyr in situations when, according to Halakhah, such behavior was forbidden" (Hartman 1985, pp. 66–67).

9 According to Susanne Zepp, it is precisely the Marrano sense of non-belonging which determined Montaigne's unique style of literary self-invention: "There are frequent references to the father in the *Essais*, while the mother is not mentioned at all in this three-volume work. This does not necessarily mean that Montaigne thus mainly intended to avoid inquiries about her origin. After all, we cannot reconstruct with absolute certainty whether Montaigne knew about the origin of his mother's family, as has been explained above. Yet it seems that [ . . . ] a subject exploring itself perspectively is created in the act of speaking about the "I" for whom biological ancestors have been replaced by the act of writing itself [ . . . ] Thus "Marranic writing" should not be understood as a reference to Montaigne's origins in this instance, but as a metaphor for an *écriture* that transforms the speaking about the "I" so steeped in designations of affiliation into a skeptical self-reflection at the beginning of the early modern age. The latter eventually was to guarantee the freedom of the modern self" (Zepp 2014, p. 98).

10 "I am a kind of Marrano of French Catholic Culture, and I also have my Christian body, inherited from St. Augustine [ . . . ] I am one of those Marranos who, even in the intimacy of their own hearts, do not admit to being Jewish" (Derrida 1993, p. 160).

11 "Every authentic revolutionary has to assume this attitude of thoroughly abstracting from, despising even, the imbecilic particularity of one's immediate existence" (Žižek 2007, p. xviii).

12 It is not an accident that the Derridean eponymous rogues—or *voyous*—bear the features of what Derrida calls "universal Marranos": they always "choose life" and because of that press towards a new democratic arrangement in which the right to survive will have constituted the highest law. The figure of the universal Marrano emerges in *D'ailleurs*, Derrida, a 1999 film directed by Safaa Fathy, in which Derrida confesses: "I gradually began to identify with someone who carries a secret that is bigger than himself and to which he does not have access. As if I were a Marrano's Marrano [ . . . ] a lay Marrano, a Marrano who has lost the Jewish and Spanish origins of his Marranism, a kind of universal Marrano."

13 For a full argument of Derrida against the thanatopolitical imagery, see my *Another Finitude. Messianic Vitalism and Philosophy* (Bielik-Robson 2019, pp. 103–44).

14 See Agamben's definition of bare life as coinciding with the "zero point of tradition", that is, marked by the radical detraditionalization and living-on beyond all traditional forms of articulation (Agamben 1998, p. 51).

15 Benedict de Spinoza, "Letter LXXVI" (De Spinoza 2019, p. 354).

16 As we have seen, the problem of the "unheroic conduct" appears already in Maimonides's "Epistle on Martyrdom": "What most perturbed Maimonides about the rabbi's ruling was not his legal decision requiring martyrdom, but the fact that he (the rabbi) stripped any positive significance from the religious behavior of those who failed to become heroes. As Maimonides claims, he became enraged by the rabbi's declaration that if a Jew failed to accept martyrdom, all his secret prayers and religious practices thenceforth became loathsome in God's eyes [ . . . ] The status of nonheroic, compromising behavior is, as Maimonides shows, a legitimate halakhic issue. Judaism not only stipulates legal rules for conduct, but provides principles for assessing the religious significance of the behavior of a person who fails to live a heroic religious life. Such principles may be explicit in the tradition or may be implicit in the descriptive body of Aggadah that constitutes an integral part of Judaism" (Hartman 1985, pp. 50–51). However, the adamant rabbi, so severely criticised by Maimonides, also has had his advocates who would not be so lenient on the Marrano lack of heroism—most of all Haym Soloveitchik, who tends to dismiss *Iggeret ha-Shemad* as an example of emotional rhetoric, lacking seriousness of the proper halakhic argument: "The *Iggeret ha-Shemad* is not a halakhic work, not a responsum,

but to use a modern term, a propagandist tract, written with a single purpose in mind—to counteract the effects of a letter of indictment that had gained great currency and threatened to wreak havoc on the Moroccan community” (Soloveitchik 1980, p. 306). Rather, the proper argument was formulated by Maimonides’s opponent: “His position was not just a vague forecast of the millennial fate of the Marranos, but a consequence of his previous stand. The Jews in Morocco had admitted the prophetic character of Mohammed’s mission. They had by this disavowed the eternal validity of their religion and their Law, and for this they were to be deemed apostates. This led to one inescapable conclusion: that their religious observances were of no value. Having denied their religion, their attempts to fulfill its dictates were not only worthless but ridiculous, indeed they verged close to mockery. There is no room in the faith, he claimed, for Orthodox Jewish heretics. In this charge he was assessing not simply the moral standing of the Marrano generally, but also the meaningfulness of his religious conduct, the precise legal standing of his actions. He was focusing on the deed as much as on the man. The conclusions he arrived at were highly negative, and he spared nothing to make this brutally clear to his readers” (Soloveitchik 1980, p. 296). On this controversy see also: Yair Lorberbaum and Haim Shapira, “Maimonides’ Epistle on Martyrdom in the Light of Legal Philosophy” (Lorberbaum and Shapira 2008), as well as Soloveitchik’s “A Response to Lorberbaum and Shapira, ‘Maimonides’ Epistle on Martyrdom in the Light of Legal Philosophy” (Soloveitchik 2014, pp. 163–72). The classical locus of the rabbinic discussion on the Marranos, which listed one hundred and fifty responses to Maimonides’ *Iggeret ha-Shemad* throughout the ages, is the work of Hirsch Jakob Zimmels, *Die Marranen in der rabbinischen Literatur. Forschungen und Quellen zur Geschichte und Kulturgeschichte der Anussim* (Zimmels 1932). Its American reviewer—the famous Sephardic rabbi, David de Sola Pool—summarizes those debates as follows: “At first they were almost uniformly regarded in the most favorable and sympathetic light. It was recognized that they were the victims of *force majeure*, and therefore should not be treated as true apostates. But as time went on, and many remained without the fold though possibilities of return to Judaism were theoretically open through emigration, the question became more complex and the answers less favourable [ . . . ] Dr. Zimmels traces the chronological development of the problem. In the earliest they [the Marranos] were regarded as Jews. Then they were regarded as Jews only in questions of marriage, but not in other respects. In the third phase they were treated as non-Jews and in the fourth as yet more estranged than other non-Jews. In the fifth phase they were put into the category of a child living captive among gentiles” (De Sola Pool 1934, p. 248–9).

17 Derrida’s Marrano-antinomian intuition that the secret “truth of the tradition” may lie deeper and even at odds with the “chain of the tradition”, transmitted from generation to generation through the overt Teaching, was first articulated by Scholem who, in his *Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah*, composed in the 1940’s, plays on the ambivalence of the Latin verb *tradere* (meaning “to pass on”, but also “to betray”) and insists on the difference between *Tradition* in its truth and *Tradierbarkeit* as that which can be transmitted (*tradendum*): “The kabbalist claims that there is a tradition (*Tradition*) of truth which can be handed over (*tradierbar*). This is a very ironic claim since the truth, of which it speaks, is anything but capable of being handed over (*tradierbar*). The truth can become known but not passed on, *for precisely in what can be passed on, the truth is no longer*. The authentic tradition remains hidden” (Scholem 1973, p. 264; emphasis added). My interpretation of Derrida’s reversal as antinomian derives from Scholem’s definition which focuses not so much on the anti-legal practices as on the tension between the overt and the hidden tradition which can come to the fore only when the former is questioned.

18 “To deny Hitler the posthumous victory of destroying this faith was a moral-religious commandment. I no longer hesitated to call it the 614th commandment: for post-Holocaust Judaism it would be as binding as if it had been revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai. The long-avoided but now accepted task, then, *did not destroy my Jewish thought but revolutionized it*” (Fackenheim 1994, pp. ix–xx, emphasis added). Derrida could have said the same about his new embracement of Judaism via the self-reflected Marrano experience.

19 The triple association of the Marrano, the witness, and the survivor is confirmed by Derrida himself. In the letter from Istanbul, when visiting the local old Sephardic community, he confesses: “I feel, a little like them perhaps, like a survivor, more Marrano than ever” (Derrida and Malabou 2004, p. 14). In *Demeure, Athens*, the Marrano identification is missing, yet the phrase—“doubly surviving witness”—seems to refer to Derrida’s double survival and thus a double guilt: as the one who still lives after the Holocaust and the one who still lives after he lost his Jewish origins: “This book bears the signature of one who keeps a vigil, involved in more than one mourning, a doubly surviving witness” (Derrida 2010, p. 42).

20 Perhaps Derrida’s radical exoneration offers a possible solution to the dilemma of the Marrano guilt which, as Haym Soloveitchik rightly remarks, plagues Maimonides’s tolerant position: “. . . all that Maimonides’ remarkable erudition has proven is that coerced acts are not punishable, not that they are non-tortuous. Punishment is one thing, sin is another, and the sting of the opponent’s charges lay as much in the sinfulness of the Marranos’ deeds as in their culpability. Indeed, in his *Perush ha-Mishnayot*, Maimonides seems to be of the opinion that religious breaches committed under duress have no need for atonement [ . . . ] However, he does not advance it in his defense of Moroccan Jewry and for an obvious reason. If their conduct until then had not been sinful, why should Jews flee Morocco, as Maimonides insists they must? Maimonides was caught between the Scylla of overwhelming guilt and the Charybdis of guiltless inertia” (Soloveitchik 2014, p. 172).

21 The concept of the “enigma of survival” as an “enabling trauma” which turns crisis into a new chance derives from Cathy Caruth: “Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival [ . . . ] The trauma consists not only in having confronted death but in having survived, precisely, without knowing it. What one returns to in the flashback is not the incomprehensibility of one’s near death, but the very incomprehensibility of one’s own survival” (Caruth 1996, p. 58). What Caruth writes about Judaism in Freud’s rendering, then, can be applied a fortiori to the Marrano form of religiosity in crisis:

“The traumatic structure of monotheism [ . . . ] signifies a history of Jewish survival that is both an endless crisis and the endless possibility of a new future” (Caruth 1996, p. 68).

- 22 In that sense, Spinoza in Yovel’s interpretation—the “Marrano of reason” and “the first secular Jew”—can indeed be regarded as a “harbinger” of those changes that transformed modern religion, Judaism included, by loosening its normative grip on the faithful: “. . . who in the Jewish world today might be authorized to accept Spinoza back into the Jewish fold? The Lubavitcher Rebbe? The prime minister of Israel? The board of the Jewish Theological Seminary? The B’nai B’rith? There is no longer a single normative Judaism today—a development of which Spinoza himself was a harbinger. In abandoning the observant Judaism of his day, but refusing to convert to Christianity, Spinoza unwittingly embodied the alternatives which lay in wait for Jews of later generations following the encounter of Judaism with the modern world. As a result of this encounter, there is no longer one norm of Jewish existence today. There are Orthodox and secular Jews, Conservative and Reform Jews, Zionist and anti-Zionist Jews, and nuances and subcategories within all of these; in fact, Judaism today is determined by the way actual Jews live it, and not by any one compulsory model. This being the case, there is no longer an institution or an individual with the authority to include or exclude, to excommunicate or bring back to the fold (even symbolically). Since Spinoza himself foretold this development [ . . . ], he has once more become central to contemporary thinking about Judaism and the complexities of its existence and survival” (Yovel 1989a, p. 203–4).
- 23 This Jewish gender-bender, so emphatically affirmed by Boyarin, is also met with a big *yes, yes* by Derrida who often equates circumcision with effemination and is quite willing to accept Otto Weininger’s diagnosis as a praise, not an accusation. This motif is nicely summed up by Gideon Ofrat: “Women and Jews represent the simulacrum of emasculation, and what is emasculation if not circumcision? [ . . . ] Derrida sees this unity (woman = Judaism) and this contradiction (Judaism as against army, state, etc.) as challenge to all the nations of the world, Israel included” (Ofrat 2001, p. 50).
- 24 This type of reversal, in which the tragic blame gives rise to a messianic hope, is a frequent theme in modern Jewish thought, from Hermann Cohen, through Rosenzweig and Benjamin, to Levinas and Derrida. While defining the messianic discourse, Cohen states that “prophecy exhausts and surpasses all tragedy”, because it offers a hopeful way out of the tragic closure (Cohen 1995, p. 26). On the relation between the tragic and the messianic, see also my *Cryptotheologies of Late Modernity: Philosophical Marranos*, especially the chapter, “Individuation through sin: Hermann Cohen between tragedy and messianism” (Bielik-Robson 2014, pp. 41–62).

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