



CULTURES
of the
JEWS

A New History

EDITED BY

David Biale

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PREFACE: TOWARD A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE JEWS

DAVID BIALE

Sometime in the fifteenth century, a small silver casket was fashioned by an Italian Jewish craftsman known to us from his embossed signature on the lid as Jeshurun Tovar. The casket was intended as a wedding gift for a bride in northern Italy, probably to hold the keys to her linen closets.¹ On the lid of the casket are small dials indicating, in Hebrew numerals, quantities of different kinds of linen and clothing noted by their Italian names written in Hebrew characters: tablecloths, towels, men's shirts, women's chemises, handkerchiefs, knickers, and aprons or cloths for menstruation. It has been suggested that the purpose of this accounting system was to keep track of the items in characters unknown to the woman's Christian servants, although the Hebrew alphabet may also have been the only one that the woman or her Jewish servants could read. The nielloed front panel of the casket depicts three scenes of a Jewish wife fulfilling her cardinal religious duties: separating the *hallah* from the dough, lighting the Sabbath candles, and immersing herself in the ritual bath, which symbolized the separation of husband and wife during her menstrual period.²

What meaning does this intricate piece of craftwork have for understanding Jewish culture? Culture is an elastic term that can be stretched in many directions: indeed, the authors of the chapters in these volumes have each followed his or her own definitions. One way to define culture is as the manifold expressions—written or oral, visual or textual, material or spiritual—with which human beings represent their lived experiences in order to give them meaning.³ But culture is more than just the literary or aesthetic products of a society. As one witty adage goes: "Culture is how we do things around here." From this point of view, culture is the practice of everyday life.⁴ It is what people do, what they *say* about what they do, and, finally, how they understand both of these activities. If Jewish culture is broadly conceived along these lines, objects like the silver casket are as precious repositories of meaning as learned texts: the keys contained in it may unlock more doors than just those of linen closets. For example, the dresses worn by the three female figures on the casket are clearly

similar to those worn in a somewhat earlier period in Italy by Christians as well as Jews. Yet the artistic themes themselves suggest a specifically Jewish culture. What, then, was the relationship between Jewish culture in that particular epoch and the culture of the non-Jews among whom the Jews lived? What can we learn from the casket about Jewish culture internally—especially, in this case, about the lives of Jewish women? Finally, can we speak of one Jewish culture across the ages or only Jewish cultures in the plural, each unique to its time and place? These are some of the questions that *Cultures of the Jews* will raise and attempt to answer.

The *Mekhilta*, one of the oldest rabbinic midrashim, tells us that the ancient Israelites were preserved as a distinct people in Egypt for four reasons: they kept their names; they maintained their language; they resisted violating the biblical sexual prohibitions (by which the midrash means that they did not intermarry); and they did not engage in “idle gossip” (*leshon ha-ra*, which the midrash understands as collaborating with the gentile government).⁵ The *Mekhilta* nostalgically portrays the biblical Jews in Egypt as an “ideal” nation in exile. But from what we know of biblical times (and the Bible says nothing about the 430-year period in Egypt to which the midrash refers), this is an unhistorical portrait. Did the biblical Jews—or, more precisely, the Israelites, as they called themselves—resist foreign names, languages, and intermarriages? Quite the opposite. The name Moses itself is almost certainly of Egyptian origin; the Hebrew language borrowed its alphabet from the Phoenicians and is closely related to Ugaritic, the language of an earlier Canaanite culture (perhaps the earliest Hebrew ought to be called—tongue-in-cheek—“Judeo-Canaanite”); and the Bible is replete with intermarriages, from Joseph’s marriage to the Egyptian Asnat to Bathsheba’s marriage to Uriah the Hittite (not to speak of Solomon’s many foreign wives). All the earmarks of “assimilation” can be found in the Bible itself.

Although it is not possible to date this rabbinic midrash precisely—it is probably from the late second or third century C.E.—the *Mekhilta*’s cultural context was the Greco-Roman period, a period when all of these “prohibitions” were manifestly violated: Jews did adopt Greek names and the Greek language, intermarriage was not unknown, and some Jews did act as agents of or informers to the non-Jewish authorities. A stunning example of such interaction between Jewish and Greek culture was revealed in the excavations at Bet She’arim in the lower Galilee. An enormous third-century C.E. Jewish burial chamber at the site contains many sarcophagi decorated with a variety of mythological motifs, such as Leda and the swan, a favorite artistic theme from Greek mythology. Inscriptions in Greek are mixed with those in Hebrew. The Bet She’arim necropolis also contains the graves of rabbis contemporary with Judah the Prince, the compiler of the Mishnah, demonstrating that the cultural syncretism

of the site was not alien to the rabbis themselves, despite the statements to the contrary in the *Mekhilta*. Did these Jews who shared a burial space—rabbis and others clearly of a wealthy class—believe in some fashion in the Greek myths portrayed on their tombs? Or, as seems more likely, were they adopting Greek motifs for their own purposes? What meaning did such images have for them, if not what they meant in Greek culture? Were they purely ornamental, or did the Jews graft onto them symbolic meanings consonant with their understanding of Jewish tradition?⁶

In the light of such findings as Bet She'arim, it is impossible to maintain the popular conception of rabbinic Judaism flourishing in splendid isolation from its Greco-Roman surroundings. We now know that the development of rabbinic culture involved the adaptation of legal principles and language from the Hellenistic and Roman worlds.⁷ Although concerned with inoculating the Jews against contamination by pagan idolatry, the rabbis also made a clear distinction between images and idols. An image such as a statue of Aphrodite might be acceptable in a bathhouse but not in a pagan temple, where it functioned as an idol and was thus forbidden.⁸ Similarly, Greek images might be incorporated into Jewish funerary practices, as at Bet She'arim, without this necessarily constituting adoption of their Greek meaning.

How should we label such adoption of non-Jewish culture? Does it suggest “assimilation” or, to use a less loaded term, “acculturation”? The Italian Jewish culture that produced our casket has frequently been described as one of the most assimilated or acculturated in all of pre-modern Jewish history. But perhaps the contemporary model of assimilation is misleading when applied to the Jews of Renaissance Italy.⁹ Here was a traditional community intent on drawing boundaries between itself and its Christian neighbors but also able to adopt and adapt motifs from the surrounding culture for its own purposes. Indeed, the Jews should not be seen as outsiders who borrowed from Italian culture but rather as full participants in the shaping of that culture, albeit with their own concerns and mores. The Jews were not so much “influenced” by the Italians as they were one organ in a larger cultural organism, a subculture that established its identity in a complex process of adaptation and resistance. Jewish “difference” was an integral part of the larger mosaic of Renaissance Italy. Expanding beyond Renaissance Italy to Jewish history as a whole, we may find it more productive to use this organic model of culture than to chase after who influenced whom.

The findings at Bet She'arim—as well as our richly decorated silver casket—challenge another common misconception: that Jewish culture was hostile to the visual arts. The Jewish religion has traditionally been understood as a textual or written tradition in which visual images played a minor role at best. Accord-

ing to some interpretations, the second of the Ten Commandments, which prohibits all images of God, also prohibits, by extension, human images. But it is questionable whether such a prohibition ever really existed.¹⁰ In the Middle Ages, illuminators of Jewish manuscripts were not shy about depicting human beings; the famous *Bird's Head Haggadah* and other Ashkenazic manuscripts from that period, in which people are portrayed with the heads of birds or other animals, are exceptions that prove the rule, and their meaning is still hotly debated.¹¹ Even within the textual tradition, there developed a particularly Jewish form of art, called micrography, in which the letters of a text were written in tiny characters that formed visual images.¹² In most cases, such as that of the casket, Jewish art involved an interaction between Jewish and non-Jewish motifs and artistic techniques. This interaction demonstrates how the culture of a minority group like the Jews can never be separated from that of the majority surrounding it.

Even in the earliest phases of Jewish history, the ancient Israelites were probably most often a minority among the Canaanite and other Near Eastern peoples who inhabited what the Bible itself calls "the Land of Canaan." In fact, the archaeological evidence suggests that many, if not most, of the Israelites were culturally and perhaps even ethnically descended from the Canaanites. As much as the authors of biblical monotheism tried to isolate the Israelite religion from the practices of their neighbors, it is now generally accepted among scholars of the biblical period that ancient Israel's cult, especially in its popular manifestations, was bound up with Canaanite polytheism.¹³ The theological segregation of "Israelite" and "Canaanite" religions is just as mythic as the social and cultural segregation of the two peoples called "Israelite" and "Canaanite." The correct question may therefore not be the difference between "polytheism" and "monotheism" but rather how a theology that claims one, transcendent God nevertheless surreptitiously incorporated and transformed many of the elements of polytheism.

What was true for cult is true for culture. For every period of history, interaction with the non-Jewish majority has been critical in the formation of Jewish culture. Even those Jewish cultures thought to be the most insular adapted ideas and practices from their surroundings. A case in point are the medieval Ashkenazic Jews, whose culture is often considered to have been far more closed than the culture of the contemporaneous Sephardic Jews. Yet their spoken language was essentially that of their Christian neighbors. And, consider how the thirteenth-century German *Hasidim* (Pietists), whose ideals included segregation not only from Christians but also from nonpietistic Jews, adopted ascetic and penitential practices strikingly similar to those of the Franciscan Order from the same period.¹⁴

Rather than the *Mekhilta's* explanation for why the Jews survived in exile—as well as in their own land—perhaps our supposition ought to be just the reverse: that it was precisely in their profound engagement with the cultures of their environment that the Jews constructed their distinctive identities. But this engagement involved two seeming paradoxes. On the one hand, the tendency to acculturate into the non-Jewish culture typically produced a distinctive Jewish subculture. On the other hand, the effort to maintain a separate identity was often achieved by borrowing and even subverting motifs from the surrounding culture.¹⁵

Language was one arena in which this complex process took place. Jews were remarkably adept at adopting the languages of their neighbors but also in reshaping those languages as Jewish dialects by adding Hebrew expressions: language was at once a sign of acculturation *and* cultural segregation. Yiddish, Ladino, and Judeo-Arabic (the latter is actually vernacular Arabic written in Hebrew characters) are the best known of these dialects, but there were many others. In the Greco-Roman world, Jews did not develop a Judeo-Greek, but they incorporated so many Greek words into both Hebrew and Aramaic that those languages, in Late Antiquity, must be considered “fusion” or “acculturated” languages (that is, languages strongly reflecting Greco-Roman culture).

The cases of Yiddish and Ladino are more complicated. Both started out as Jewish dialects of the local non-Jewish language: Middle High German (with some medieval French) for Yiddish, and Castilian Spanish for Ladino. But both took on a much more segregated quality when the Jews who spoke them migrated elsewhere. So, when the Ashkenazic or German Jews moved to Poland in the late Middle Ages, they did not develop a Judeo-Polish but rather absorbed some Slavic words into the Judeo-German that would come to be known as Yiddish. In Germany itself, the Jews continued to speak *ma'arav Yiddish* (Western Yiddish) into the early nineteenth century, long after the Germans themselves no longer spoke the German of the Middle Ages. Ladino was spoken by the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula, but it remained their language for half a millennium after the Expulsion in the Balkans, Greece, Turkey, and other areas of the Ottoman Empire; in these countries of “double exile,” the Sephardim never developed Judeo-Greek or Judeo-Turkish. So, two processes were at work: first, intense linguistic acculturation in the early and high Middle Ages, and then, later, a kind of linguistic conservatism—the preservation of these earlier dialects as ever-more distinctive markers of difference from the surrounding cultures, at times even regarded as the “secret” languages of the Jews.

Only in modern times did the Diaspora Jewish languages begin to die out, replaced by the languages of the countries in which the Jews became citizens or by Hebrew, revived by the Zionist movement as a spoken language. Yet even in the

modern process of linguistic acculturation, one can discern Jewish inflections in the way Jews wrote and spoke languages like German and English. In describing the translation of the Bible into German that they published in the 1920s, Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber used the word *Verdeutschung* rather than the standard German word for translation (*Übersetzung*).¹⁶ *Verdeutschung* obviously means “a rendering into German,” but it is also the Yiddish word for both translation into Yiddish and commentary (*teitsh humesh* means something like “the Bible translated and explained in Yiddish”). It is doubly ironic that Yiddish refers to itself as *teitsh*—that is, German—and to translation into Yiddish as “to render into German.” By using this rare German word with its Yiddish reverberations, Rosenzweig and Buber were hinting that one goal of the Bible translation was not so much to translate the Bible into “pure” German, as Martin Luther had, but to infuse German with the intonations of the original Hebrew and thus make it a “Jewish language.” And they performed this linguistic magic with the very word they chose to describe their project.

Linguistic adaptation was part of a larger strategy of resistance in which the Jews asserted their identity in intimate interaction with the majority culture. The study of indigenous groups living under colonialism has enriched our understanding of how a politically subjugated people shapes its culture and identity.¹⁷ This process involves both defending one’s native traditions *and* incorporating and transforming the culture imposed by the colonial power. Both parties to these negotiations end up defining themselves through and against the other. Although the situation of the Jews as a minority was not precisely analogous to that of non-Western colonized peoples under Western imperialism, there is a similarity in the way Jewish identity developed in a rich dialectic with the identities of the non-Jewish majority: the category of “Jew” assumed and, indeed, produced the category *goy*.¹⁸ The production of Jewish culture and identity in such circumstances can never be separated from the power relations between Jews and their neighbors.

A fascinating visual example of this process can be found in numerous Jewish medieval illuminated manuscripts. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council required that Jews wear identifying insignia, a piece of legislation purportedly motivated by fears of sexual relations between Jews and Christians. Among the distinctive forms of Jewish dress that one finds in the later Middle Ages is the hat, which assumed a variety of different shapes. In many Hebrew illuminated manuscripts, the Jews are depicted wearing these hats as a matter of course.¹⁹ If the intention of the Christian rulers was to degrade the Jews, it seems evident from these pictures that the Jews did not feel degraded, for otherwise it is hard to imagine why they portrayed themselves—or commissioned Christian artists to portray them—wearing the distinctive hat in scenes of private or synagogue life. In a

later period, the age of emancipation, the Jewish hat came to be seen as humiliating. Yet, for the Jews of the Middle Ages, the way Christians commanded them to dress became badges of their own identity, as much a part of their culture depicted in these manuscripts as the sacred words on their pages.

The Jewish minority often adopted non-Jewish beliefs or practices but infused them with traditional Jewish symbols. For instance, the ritual—practiced widely in many different communities—of the first day of school, during which a young boy would eat honey in the shape of Hebrew letters, may have been enacted by the medieval Ashkenazic Jews in a way that responded to the new Christian dogma and rituals of the Eucharist.²⁰ And when the same Jews confronted the Crusaders in 1096 with a messianic theology of blood vengeance—a theology that led some to slaughter their own children and commit suicide in order to bring down the divine wrath on their persecutors—much of the language of blood, sacrifice, and atonement, although rooted in earlier Jewish sources, resonates with similar Christian concepts from the time.²¹

The example of the Crusades suggests that the Jews did not interact with the cultures of their non-Jewish neighbors only during peaceful times but also in times of conflict. While much of this violence flowed from the majority toward the minority, the street was not exclusively one-way. In the Middle Ages, Jews also utilized violence, sometimes real and sometimes symbolic, to enforce the boundaries that they, no less than Christians and Muslims, wished to maintain. A particular instance of such ritualized violence was the custom of hanging an effigy of Haman on a cross during Purim, thus demonstrating the Jews' contempt for Christianity.²² Moreover, great cultural interchange, such as occurred during the so-called Golden Age of Spain (roughly 1000–1400), did not preclude such acts of real or symbolic violence.²³ Relations between the minority and the majority cultures cannot, therefore, be so easily categorized as either peaceful “symbiosis” or unrelieved antagonism, or, more broadly, as “golden ages” versus “dark ages.”

Jewish self-definition was, then, bound up in a tangled web with the non-Jewish environment in which the Jews lived, at once conditioned by how non-Jews saw the Jews and by how the Jews adopted and resisted the majority culture's definition of them. For all that Jews had their own autonomous traditions, their very identities throughout their history were inseparable from that of their Canaanite, Persian, Greek, Roman, Christian, and Muslim neighbors. An old Arabic proverb claims that “Men resemble their own times more than the times of their fathers.” Viewed in this light, Jewish identity cannot be considered immutable, the fixed product of either ancient ethnic or religious origins, but rather to have changed as the cultural context changed.

But if Jewish identity changed according to differing historical contexts, can

we speak at all of *a* Jewish history, a common narrative stretching from the Bible, through the Hellenistic and rabbinic periods, the Muslim and Christian Middle Ages, and into the modern period? Is there or was there *one* Jewish people with one history? Is there or has there ever been one Jewish religion called Judaism? Both high literary culture and material culture, from the way Jews dressed to the way they looked and behaved, from their natural landscapes to the architecture of their homes and communal institutions, differed radically from period to period and place to place. Culture would appear to be the domain of the plural: we might speak of Jewish *cultures* instead of culture in the singular.

And, yet, such a definition would be missing a crucial aspect of Jewish culture: the continuity of both textual and folk traditions throughout Jewish history and throughout the many lands inhabited by the Jews. The multiplicity of Jewish cultures always rested on the Bible and—with the exception of the Karaites and the Ethiopian Jews—on the Talmud and other rabbinic literature. In the Middle Ages, philosophical, legal, exegetical, and mystical traditions added to the edifice built on earlier textual foundations. This extraordinary library became the cultural legacy not only of the legal authorities and intellectuals who produced it but also of the people as a whole, as defining of Jewish identity as the diverse cultural interactions of which we have already spoken. To be sure, the Jewish library cannot be reduced to a single “essence.” As the work of the great historian of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem (1897–1981), taught us, myth and magic occupy as much room on its shelves as law and philosophy: Jewish religion—and, more broadly, Jewish culture—contain the rational *and* the irrational.

As the *Mekhilta*'s ideal of national isolation and purity demonstrates, the Jews throughout the ages *believed* themselves to have a common national biography and a common culture.²⁴ These beliefs are also an integral part of the history of Jewish culture because their very existence made them as true as the historical “facts” that seem to contradict them. The history of other national groups suggests how complicated the relationship is between the belief in the unity of the nation and historical reality. The Germans and the French, for example, only really became united peoples with a common language in the nineteenth century (although the French had a much older unified state, whereas the Germans did not). Yet the *idea* of a common French or German identity long preceded the historical reality and, indeed, contributed toward creating this reality. In a similar way, we can speak of a dialectic between, on the one hand, the *idea* of one Jewish people and of a unified Jewish culture, and, on the other, the history of multiple communities and cultures.

The role of rabbinic law in Jewish history demonstrates how this dialectic worked. The development of rabbinic law often appears to follow its own inter-

nal logic, with a sixteenth-century authority debating a twelfth-century predecessor as if both were in the same room. The legal innovations of a particular authority, often couched to appear as if they were really present in an earlier text, might seem to be utterly divorced from the culture, both Jewish and non-Jewish, in which the authority lived. Yet between the lines of this ethereal discourse, one often finds echoes of the external world, intruding and shaping the rulings of judges and scholars. In addition, the rigid fences of the law typically bent to include local customs (*minhagim*), unique to particular communities, which also reflected historical developments. And if rabbinic law can be considered the product of “elite” culture, “popular” culture exhibited the same dialectic: Jews throughout the world shared common beliefs—as well as actual books—about demons and how to ward them off. Yet these folk customs varied in their details from place to place, often reflecting the practices of the surrounding non-Jewish folk cultures. On both the elite and popular levels, then, the Jewish people were, at once, one *and* diverse.

Let us return to our silver casket as a case in point. A particular detail in the center of the frontal panel attracts our attention: the woman standing in the barrel-shaped ritual bath is naked. Does the presence of a nude woman on this object suggest that, following the predominant cultural values of the Italian Renaissance, the Jews of the time did not regard depiction of the unclothed human body as immodest, religiously unacceptable, or, perhaps, even erotic? Or, perhaps it *was* considered erotic, since the bed linens indicated by the dials on top of the box are connected with an act that Jewish law considered a suggestion of intimate marital relations: a wife making the bed for her husband (because during her menstrual period she was not allowed to make the bed).²⁵ Might, then, this image, appearing on a casket holding keys to the linen closet, serve to arouse her (or her husband) sexually? What does the casket teach us about attitudes toward the body among Italian Renaissance Jews? Was the woman who owned the casket aware of the discrepancy between rabbinic prohibitions of nudity and this particular image? Was her understanding of the images on the casket the same as that of her husband or of the casket’s maker? What did the rabbinic authorities of the day think of such depictions? Do we have evidence here of divisions among the Italian Jews between a “secular” class and rabbinic authority or, perhaps, among the rabbis themselves?

Whatever the answers may be to these questions—and some will be found in the chapter on Jewish culture in the Italian Renaissance—it would be a mistake to assume that the maker and users of the casket necessarily intended to contradict the dictates of Jewish law. After all, the images were designed to remind the woman of the house of the primary commandments of her religious life. Rather,

the cultural means by which people chose to represent and express rabbinic law changed from period to period and from context to context. Culture acted as a kind of expansive interpretation of the law, or, to put it differently, law was only one aspect of a wider culture that as much shaped the law after its own values as it was shaped by it. Instead of imagining an elite rabbinic culture coexisting perhaps uneasily with an opposing popular or nonlearned culture, we might see the two as much more tightly entangled with each other, for rabbis and other authorities often shared many of the cultural practices of the common folk, just as those who were not authorities incorporated “elite” culture into their own. The Talmud, for example, though the product of an elite class of rabbis in Palestine and Babylonia, contains much folklore, both Jewish and non-Jewish, suggesting that these rabbis were not walled off from the larger culture in which they lived. And in the Middle Ages the Talmud, while remaining a book studied by a small, male elect, came to shape popular Jewish culture, not only through its laws but also through its maxims and legends. While the terms “elite” and “popular” may still be useful in thinking about Jewish culture, it is equally important not to be seduced by such polar opposites and to recognize the common ground that existed between the two.

For the cultural historian, the intellectual elite does not exist in isolation, just as daily life does not remain in its own mute universe, unencumbered by intellectual reflection. Cultural history is an effort to see the connections between them. Those who produce cultural objects, whether written, visual, or material, can never be isolated from the larger social context, the everyday world, in which they live, just as those who belong to this larger world are not immune to the ideas and symbolic meanings that may be articulated by intellectuals. The relationship between text and context ought rather to be seen as the relationship between different types of texts, rather than between the “ideas” of elites versus the “material” reality of the wider society.²⁶ At times, those among the uneducated mobilized ideas, perhaps derived from old, subterranean traditions, to subvert the dominant discourse.²⁷ In the Jewish sphere, one might turn to folklore for such traditions or to the rabbinic responsa literature, which can provide not only a history of legal precedents and case law but also evidence of the actual beliefs and practices of Jews who lived their lives outside the *bet midrash* (the study hall) and the *bet din* (the rabbinic court), perhaps even in opposition to these venerable institutions.

An example of such subversion and of the complex relations between rabbinic and nonrabbinic culture for the same period as our silver casket are two prayer books copied by one of the leading rabbis of the day, Abraham Farissol. The first was commissioned by a man for his wife in Ferrara in 1478, and the

second was ordered by a married woman in Mantua in 1480. In both cases, the morning blessings—when men traditionally thank God for “not making me a woman” and women thank God for making them “according to His will”—contain a radical revision: the prayer thanks God “for making me a woman and not a man.”²⁸ Whose decision was it in the first case to change the blessings: the man who commissioned the work, or his wife? How did the woman in the second case decide to make this revision, and did she have the approval of her husband? We know nothing about the negotiations between the wealthy patrons and the learned rabbi who copied the books. Did Farissol resist the revision or, alternatively, did he perhaps suggest it? What more do these objects tell us about attitudes toward Jewish women in Renaissance Italy among the wealthy classes and among the rabbis? And, what meaning—if any—ought we assign to the fact that someone at a later point erased the names of the patrons from the title pages of the books?

Both the silver casket and these prayer books were objects intended for use by women. Introducing gender into the study of Jewish history is one way of including alternative voices and extending the scope of our inquiry from high or learned culture to the culture of everyday life. These objects suggest a cultural matrix for Italian Jewish women in the Renaissance that may have differed significantly from that of men of the time, but also from that of Jewish women in other periods and places. The woman who commissioned the prayer book was clearly educated enough to read Hebrew, as was the woman who owned the casket. Such details allow us to reconstruct at least some aspects of Jewish women’s lives and thus to portray Jewish culture as much more diverse and heterogeneous than one might conclude from a study of rabbis or other learned men. Another example is the rich body of literature, written in Yiddish, that provided women with private prayers (*teḥines*) about issues, such as the three cardinal commandments or conception and childbirth, specifically germane to their lives.²⁹

Cultures of the Jews is therefore shaped by a broad definition of culture. As we have seen, this approach challenges such conventional distinctions as “unity” versus “diversity,” “textual continuity” versus “cultural ruptures,” “monotheism” versus “polytheism,” “isolation” versus “assimilation,” “golden ages” versus “dark ages,” and “elite” versus “popular.” Jewish history consisted of all these centripetal and centrifugal forces, and each coexisted with its opposite, to the point where the very opposition between them appears artificial and overly simplistic. More than just expanding our story to include what has been neglected, we will question these very dichotomies.

There is yet one more dichotomy that we need to examine: the opposition be-

tween "Homeland" and "Exile." The belief in a "Promised Land," the Land of Israel, lies at the core of the biblical narrative and subsequent Jewish thought; it is this belief, in barely secularized form, that animated the Zionist movement in its reestablishment of the Jewish state. Yet the Bible itself oscillates between the two. The Book of Genesis starts with exile from the Garden of Eden, and Abraham, almost immediately after arriving in the Land of Israel, goes "down" to Egypt. Exile and Return are the recurring motifs of the biblical text.³⁰ And, as we shall see repeatedly in this work, the Jews of many Diaspora communities, while holding onto the messianic vision of return to the Land, often saw in their own countries a remembrance of an ideal past and a taste of that messianic future: so it was that the Lithuanian Jews referred to Vilna as "the Jerusalem of Lithuania." So, too, the Jews of the Greco-Roman Diaspora, Sassanian Babylonia, Muslim al-Andalus, Christian Spain, and contemporary America seemed to feel at home in exile.

Even the modern return of the Jews to their historic homeland and the restoration of Jewish political sovereignty have not definitively resolved this dialectic between Land and Exile. The "national poet" of the Zionist movement, Ḥayyim Naḥman Bialik, perhaps the last person we might expect to endorse life in exile, described in an essay written in 1922 what he called the "Jewish dualism" of expansion and contraction, wandering and returning. He concludes with a startling prophecy:

After wandering for thousands of years and after endless changes and re-evaluations . . . after influencing the whole world and being influenced by it, we are now, for the third or fourth time, once again returning to our land. And here we are destined to fashion a culture sevenfold greater and richer than any we have heretofore created or absorbed. And who knows? Perhaps after hundreds of years we will be emboldened to make another exodus that will lead to the spreading of our spirit over the world and an assiduous striving towards glory.³¹

Rather than an end to Jewish wandering, the new nation of Israel may be only the latest phase in an eternal cycle of leaving and returning, Homeland and Diaspora. This, too, is an enduring theme in the cultural history of the Jews.

The ambiguous relationship today between Homeland and Exile, foreshadowed by Bialik, finds concrete expression in this work. For the first time, a collaborative history of the Jews includes an equal number of scholars from Israel and the Diaspora. Moreover, the lines between the two seem increasingly fuzzy. Many of the Israeli scholars were born and educated in the Diaspora (particu-

larly the United States and Canada), while others born in Israel received their training in universities abroad. And, virtually all of the scholars currently based in the Diaspora have spent considerable periods in Israel, studying, teaching, or doing research. Jewish Studies as a field has become “globalized” and, though differences surely remain, the categories of Israel and Diaspora no longer occupy the central place in scholarly agendas they once held.

In the chapters that follow, scholars from many disciplines—archaeology, art history, ancient Near Eastern studies, cultural history, literary studies, and folklore—offer their answers to the questions raised in this introduction. Just as culture itself consists of many dimensions and facets, so there are many windows through which scholars may try to view this imprecise object of study. Instead of following one ironclad set of guidelines, each has been free to approach the subject with his or her own particular tools. The sum total of their diverse efforts constitutes a better or more approximate definition of Jewish cultures than does any one chapter.

This enterprise certainly does not exhaust its subject. For every major cultural formation discussed in these pages, a multitude of other approaches and other sources would be equally legitimate. Similarly, the reader should not expect to find an encyclopedia, with entries for every Jewish culture. We have attempted to identify the most significant and original cultures, often by subsuming regional variations under broader headings. The authors were also encouraged to frame their chapters with specific examples—a text, an artifact, or an anecdote—and undertake a “thick description” of them, as with our example of the Italian silver casket.

The questions we have posed in this study of Jewish culture are hardly new, and, indeed, every generation of scholars has asked them in one form or another. But the answers have not always been the same, because every generation weaves its image of the past out of the cloth of its present. In the past half-century, there have been two great, multivolume collaborative histories of the Jews, each a product of its own time and place. In the late 1940s, Louis Finkelstein of the Jewish Theological Seminary edited *The Jews: Their History, Religion and Contribution to Civilization*. The third volume of Finkelstein on the contribution of Jews to civilization takes an expansive view of culture, but it is primarily concerned with what its title suggests—the Jewish *contribution*—rather than with the mutual interaction between Jewish and non-Jewish cultures. Finkelstein makes it clear that he believes that the primary Jewish contribution to civilization was in religion, a view that dominates his understanding of Jewish culture and reflects rather accurately the self-definition of American Jewry in the late 1940s.

In the late 1960s, Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson edited *A History of the Jewish People*, three volumes written exclusively by scholars from the Hebrew University, published first in Hebrew and subsequently in English. The Ben-Sasson volumes are characterized by a distinct, if muted, nationalist teleology, reflecting the post-1967 atmosphere in Israel. Thus, Shmuel Ettinger, who wrote the chapter on modern Jewish history, concludes with the State of Israel. The authors emphasize the historical continuity of Jewish identity. In Ettinger's words: "One cannot overemphasize the tremendous force of historical continuity and of enduring conscious historical existence. . . . The Holocaust and the State of Israel are indisputable testimony to the fact that . . . the communal and national uniqueness [of the Jews] has never ceased to be significant." Although some of the authors, notably Ben-Sasson in his medieval chapter, investigate cultural interaction, the work as a whole conveys a sense of Jewish difference and isolation.

Both of these collaborative histories were notably deficient in their treatment of the Ladino-speaking Diaspora and, especially in the modern period, of the Jewish communities of North Africa and the Middle East. Despite chapters on the Jews of Arab lands in the Middle Ages, these works were highly Eurocentric, reflecting the dominant intellectual tendencies of their times. This is a deficiency we have taken pains to correct. For the first time, these Jewish communities receive their due, a corrective that is particularly important given the growing influence of North African and Middle Eastern Jews on the politics and culture of the State of Israel.

The present work is also the product of a particular time. Ours is a self-conscious age, when we raise questions about old ideologies and "master" narratives and no longer assume as unchanging or monolithic categories like "nation" and "religion." Teleologies, whether national or religious, are harder to sustain, just as categories that were foundational for previous generations, such as Homeland and Exile, have lost their ideological edge. We have become acutely aware—and critical—of how we use these categories to construct the past; instead of accepting them as immutable and given, we try to see them too as products of historical contexts. We are conscious, perhaps more than any earlier generation, of how our contemporary culture and commitments influence the ways we view our historical subjects.

Our silver casket may once again demonstrate this point. As cultural historians, we are aware that we are viewing an object not intended for public display, which is its fate today in the Israel Museum. Perhaps the nudity of the woman portrayed in her ritual bath excited no curiosity or controversy when it was made precisely because the casket was intended for private, female use. Just as the Hebrew lettering on the lid may have been used to hide the number and type

of the woman's linens from her Christian servants, so the casket itself, despite its revealing nakedness, is a kind of repository of secrets. We are like voyeurs peering into a world not our own and asking questions that are peculiarly modern. The cultural historian cannot ignore the gap that separates his or her investigations from the lived reality of those people—educated and uneducated, rich and poor, male and female—who have left us such artifacts. Our concerns may not have been theirs.

The task of the contemporary historian of Jewish culture is, then, paradoxical: to find commonalities between the past and present, but also to preserve all that is different and strange in that past. The singularly modern questions of Jewish identity—what is it that defines a Jew and where are the borders between what is and is not Jewish—preoccupy each of us as we reconstruct the variety of Jewish cultures. What it meant to be a Jew in biblical Canaan, Hellenistic Alexandria, sixteenth-century Poland, or nineteenth-century Morocco was certainly not the same as what it is today, nor were the questions we pose necessarily their questions. But by refracting our study of cultures past through such modern questions, those cultures appear at once more familiar *and* more alien. And by looking in the mirrors of the many and diverse Jewish cultures over the centuries, we may hope to see reflections of who the Jews were, what they are now, and, perhaps, some shards that they may use in fashioning what they will become.

NOTES

1. For a description of the casket, see Mordecai Narkis, "An Italian Silver Casket of the Fifteenth Century," *Journal of the Warburg and Courland Institutes* 21 (1958): 288–95. See also Vivian Mann, *Gardens and Ghettos: The Art of Jewish Life in Italy* (Berkeley, 1989), 309–10; Elias Bickerman, "Symbolism in the Dura Synagogue," *Harvard Theological Review* 58, no. 1 (1965): 131–32; and Shalom Sabar, "Bride, Heroine and Courtesan: Images of the Jewish Woman in Hebrew Manuscripts of the Renaissance in Italy," *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division D, vol. 2 (1990): 67.

2. The source for these commandments is m. Shabbat 2.6, which presents them negatively by stating that women die in childbirth for transgressions of these three laws. It should be noted that men are also subject to these laws. See Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law* (New York, 1984), 40.

3. See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973). For some critiques and expansions of Geertz, see Sherry B. Ortner, ed., *The Fate of Culture: Geertz and Beyond* (Berkeley, 1999), and James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988).

4. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, 1984), and Michel de Certeau, *Culture in the Plural*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis, 1997).
5. *Mekhilta*, Bo, parasha 5. The saying appears in a number of places in various forms in rabbinic literature: e.g., *Leviticus Rabba* 32.5; *Numbers Rabba* 13.19 and 20.22; *Song of Songs Rabba* 24.25, and *Tanhuma*, Balak 16.
6. For one view emphasizing a kind of mystical Judaism, see Erwin Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, vols. 1–13 (New York, 1953–68). For a critique of Goodenough, see Bickerman, “Symbolism.”
7. See Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine*, 2d ed. (New York, 1965).
8. M. Avodah Zara 3.4. See the discussion of this problem in the chapter by Eric Meyers in Part I.
9. Roberto Bonfil has made a cogent case for this position in his *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Anthony Oldcorn (Berkeley, 1994).
10. See Cecil Roth, *Jewish Art: An Illustrated History*, rev. ed. (London, 1971); Therese and Mendel Metzger, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages: Illuminated Jewish Manuscripts of the Thirteenth to the Sixteenth Centuries* (New York, 1982); and Kalman Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton, 2000).
11. Ruth Mellinkoff has argued recently that such depictions of Jews were inserted by anti-Jewish Christian illuminators. See her *Antisemitic Hate Signs in Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts from Medieval Germany* (Jerusalem, 1999). It seems hard to believe that the Jewish patrons who commissioned such works would have accepted these depictions if they were truly antisemitic. Nevertheless, Mellinkoff is convincing, following other Jewish art historians, in showing that there was no rabbinic prohibition on portraying the human face that might have led to the use of animal heads. The mystery remains unsolved.
12. See Stanley Ferber, “Micrography: A Jewish Art Form,” *Journal of Jewish Art* 3–4 (1977): 12–24.
13. For a recent example, see Susan Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth Century Judah* (Atlanta, 1992).
14. F. Y. Baer, “The Religious-Social Tendency of ‘Sepher Hasidim’ ” (Hebrew), *Zion* 3, no. 1 (1938): 1–50.
15. See Marc Michael Epstein’s fascinating study, *Dreams of Subversion in Medieval Jewish Art and Literature* (University Park, Pa., 1997).
16. See Martin Buber, *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung* (Berlin, 1936), which contains essays by both Buber and Rosenzweig on the Bible translation.
17. See the collection of essays edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London, 1995).
18. See my “Confessions of an Historian of Jewish Culture,” *Jewish Social Studies*, n.s. 1, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 40–51.
19. See an especially striking case in the *Bird’s Head Haggadah*: one of the pages illustrating the “Dayanu” shows the Israelites in the desert collecting manna and receiving the law.



All have birds' heads on which are perched typical "Jew's hats." See the reproduction in Bazalel Narkis, *Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts* (Jerusalem, 1969), 96–97. Another example in which human faces are shown with at least one figure wearing a "Jew's hat" at a Passover Seder is the *Darmstadt Haggadah* in *ibid.*, 126–27. For a pictorial collection of such head-gear, see "Head, Covering of the" in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. See also Raphael Straus, "The Jewish Hat as Cultural History," *Jewish Social Studies* 4 (1942): 59.

20. See Ivan G. Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood: Jewish Culture and Acculturation in the Middle Ages* (New Haven, Conn., 1996), as well as his chapter in Part II of this work.

21. See Yisrael Yuval, "Vengeance and Damnation, Blood and Defamation: From Jewish Martyrdom to Blood Libel Accusations" (Hebrew), *Zion* 58, no. 1 (1993): 33–90.

22. See Elliott Horowitz, "The Rite to Be Reckless: On the Perpetration and Interpretation of Purim Violence," *Poetics Today* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 9–54. See also his *Reckless Rites* (Princeton, 2001).

23. See David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1996).

24. See Ilana Pardes, *The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible* (Berkeley, 2000), and her chapter in Part I of this volume.

25. See the discussion in b. Ketubot 61a.

26. See Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1983), 116–17. LaCapra suggests that the relationship between ideas and context ought to be drawn using theories of intertextuality, since even the context is itself composed of texts.

27. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Ann Tedeschi (Baltimore, Md., 1980).

28. The manuscripts are, respectively, 1478=J TSA MIC. 8255 (ms. JMC 16), 5b and 1480=JNUL 8°5492, 7a. See David Ruderman, *The World of a Renaissance Jew: The Life and Thought of Abraham Ben Mordecai Farissol* (Cincinnati, 1981), appendix, and Shalom Sabar, "Bride, Heroine and Courtesan," 68. I thank Sabar for drawing the text from the Jewish Theological Seminary Library to my attention. My student Yoel Kahn will be publishing his own study of these manuscripts in a work on the history of the morning blessings. Based on his examination of the manuscripts, he has concluded that the one from 1478 was written by Farissol, whereas the new version of the words in the one from 1480 was written in a different hand.

29. See Chava Weissler, *Voices of the Matriarchs* (Boston, 1998).

30. See Arnold Eisen, *Galut* (Bloomington, Ind., 1986).

31. Translation in Ḥayyim Nahman Bialik, *Revelment and Concealment: Five Essays* (Jerusalem, 2000), 43–44. See also the afterword by Zali Gurevitch in which he describes Bialik as "the poet of exile."