SHMUEL N. EISENSTADT

*Tensions as Resources in Jewish Historical Civilizational Experience**

Abstract

The article analyzes in a comparative framework the Jewish historical experience as a distinct – the first monotheistic – Axial civilization and the major characteristics thereof. Special emphasis is given to the multivalence of the major components of the cultural orientations, collective consciousness and institutional premises as they bear on its long historical continuity and their major carriers, including heterodoxies. The article points out some of the major differences of the modern Jewish historical experience as compared with medieval history.

Keywords: Jewish historical experience; Axial civilizations; Monotheism; Heterodoxies.

I
The Jewish Civilization – The First Axial Monotheism

THE FACT OF Jewish survival, of the continuity of the collective life of the Jewish people and culture has been – and continues to be – one of the great puzzles of human history. Its explanation has constituted the focus of many explorations. In this paper I would like to suggest that the emphasis on the civilizational dimension of Jewish collectivity and historical experience may provide an important clue to the question of Jewish continuity.[1]

The assertion that the term *civilization* – and not other terms often used in the literature, such as people, nation, ethnic group or religion – is

* The first draft of this article was presented at the conference on Jewish Survival organized by the Spinoza Institute in Jerusalem in January 2005. I am grateful to Haim Soloveitchik and B. Z. Kedar for detailed comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

[1] Several aspects of the problems discussed in this paper are presented in greater detail in EISENSTADT 2004a.

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Arch.europ.sociol., L, 2 (2009), pp. 233–271—0003-9756/09/0000-900$07.50per art + $0.10 per page©2009 *A.E.S.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975609990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

best suited to define the nature of Jewish collectivity and historical experience and that it provides at least a clue to Jewish survival is based on the fact that while all these terms touch on some very important aspects of this experience, not only do they not exhaust it – they do not address its most distinctive characteristics. This is so not only because there are some specific Jewish idiosyncrasies with respect to each of these terms – for example the fact that the Jewish nation was for a long time dispersed without a common territory, or that the Jewish religion evinces some very distinctive characteristics in terms of its beliefs and rituals, or that it is a religion of one people that presents itself at the same time as a universal religion. With respect to this last characteristic, there are some interesting parallels, for example, with the Armenian or Ethiopian churches; there is, however, one ''small'' difference: whereas the Armenian or Ethiopian churches constitute part of Christianity, the Jewish religion has never been part of any other religion. One could go on with the list of such distinctive peculiarities of the Jews as a nation, religion or ethnic group. But it is not just these peculiarities that are of importance for the understanding of the major characteristics of Jewish collectivity and historical experience; rather, it is the combination of all these characteristics – of ''nationhood'' (basically a modern term which might not be appropriate for all periods of Jewish history), peoplehood, ''ethnicity'' and religion, and it is the very fact that such multiple terms are used that constitutes such distinctiveness.

The core of this distinctiveness is the belief that the Jews are the chosen people, with a covenantal communal relation with God, and with access to the sacred being given to all members of the community called upon to implement, through the combination of ritual and legal injunctions and customs, a distinct religious vision. Significantly, the different terms or orientations in which this vision was formulated have been multivalent, interpreted throughout Jewish history in different ways.

But what is the nature of this combination? Instead of starting with formal definitions, I would like to analyze some of the major characteristics of this combination as they developed historically.

There exist, of course, many scholarly controversies as to whether this combination started toward the end of the First Temple period, or with the return from the Babylonian exile with Ezra and Nehemiah or in the later period of the Second Temple. But these interesting historical questions are not of crucial importance to my analysis. Whenever it started, it was a very distinct, rather unusual combination

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of all these components – of "peoplehood", "nationhood", some type of ethnic and political entity – with a rather distinct religion, the first great monotheistic religion. And it was also a rather distinct monotheism. It entailed not just the recognition of one God, something that can be found, as Jan Assmann[2] has shown, among many societies, including societies in the ancient Near East. It was the first monotheism that called for the reconstruction of the world, of the ways of life of people, especially of the people with whom God has a special relation according to the specific transcendental vision enunciated by this God – but not just that people, as this God is also presented as the God of all nations.

The claim to universality and the demand for the reconstruction of man and society according to a transcendental vision are of course shared by those monotheisms that developed out of this first one; the latter did not, however, share the distinctive connection with one people. This claim to universality promulgated by this "national" religion constituted a central bone of contention with other peoples and religions. Thus, to give only one, seemingly trivial illustration, in the early nineteenth century Czar Nicolas I, who was not the greatest lover of Jews, permitted the Jewish community in St Petersburg to erect a temple, a very magnificent temple, and they wanted to write on the entrance, "My house will be a house of prayer to all the nations". The Czar ordered "all the nations" to be erased, while retaining "house of prayer".

It is this combination of the different components that warrants to my mind the designation of Jewish collectivity and historical experience as a civilization; it is this combination that explains why the best way to understand Jewish collective historical experience is indeed to look at Jews not just as a religious or ethnic group, nation or "people", although they have been all of these, but as bearers of a civilization – of an overall vision that entails attempts to construct or reconstruct social life according to a transcendental vision. This civilization developed in the period of the crystallization of what Max Weber called "the great world religions" and what Karl Jaspers and others later designated as "Axial civilizations", world religions oriented toward the reconstitution of the world.[3] It is in this sense that Jewish collectivity and historical experience are best defined as a civilization – i.e., as an Axial civilization, the first monotheistic Axiality.[4]

[2] Assmann 1995, 1997.

[3] Weber 1920-1921; Jaspers 1949.

[4] Eisenstadt 1986; Arnason *et al*. 2005.

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As is true with respect to all civilizations, the concrete contours of the Jewish civilization developed out of the combination of the civilizational vision or visions prevalent in it, the concrete circumstances of its historical experience, especially the political, economic and ecological settings in which it developed, and its encounters with other, especially, but not only, Axial civilizations. It shared with other Axial civilizations the strong demands for the reconstitution of the world, as well as the fact that it encompassed different political and even cultural formations and that – during large parts of its history – it was dispersed in many territories. In this context, it is of special importance that from early on – certainly from the period of the (multicentral) Second Temple – dispersion and Diaspora constituted an inherent component of the Jewish historical experience. This fact gave rise to a central problem in the constitution of this civilization, namely the relations between the territorial centre and various dispersed communities in many parts of the world, a problem that crystallized in the period of the Second Temple, and that continued, albeit in different formulations, throughout Jewish history – from the Middle Ages to the establishment of the State of Israel.

But it is not only that this civilization shared some basic characteristics with other Axial civilizations, while at the same time exhibiting some distinct characteristics. A central aspect of its historical experience was that its specific combination of "peoplehood", "ethnicity" or "nationhood" with political entity and religion developed out of the confrontation, often contestation, with other proto-Axial and Axial civilizations – possibly with the Persian Zoroastrian, but especially with the Hellenistic and Roman civilizations, and later on with the two other monotheistic civilizations – the Christian and the Muslim civilizations.

II
Multiple Definitions of Jewish Collective Consciousness and the Tensions Between Them

What is the importance, if any, of these specific characteristics of the Jewish collective identity and historical experience for understanding Jewish continuity or survival? An examination of some of the basic terms in which the Jewish collective identity was defined might provide a good starting point for the analysis. The most important fact is that most, probably all the terms that denote some aspects of this collectivity,

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be it land, territory, common ancestry and the like, usually have been defined in different, multifaceted, multivalent, sometimes even opposite terms rooted in one of the components of this civilization – ''people'', ''ethnicity'' or ''religion'' – and that these terms have been brought together, although they were often in tension with each other.[5]

Thus, for instance, the connotations of land and territory as they developed since Ezra and Nehemiah, possibly before that time, entail different primordial connotations: sometimes the land is a ''simple'' homeland, sometimes it is the land of the fathers, the land in which the fathers have lived from time immemorial. But it is not just the land of the fathers, not just a land in which the fathers lived, but a land – promised to the fathers. The same is true for kinship or ethnicity: the terms have been used to designate common descent; sometimes that entailed a strong emphasis on territory, but it was also a kinship constituted through a covenant. The same is true of the political component of this collective identity: there is the emphasis on the existence as a distinct political self-governing entity, but this political component may be defined in territorial terms, in terms of sacrality, religious, often transcendental terms.

With respect to all these terms, there are at least two basic constitutive components in the definition of this collectivity. One is a primordial one, defined in different, often contrasting ways in terms of kinship, territory or common history. But beyond these different primordial definitions there is a second dimension: a very strong transcendental orientation, rooted in the special relation between God and His people – above all in the covenant between them. It is this sacred covenant that constitutes the Jewish community as a ''chosen people''. The covenant creates the collectivity – and imbues it with a specific transcendental dimension.

The same is true with respect to the definition of the religious component in the constitution of Jewish collectivity. This component is, of course, defined in terms of basic beliefs, of ritual or legal injunctions, but it embraces also multiple mystical, philosophical dimensions – all of which indicate the arenas in which the religious vision is to be implemented, be it observance of ritual and legal injunctions, study and exegesis of the law or philosophical and mystical discourse. It is – as we have already indicated – the religion of one particularist group, one ''nation'' – and at the same time a universal religion. It is this multiplicity of different, potentially contradicting terms that constitutes

[5] See the illuminating works by Steven Grosby: Grosby 1991, 1993, 2002.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975609990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a major characteristic of this religion – a characteristic that distinguishes it from many of the neighbouring religions in the ancient Near East and beyond, from ancient Egypt, Assyria or Babylonia as well as, for example, from Japan. The case of Japan is interesting not only from a general point of view of comparative religions, but also because there is one combination, one way of defining collectivity, that seemingly developed in similar ways in the Jewish tradition and in Japan.[6]

This common feature of Jewish and Japanese collective identity, as Zwi Werblowsky has underlined, is the emphasis on the sacred primordiality of the respective collectivities.[7] But there is one minor difference – *vive la petite différence!*: the sacredness of the Japanese is given by their relation to their kamis, to their gods or spirits, but these gods do not make great demands on the Japanese people except with the respect to the maintenance of the appropriate rituals. The kamis do not command the Japanese people to reconstitute their ways of life; they do not punish them if they do not "behave". They do not tell them to be carriers of some universal mission. The Japanese gods provide a very good insurance at relatively small cost, and this is very different from the Jewish conditional "sacrality". This difference does indeed bear, as we shall see in greater detail later on, the distinct Axial characteristics of Jewish religion – namely the development of sectarian heterodoxies, i.e. the possibility of defining the basic components of the religious vision and the collective identity, which is one such basic component, in multiple, potentially contesting ways.

Thus, there crystallized in the Jewish historical experience multiple, multivalent connotations of the different basic components, themes of collective identity and culture. It is not that in other civilizations there has been only one, monolithic definition of such themes. Different formulations developed in all civilizations, especially the Axial ones. But in the Jewish civilization, especially given the relative "smallness" of this collectivity and the turbulence of its history, they have been more visible and they have had far-reaching implications. Above all, these different connotations and themes were continuously brought together in the very constitution of the collective consciousness and the cultural definitions of Jewish collectivity – confronting, reinforcing, but also contesting each other. These confrontations and contestations in turn constituted foci of cultural discourse and had far-reaching institutional implications.

[6] Eisenstadt 1996.

[7] Werblowsky 1976.

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These different conceptions have not just been different abstract notions promulgated by different visionaries or groups of intellectuals or religious specialists. They entailed institutional implications, above all with respect to the definition of membership in the collectivity, of the nature of its gatekeepers, of access to the collectivity and the definition of the ''others'' – often leading to intense political controversies, at times to sectarian confrontations and contestations.

Furthermore, these conceptions continually confronted one another throughout Jewish history, with consequences both for the Jewish self-consciousness and – at least to some extent – for the perception of the Jews by others. This kind of confrontation continues today, manifestly, for example, in controversies between the different camps of Zionist ideology, and between them and other Jewish groups – ultraorthodox groups as well as ''liberal'' or secular ones. In Israel, for the last twenty years, such controversies also developed between different religious groups, between the Zionist-religious groups who proclaimed the territory sacred, while a great ultraorthodox religious leader, Rav Shach, made fun of this attitude, emphasizing that it is not the attachment to the territory that constitutes the Jewish people and that therefore the territory is not sacred. It is the Torah – the covenant of Sinai – that constitutes this people, not the territory. Territory is important only in so far as it is related to the covenant, in so far as it is commanded by the Torah.

III

The Intercivilizational Dimension of Jewish Collectivity and Historical Experience in the Period of the Hegemony of the Halakhah

The different definitions of collective identity, of the ways of life of people, cultural creativity and the confrontations and contestations between them, developed out of internal developments within the Jewish collectivity and out of the continual confrontations with other, proto-Axial, Axial, especially the monotheistic civilizations.

These encounters and confrontations started at an early stage in Jewish history, in the periods of its – relative – political independence, especially in the period of the Second Temple. Already in this period, these encounters acquired a distinct characteristic – a characteristic which defined the Jewish ''otherness'' in the eyes of other civilizations and, as a mirror image of the otherness of these civilizations, in the eyes

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of the Jews. In the Hellenistic and Roman conceptions of the Jews, they were not simply seen as strangers of the type that Herodotus presented in his discourse on many "foreign" peoples – peoples with different and strange customs. The feeling of strangeness became transformed, as Menahem Stern has shown in the volumes of anti-Semitic Greek and Roman texts which he edited, into an ambivalent, potentially hostile attitude, one with a strong combination of attraction and repulsion – and potential competition.[8]

This "otherness" became intensified in the relations of the Jewish collectivity with Christianity and Islam. The definition of their mutual "otherness" and the continual encounter with each other have played a crucial role in the crystallization of Jewish collective consciousness and historical experience. They were also – as was emphasized by Spinoza and from Spinoza to Sartre – of crucial importance in the understanding of Jewish continuity, of Jewish survival.

The component of hostile contestations and potential competition, especially with the other monotheistic Axial civilizations, became intensified and transformed with the loss of Jewish political independence with the depletion of the Jewish population in Palestine and its dispersion in many exilic communities, with Christianization of the Roman Empire under Constantine, and with the gradual crystallization – and hegemony – of the mould of the Halakhah, of the "Oral Law" (*Torah Shebe'alpeh*), which took place in the fifth or sixth century of the Christian era.[9]

The predominance of the Halakhah entailed a far-reaching transformation of the political and universalistic components of Jewish collective consciousness and experience. The historical circumstances in which the Halakhah became predominant and institutionalized – the loss of political independence and later on the dispersal – did entail a far-reaching shift and change with respect to the institutional arena. The Jewish civilizational vision could no longer be implemented directly in the political arena or in a societal-institutional complex of a territorial society. Such implementation became confined to the daily life of Jews in their communal and cultural-religious settings, in the centres of prayer and study, and in the internal arrangements of their communal life; within this framework, however, such implementation could take very creative and innovative forms. The major – probably the only – institutional arena that could be constituted according to the basic tenets

[8] Stern 1974-1984.
[9] Urbach 1975; Katz [1961] 1993; Ben-Sasson 1969.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975609990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the Jewish cultural vision and tradition was that of learning, ritual observance and prayer, and of communal organization. The central focus was the seemingly total supremacy of the Halakhah, its exposition, study and interpretation, the increased emphasis on the observation of legal-ritual prescriptions based on the exegesis, study and continuous elaboration of texts, and the communal prayer as the centre of Jewish religion and tradition, as the major arena of the implementation of the distinct Jewish transcendental vision, of the covenant between God and the Jewish people, and as the major regulator of all aspects of Jewish life. The interpretation of the law was based on an increasing systematization of the legal-ritual precepts, on the rich literature of commentaries on the Bible, Mishna and Talmud, and the widespread ''ethical'' (*Musar*) literature. It was this literature that epitomized the hegemony of the Halakhah as the major regulator of Jewish life.

The loss of political independence entailed the ''bracketing out'' of full scale active Jewish collective participation in the international political arenas, but not, as we shall see, of the political component in the collective consciousness. Their involvement in the international political arena, so dominant during the Second Temple period, seemingly disappeared almost entirely. The fact of dispersion and political subjugation made such involvement difficult and problematic. In terms of the prevalent ideological interpretation by most, but not all of the promulgators of the Halakhah, life in Galut was seen as a negative or problematic existence, or at least as highly ambivalent, even if in practice it constituted the arena of Jewish communal and cultural activities.

Indeed, Jewish communities developed an ambivalent attitude toward the fact of dispersion, to the existence in Exile, in Diaspora. The focus of this ambivalence was the tensions between the negative evaluation of life in Galut and, at the same time, the acceptance of this existence as ordained by God, involving perceptions found already in Jeremiah – to establish their families and communities there and to observe the ''law of the land'' (*dina de-malkhuta*).

The Jewish communities in late antiquity, especially after the conversion of Constantine, and above all in the medieval world lived as dispersed minorities, in situations of political subjugation, in the institutional margins or in distinct niches of other societies and civilizations. They were seen and often saw themselves as being outside the mainstream of contemporary ''international'' history, engaged only in concrete negotiations with the powers that be for the promotion of their communal interests, not participating in the construction of history. Accordingly, universalistic, as well as political and messianic,

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orientations became latent and relegated to a distant future not directly related to any concrete institutional setting in which they lived. Most of the universalistic themes of Jewish civilization that developed in this period were seemingly ''intellectual'', with little – if any – application to the institutional arenas of the broader societies in which they lived.

However, and this is crucial for our analysis, the formal bracketing out of the political dimension by the bearers of the Halakhah, of active participation in the international political arenas and in the *historia sacra* of their host civilizations, did not entail that Jewish communities gave up their civilizational visions, their claim to be a civilization of universal significance and the political components connected with this vision – contrary to the suppositions of Toynbee and Weber, and also of large parts of modern Jewish historiography.[10] This bracketing out did not abate the importance of mutual intercivilizational relations, encounters, confrontations and contestations for the constitution of Jewish collective identity and cultural creativity. The belief of the Jews in the universal significance of their religion did not change – even though they could no longer compete openly with other civilizations and had to invest most of their energies in constructing and safeguarding relatively closed collective boundaries by maintaining a firm control of their ways of life and their own cultural-religious framework, and by separating themselves from the host society.

But even under such circumstances, the legitimacy which Jews claimed for themselves, and which was also accepted – albeit in ambivalent or negative terms – by their host societies, was not merely religious or ''cultic''. Throughout the long period of halakhic predominance, the intercivilizational component – above all in relation to the two other monotheistic civilizations – continued to be central in the definition of Jewish collective identity. Christianity, and in a somewhat milder version Islam as well, were historically related to the Jewish religion and people, to the Jewish civilization. The relations among the three monotheistic civilizations were defined in terms of common historical-religious origin, and the denial by Christians that the Jewish perspective on Christianity was legitimate.

Culturally, the Jewish religion played a peculiar role within the Christian civilization of Europe. The nature of the relation between the Christian and the Jewish civilization can be elucidated by taking a critical look at Max Weber's definition of the Jews as a pariah people.[11]

[10] Toynbee 1954-1961; Weber 1920-1921 (*Das antike Judentum*).

[11] Weber 1920-1921 (*Das antike Judentum*). The term was later adopted by Hannah Arendt; see Arendt 1978.

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The term originally referred to India, where the pariahs are the outcasts. According to Weber, the Jews were the pariahs in Europe. Although there are common elements between Jews and the Indian pariahs or other pariah groups, the definition is nevertheless wrong because it misses a crucial point in the nature of the cultural and ideological relations between Christian majority and Jewish minority. The Brahmins in India were not concerned with the question of whether the pariahs legitimized them or not. They did not ask the pariahs to legitimize them, nor did they initiate disputes with the pariahs about their respective cults. They simply enforced their hegemony on the pariahs. In contrast, the relations between Christians and Jews in Europe entailed not only alienation, strong differences in belief and religious practices, but also the unusual situation that the majority culture presented itself ideologically as the only legitimate continuation of the original culture of the minority and attempted, by public disputes or more coercive measures, to receive, as it were, the minority's legitimization.

Whatever its historical origins, this peculiar situation constitutes a basic phenomenological component of the relations between Christians and Jews, one aspect of which was probably the rebellion against monotheism in the name of various vitalistic forces. This attitude became for instance very important in the wake of the constitution of the German nation state in the modern period. In this context, Jews often presented themselves or were perceived as carriers of a universalistic or ''cosmopolitan'' identity – an identity which was in contrast to the primordial components of the developing nation states.

These mutual intercivilizational attitudes were not purely intellectual or academic, although their promulgation constituted a very central concern of theologians and scholars, especially of those concerned with the interpretation of the Bible. These attitudes constituted central components in the self-definition and legitimation of these civilizations, of the ideological core of their interrelationships and of their perception of the ''otherness'' of those other civilizations. Since the Jews were seen as a potential threat to the legitimacy of the hosts' own religion, a basic ambivalence to the Jews developed in both Christianity and Islam which was very different from attitudes toward other minorities or religions. This added a new dimension to the political subjugation or dispersion of the Jews, which was seen, especially by the Christians, as evidence of the loss of their place as the ''chosen people''.

As a consequence, distinct hostile and ambivalent relations developed between the host societies and the ''guest'' Jewish communities – each

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trying to assert the basic legitimacy of its own civilization. Although Jews could no longer compete actively with other civilizations and could assert their legitimacy only in a defensive way, their respective host societies continued to fear their competition.

Of special interest in this context are the Khazars, one of the most enigmatic cases of medieval history. However unclear the details of their history, the very fact that a pagan king chose to convert himself and his kingdom to Judaism, presumably in order to avoid being embroiled in Christian-Muslim rivalry, attests to the fact that Judaism existed – or at least was conceived – if even only for a brief time in the post-exilic period, as a potentially active actor on the intercivilizational scene.

The otherness and potential hostility was also predicated on the participation of these civilizations – in this case the Jewish, Christian and Muslim civilizations – in a common trans-civilizational framework. This common framework is most clearly seen in the arena of philosophy. The great philosophers – Jewish, Muslim or Christian – were part of the same intellectual world. The problems with which they were concerned were similar, often identical, though their answers often differed – a fact that they were well aware of. Such common trans-civilizational frameworks existed also in arenas of religious exegesis – indeed to no small degree focused on the problem of biblical exegesis – thus exacerbating also the confrontational stances between these civilizations.

This ambivalence and hostility found expression in ideological discourses, as manifested, inter alia, in the frequent polemical debates between Christian priests and theologians and Jewish rabbis and theologians, in attempts by the Church and by Christian kings at forced conversion of Jews, and in blood libels accusing Jews of killing Christian children and drinking their blood. The ambivalence and potential hostility between the Jews and their host civilizations seems to have pervaded not only the more intellectual, messianic or mystic orientations but also, as Elliot Horowitz has shown, some of the more popular carnival-like festivals such as the Purim celebrations, which was perceived as an expression of such hostility by non-Jews.[12]

It was the confrontations, often competition, with these civilizations and their shared trans-civilizational frameworks that defined the basic characteristics of the Jewish ''otherness'' in the eyes of their ''host'' civilizations, and – in a mirror image – the ''otherness'' of these civilizations in the eyes of the Jews. At the same time, the continuity of

[12] Horowitz 1994.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975609990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

these encounters and their interweaving with internal ''themes'' of Jewish collectivity and cultural creativity attested to the intense creativity, heterogeneity and relative ''openness'' of the Halakhah and to the continuity of Jewish historical experience with earlier periods. Of special importance from the point of view of our discussion is the fact that the development of such themes also generated or intensified potential sectarian or heterodox orientations within the framework of halakhic Jewish civilization.

IV
The Participation of the Jews in the Political Arenas during the Predominance of the Halakhah

The extensive and ambivalent modes of participation of the Jews in the broader civilizational frameworks developed not only in the ''academic'', philosophical arena or in popular culture but also in the political frameworks of their respective host societies. The theory that before the modern, especially the Zionist re-entry into history, the Jews were merely passive objects in the major political arenas is, of course, valid to a certain extent. It is true that, as a minority within a monotheistic civilization, Jews were often viewed as problematic and were under constant threat of expulsion and persecution. In this respect, they were indeed passive. Yet throughout the long period from late antiquity to the Middle Ages, Diaspora Jews fared no worse than many sectors of the Muslim and Christian world in which they lived. Salo Baron has pointed out that they in fact fared better than some members of the peasantry and even of the nascent urban groups. Not only was their economic status generally better. They did participate, as we shall see, at least to a certain extent, in the games of politics – both at home and across borders.[13]

Of course, they were never top political players – kings or members of the high aristocracy – and they did not engage as a collectivity in military campaigns. But they were not entirely passive either. For long periods of time they were allowed to play at least a minor role in the corporate world of medieval Europe or in the different communal politics of Muslim lands. Indeed, a closer look at Jewish political organizations and activities throughout the Middle Ages – in Muslim and Christian lands alike – indicates that the Jews, whether collectively or as individual agents, were not limited to playing the part of ''court Jews''

[13] Eisenstadt 2004d.

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or petitioners but could attempt to play an actual, even if not central, political role – in alliance, for example, with major actors in Muslim Spain, in a limited way in patrimonial settings in France, or in organizations such as the Council of Four Lands (*Vaad Arba Aratzot*) in Poland and the Council of the Communities in Lithuania.

Thus, as Simon Dubnov and later Yitzhak Baer and Arnaldo Momigliano have indicated (and contrary to Max Weber's view of the Jews as a pariah people), Jewish identity and collective activities throughout this long "medieval" period had a political dimension, often associated with a strong transcendental orientation.[14] The communal arrangements and political institutions, whether in the Babylon of the Gaonic era or in Lithuania in the seventeenth century, were often perceived by Jews as an extension of Davidic rule – with messianic, even if often muted, overtones. Jews went on searching for ways to forge a cultural, symbolic, institutional framework that would enable them to maintain their political, religious and ethnic identity and sustain some of their claims to a universal validity. This dimension was manifest in the emphasis placed on collective salvation and political redemption and in the definition, unique among a dispersed people, of the experience of Exile in metaphysical terms, combined with a metaphysical definition of the primordial relationship between the Land of Israel and the People of Israel.

Throughout these periods, Jews could at times play "Jewish" international political or diplomatic games – as attested, for example, by a letter found in the Cairo Geniza which Hasdai ibn Shaprut, adviser to the Caliph of Cordova in the tenth century, sent to the Empress Helena, asking for her protection of the Jewish communities in Byzantium, and promising in return to protect the Christians in Muslim Spain. Even the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and Portugal – seemingly a prime example of their passive fate – was in fact connected, as Yitzhak Baer and Haim Beinart have shown, with the part they played in the internal politics of these kingdoms.[15]

Needless to say, such political activity could be, and often was precarious – as was the very existence of the Jewish communities; Jews were often subject to persecution and expulsion. But during periods when they were not – and in purely qualitative terms these were probably the longest in the history of their respective host countries – they could act as petitioners, depending on their relative numbers, their relations with rulers, their place in the economy and the like.

[14] Dubnov [1925-1929] 1967-1973; Momigliano 1980; Baer [1947] 2000.

[15] Baer [1947] 2000, especially the introduction by Yosef H. Yerushalmi; Goldberg 2008.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975609990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This political component in the Jewish collective consciousness was to no small extent related to their ambivalent attitude toward life in Galut, to their negative evaluation of Galut as a legitimate area of Jewish collective life – until the messianic era.[16]

Yet in one crucial sense, the Jews were indeed excluded – or, with the significant exception of some of the messianic movements, excluded themselves – from "history"; not from the mundane history, which in those periods was usually not defined as history at all, but from "*historia sacra*": the image of the Jews served as a negative reference point for a Christian interpretation of eschatological history. Jews were excluded – and excluded themselves – as active participants in the concrete events of world history as it was then conceived by the Christians. The attempts by messianic movements to break through such exclusion could bring about strong confrontations with their host societies and with the leadership of their own communities. These messianic movements were "hemmed in" by their own leadership, which suppressed attempts to re-enter the sacred historical arena for fear of the consequences – as seen, for example, in the Sabbatean movement in the seventeenth century. But contrary to many sectarian orientations, Augustine's separation of the City of God from the City of Man meant that the Jews were sometimes allowed to participate, even if only in limited ways, in the affairs of the City of Man – thus adding another dimension to the political component of Jewish political identity.

V
Intercivilizational Relations and Heterodox Tendencies in Jewish Historical Experience

The multiple encounters with other civilizations became closely interwoven with internal developments within Jewish communities, with the promulgation and reformulation of different themes of Jewish collectivity and the reconstitution of cultural arenas. They were closely connected with the problem of Jewish continuity – as is perhaps most visible in the distinctive Axial dimension of Jewish civilization, especially the development of sectarianism and heterodoxies.[17]

[16] On the attitude toward Galut, see Ben-Sasson 1984; Hallamish and Ravitzky 1991. On the attitude toward Galut in principle see Baer [1947] 2000; Goldberg 2008.

[17] See in greater detail Eisenstadt 2004b.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975609990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The consciousness of the contestation and competition between the monotheistic civilizations was present in many themes that developed within the framework of Jewish cultural perspective and bore kernels of antinomianism, above all with respect to the basic attitudes of most of the bearers of the Halakhah to political activity. The tensions between the monotheistic host civilizations and Jewish communities throughout the medieval period were of continuous relevance for the constitution of Jewish collective identity and continued to harbour strong political orientations. They were of crucial importance in the process of transforming older Jewish civilizational themes and of developing new ones.[18] Many of the messianic themes that developed within this context entailed specific orientations toward the respective host civilization, often indicating strong ambivalence toward them. As Gershon S. Cohen briefly indicated, and as Israel Yuval has shown in greater detail, there developed far-reaching conceptions of redemption, especially of redemption through vengeance (in contrast to redemption through conversion) – conceptions which necessarily exhibited deep-seated ambivalence, often hostility, toward host nations.[19]

The view that heterodoxies did not develop within the framework of the Halakhah in medieval Jewish history is not exactly correct. We have to remember that rabbinical hegemony did not fully crystallize immediately after the destruction of the Second Temple – but probably only around the fifth or sixth century C.E. It was only after that time that the first great heterodoxy – the Karaites – appeared; and it was in close relation to the loss of this hegemony from around the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries on that other heterodoxies, promulgated, for example, by groups of Marranos and later the Sabbatean movement, emerged.[20]

Sectarian tendencies that developed in the period of the Second Temple and even those that crystallized soon afterwards cannot be described as heterodoxies, since they did not develop any clear hegemonic orthodoxy. Throughout these periods, many sects and groups continued to be conspicuous in Judea and Galilee, in the various diasporas, and in the desert in the form of various Samaritan or Hagarist

[18] Momigliano 1980; Baer [1947] 2000.

[19] Yuval 1993; see also the various articles in *Zion*, 59 (2-3), 1994, which critically take up various aspects of Yuval's thesis. See also Cohen 1967, 1991.

[20] On the Karaites see Schwartz 1992. On relevant aspects of the Karaite Halakhah see Erder 1994, 1995. On the Marranos see Roth 1932; Baer [1947] 2000; Netanyahu 1966; Kaplan [1982] 1989, 2000; Katz and Israel 1990; Yovel 2009.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975609990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

groups. These sects – prominent among them the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the purported ''scroll'' sects of the Second Temple period, various groups in the multiple diasporas in the early centuries of the Christian era, various Jewish-Christian groups, and later on different sects closely connected to a new and powerful universal civilization: Islam – were vying for such hegemony, or at least for autonomy in the constitution of their distinctive cultural spaces and life-worlds.

The competition between these groups and sects was often reinforced by their common origin in Jewish civilization and the claim of each of them to be the true bearer of this civilization – and it was often bitter and intense. From this competition, the predominance of rabbinical Judaism, of the mould of Halakhah, gradually emerged – a predominance that would continue up to the end of the ''medieval'' and the beginning of the modern period.

A closer examination of the Halakhah indicates, first, that its development and hegemony can only be understood as a continuation, even if a dialectical one, of the Jewish civilization as it developed since the end of the period of the First Temple and crystallized in a more distinct intercivilizational mode in the period of the Second Temple. Second, it emerged not as a ''natural'' development, but through continual struggles between different groups and tendencies, which had strong roots in the preceding period. Many sectarian orientations that were strong in the period of the crystallization of the Halakhah, and many potential heterodox themes that were predominant in the preceding period, were never fully obliterated. Many sectarian trends or themes persisted even after the crystallization of the Halakhah, and out of them developed – potential – challenges to this mould and to its central assumption of its supremacy.

Even when the contents of major themes did change, this did not necessarily entail the throwing out of old themes; some were bracketed out, some were transposed into a new universe of discourse. To give only two illustrations: when political independence was lost, the yearning for territoriality and for coming back to the Land did not disappear; and it was not simply bracketed out from concrete activities but transposed into a new sort of metaphysical universe. Second, the major – cultic – role of the priesthood disappeared with the destruction of the Temple; but it was transposed to a special niche in the prayers in the synagogues. Thus, the meaning of different terms and the practices connected with them changed, but the common problematic and large parts of the cultural heritage were continually reconstituted – thus perpetuating the consciousness of continuity.

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VI

What was the nature of the potential antinomian, sectarian or heterodox tendencies as they developed, for example, among the Karaites or Marranos, and later in the Sabbatean and Frankist movements, but which were simmering also in many groups throughout the long medieval period? Among most of these groups, it was not the standing of the Halakhah as the major regulator of Jewish life itself that constituted the potential target; it was the assumption that the Halakhah constituted the major or only way to implement God's vision for Israel that served as the starting point of such antinomian and heterodox potentialities and tendencies – tendencies which could then be promulgated by various intellectuals, kabbalists, mystics, ascetics or philosophers.

In contrast, for example, to Islamic legal frameworks, the Halakhah was relatively open – not only de facto but also de jure – and emphasized the autonomy of new interpretations. However, in the eyes of Halakhists, this discourse was self-regulating and did not need any legitimation beyond itself – and it was this dimension of the Halakhah that constituted the focus of the heterodox tendencies.

Although the groups which promulgated mystical, ascetical, kabbalistic, philosophical or proto-scientific thinking usually did not challenge the prescriptive dimension of the Halakhah and the legitimacy of study and prayer as the major, but not necessarily the only, arenas of implementing the specific Jewish vision, many of them did not fully accept its internal self-legitimacy. Above all, they did not accept the premise that the Halakhah constituted the major, possibly exclusive arena of the implementation of God's vision for the Jews as His Chosen People. Behind this questioning lurked the even more radical possibility that the Halakhah itself may at some point be superseded as the major arena of the implementation of God's vision for the Jewish people by other types of cultural creativity and prowess.

One of the most important indications or illustrations of such antinomian or heterodox potentialities can be found in the field of the Kabbalah. As Jacob Katz has shown in a series of incisive articles,[21] it is possible to distinguish between two types of scholars who engaged in kabbalistic studies or practices. Some saw the Halakhah as the major arena of appropriate study, with kabbalistic meditations and practices

[21] Katz 1984a, 1984b; Idel 1988; Schatz Uffenheimer 1984.

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as a supplement. Others, however, saw the study of Kabbalah and the engagement in kabbalistic practices as epitomizing the proper way to implement Israel's mission. The same was, in principle, true of the study of philosophy, which could be even more dangerous to the bearers of the Halakhah. This explains the many injunctions against the study of the Kabbalah and philosophy or any other alien wisdom, the scepticism against those who have not yet immersed themselves in the study of the Talmud and commentaries, and the limitations placed on the time that could be devoted to such studies.

VII

Such heterodox or antinomian attitudes within non-halakhic arenas of study and ways of life often referred to concepts that were central to the halakhic religious discourse. One such concept was the "hidden" or "true" Torah, or the secrets of the law, given to Moses side by side with the revealed law, the Halakhah. Another very important theme focused on the "reasons" or "justifications" of the prescriptions (*ta'amei ha-mitzvot*).[22] These concepts were imbued with powerful antinomian potentialities. They implied – or could be interpreted as implying – that the revealed Torah with its injunctions and prescriptions was in some sense secondary, even if legitimate in its own contexts, and that "behind" it existed the "true" or "hidden" Torah which could be revealed only to special people (usually members of some sects) or in more propitious circumstances or times (possibly in the messianic era). This hidden Torah could be seen as the true manifestation of God's vision for Israel which may, could or should in appropriate circumstances supersede the revealed Torah. This concept could entail a strong antinomian attitude to temporal, historical processes. It could entail the possibility that while the revealed Torah is binding in the present diasporic existence, it may be superseded with the coming of the Messiah. Similarly, the "need" to justify, as it were, the major prescriptions could lead to attempts to find such justifications beyond the Halakhah as the only avenue of implementation of God's vision for the Jewish people.

[22] Twersky 1972, 1980, 1982, 1991; see Roth 1936.
Funkenstein 1993. For an earlier discussion,

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VIII

These challenges to the Halakhah were not just ritual or legalistic, nor did they simply entail the weakening of tradition. They were closely connected to the transformation or redefinition of major cultural and civilizational themes promulgated in preceding periods. They constituted foci of the self-definition of the Jewish collectivity and of the intercivilizational relations that developed within halakhic Judaism. And they were fraught with many internal tensions – above all where the territorial and political dimensions of Jewish collective consciousness were concerned.

The most important of such themes, the kernels of which could be discerned already during the Second Temple period, although they became fully articulated only in the halakhic tradition, were the metaphysical and ideological evaluation of Eretz Israel, the ideology of Galut, the fuller articulation of messianic visions, and of the solidarity of the Jewish people.[23]

Dispersion was not unique to the Jews – many peoples in antiquity and later on experienced dispersion – although its scope and continuity were probably more extensive and continuous in Jewish history. What was unique in the Jewish case was the tendency to conflate dispersion with Exile, and to endow the combined experience of dispersion and Exile with an ambivalent, often strong metaphysical and religious negative evaluation of Galut. Explaining the fact of Galut became a major concern of many Jewish philosophers and scholars, and a central concern of Jewish religious discourse. In most cases, Galut was seen as a negative thing; it was explained in terms of sin and punishment; life in Galut was defined as a partial, suspended existence. At the same time, it had to be nurtured in order to guarantee the survival of the Jewish people until the Redemption. As we have seen, one major focus of this ambivalence was the acceptance or rejection of the law of the land, *dina de-malkhuta*. Another focus were two closely connected, though at times contradictory themes: the lack of political sovereignty (*shi'abud malkhuyot*, to be under the yoke of nations), and the negative metaphysical evaluation of Galut as a partial and distorted spiritual or religious existence.

[23] On the attitude toward Eretz Israel, see Hallamish and Ravitzky 1991; Schweid 1979; Katz 1982.

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The political and metaphysical or redemptive themes were also central in the attitude toward Eretz Israel and in the articulation of messianic visions. The growing metaphysical relationship to Eretz Israel was, in a sense, the counterpoint to that toward Galut. Eretz Israel was defined in both primordial and political terms – possibly more so than in the period of the Second Temple. But even though it built on earlier foundations – and this constitutes a great innovation – it was imbued with transcendental, metaphysical or mystical meaning, it was understood as a transcendental, metaphysical relationship.

These attitudes toward Galut and Eretz Israel converged around a third theme, which, in a sense, subsumed them: the messianic and eschatological theme. Rooted in the early Second Temple period, possibly even in the period of Babylonian exile, it found expression in the various sects of the Second Temple period as well as in Christianity. The proper interpretation of the Messiah who would come at the End of Time became the central focus of controversy between Judaism and Christianity. The salience of this point was intensified by the loss of political independence, by continual dispersion and expulsion; the contours of the messianic vision became much more elaborated around the basic motifs of political and religious redemption.

IX

These themes were of central importance among the major heterodox formations which developed at the time of the crystallization of the Halakhah as well as toward the end of its hegemony, namely the Karaites, the Marranos and – later – the Sabbatean movement (but also, even if in more subdued ways, among the various groups that developed during the long medieval period). All of them promulgated not only religious themes in a narrow sense. Part of their discourse included the interpretations of major components of Jewish collective consciousness or identity – the relation to the land of Eretz Israel, to collective political activity etc.

In both cases the principled negation of the hegemony and validity of the very central core of the mould of the Halakhah constituted the core of their respective heterodoxies, and was connected with a strong combination of "religious" themes together with different emphases on the definition of Jewish collective identity, its relations to other civilizations and perhaps, above all, its political component.

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The focus of the Karaites was the rejection of the Oral Law in the name of a ''realistic'' as opposed to a ''nominalistic'' view of it. The Karaites often referred to Sadducean and sectarian Halakhah – whatever the exact provenance of this continuity might be. They combined religious with intercivilizational themes and developed a distinct interpretation of Jewish collective identity. At least some Karaites espoused a strong political orientation which entailed the negation of exilic existence – apparent in their attitude toward Eretz Israel and Galut. The Karaites did not accept the bracketing out of the sacredness of the territoriality so characteristic for the rabbinical tradition. They proclaimed very strongly the necessity to acquire the Land and to build a new political reality. Many Karaites were also engaged in the reformulation of specific cultural themes, above all in a philosophical ''rationalistic'' direction, very much under the impact of intercivilizational relations.

The Karaite heterodoxy became an important factor in the life of Jewish communities, especially, but not only, in the Middle East in the ninth century C.E. Religious and philosophical confrontation between rabbinic and Karaite Judaism, and the continual interaction between the two camps in social and economic life, constituted a basic fact of Jewish history – especially in the Middle East – for many centuries. Rabbinic Judaism ultimately won – but it was not an easy victory. And despite the fierce controversies, social and religious contacts between them, including intermarriage, continued – thus suggesting the possibility of a common Jewish identity beyond the boundaries of the Halakhah.

A similar combination of a re-examination of the place of the Oral Law and its legitimacy with broader cultural themes and a possible redefinition of political and collective Jewish identity was to reappear, albeit in a new guise, with the beginning of the disintegration of the halakhic hegemony among some groups of returned Marranos that had retained a strong Jewish identity. Among these groups, especially in the Netherlands, heterodox tendencies developed which challenged the hegemony of the Halakhah and promulgated a new non-halakhic and even secular definition of Jewish identity. Some of the Marranos looked to the Karaites as a possible model of non-halakhic, ''authentic biblical'' Judaism, and attempted to establish contacts with Karaite sages in Eastern Europe. Although their knowledge of the Karaites was mostly based on Protestant writings, the very reference to them attests to the fact that some Jewish communities were aware of the Karaite ''heresy''.

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X

The attitudes of the bearers of the Halakhah, of the hegemonic cultural groups in Jewish medieval and early modern communities, to these potentially antinomian themes and orientations were ambivalent. They developed a twofold strategy with respect to these antinomian tendencies. On the one hand, as Isadore Twersky has shown in a series of incisive studies, there were those scholars who attempted to imbue the study of Halakhah with a spiritual dimension, to incorporate philosophical and mystical themes, thereby creating a common framework without, however, giving up the predominance and basic autonomy and self-legitimation of the Halakhah.[24] These scholars were often seen as representatives of antinomian tendencies themselves. On the other hand, the bearers of the Halakhah were suspicious of the religious aspects inherent in these themes (for example the ''spiritual'', as distinct from political, dimension of the messianic vision), and of their power to disrupt both the authority of the Halakhah and the precarious existence of the dispersed Jewish communities. There developed continuous tensions between the two tendencies.

Whatever the strength or potential of all these antinomian tendencies was, during most of the long ''medieval'' period, they were contained within the broader framework of the Halakhah. It was indeed characteristic of the situation during medieval Jewish history that it was the Halakhah itself that constituted the major arena in which these potentially heterodox orientations were worked out. These orientations became visible in their attempts to influence the halakhic daily ritual or halakhic prescriptions according to their own orientations – which in turn caused opposition among the orthodox bearers of the Halakhah. The antinomian possibilities of these tendencies and orientations were fully recognized by them. Yet they were not able to suppress or do away with them. Consequently, rabbinical orthodoxy always tried to keep them within the strict limits of the halakhic discourse and to subsume them as secondary elements within the framework of the Halakhah. Though they were denied symbolic and especially organizational autonomy, such heterodox tendencies, however muted they were, did exist. And they did not only influence parts of halakhic legislation, they also represented important themes in Jewish intellectual life; and they were foci of cultural creativity. It is only the existence of this heterodox

[24] Twersky 1974, 1983a, 1983b.

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potential that can explain the development not only of the different Marrano, Sabbatean and Frankist movements, but also of some of the later religious, social and national movements that developed among the Jews from the late eighteenth century on. These different movements were not directly caused by the persistence of such heterodox themes. They developed above all as a reaction to external developments, to changes in the relations between Jewish communities and their host societies. But many themes and orientations promulgated by these movements built on the earlier heterodox repertoire.

XI
The Jewish Civilizational Experience and Jewish Continuity

What is the bearing of the fact that the constitution of Jewish collective and cultural identity has been multivalent; that all the terms which denote the basic dimensions of this collectivity were defined in different, multifaceted, sometimes even seemingly contradictory ways; and that the constitution of this multivalent Jewish collective has been closely connected to the intercivilizational encounters – what is the bearing of this fact on the problem of Jewish continuity?

On the face of it, the fact that these different possibilities constituted a continuous aspect of Jewish life tended to facilitate the incorporation and acceptance of many different themes – legal exegesis, mystical orientations or philosophical discourses as well as ways of life – within a common framework, thereby extending the range of major arenas of implementation of the religious visions; and to be able to ''package'', as it were, different themes in accordance with the exigencies of different contexts or environments was of great importance in situations of continual migration between different territories, between the different diasporas.

But given the multiplicity of possibilities and the fact that many concrete ways of life were not shared by many Jewish communities or parts thereof, what has been the common framework and what assured this continuity?

A good starting point for the analysis of this problem is the case of the Samaritans (*Shomronim*), who – either because they were pushed out or they chose to do so – did not participate in the intercivilizational dimension of the definition of Jewish collective identity and historical experience. They shared the cultic monotheistic God, but they did not

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participate in the universalistic orientations, the universalistic mission, and in the distinctive intercivilizational relations that were connected with it. The ''negative'' case of the Samaritans indicates that what bound different Jewish communities together, what made them a part of the Jewish collectivity across different generations, was a common problematic, the core of which was the attempt to combine the themes of ethnicity, the different primordial emphases, with the tension between the universalistic and particularistic components of its religious vision and the tension between different patterns of cultural creativity. It was not just the persistence of specific religious, ethnic or national components as such that assured such continuity, but the continual confrontation with the problematic of combining these themes anew as a result of intercivilizational encounters. It was this common problematic that provided the central core of Jewish collective consciousness and facilitated its continuity. The specific answers to these problems changed throughout Jewish history, but the problematic itself did not.

Many answers, for example those given by different sects during the Second Temple period, did not survive. Many groups gave up the confrontation with this problematic and opted for one specific – primordial or transcendental – solution, often choosing to melt into the broader intercivilizational framework. But not only could these groups be reminded by ''others'', especially by ''competing'' civilizations, of their distinctive cultural characteristics or heritage. As long as there was a common discourse, there existed the possibility that this problematic could again emerge and that intercivilizational encounters could reinforce the commitment to this problematic.

XII
The Institutional Frameworks of Jewish Civilization and Continuity

The existence of a heterogenic symbolic repertoire explains to some extent the possibility of Jewish continuity. It provided the framework within which such continuity could develop. But it was only in so far as the problematic inherent in this symbolic repertoire was taken up by specific social groups that the continuity of institutional and cultural patterns of Jewish life could be maintained. In this context, the social structure of Jewish communities is of special importance.

The most important structural characteristic of Jewish collectivities and institutional formations was their structural heterogeneity, the

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continuous conflict between various social groups and multiple political, social and religious elites. Despite the differences between them, they shared the basic orientations of the Jewish civilization, particularly its strong commitment to the belief that all members of the community had access to the realm of the sacred. The tensions and conflicts that developed between the elites and the social sectors were rooted not only in different interests but in different interpretations of the tradition and different emphases on its major components – civic, legal or ethical. They competed for being accepted as the representatives of the higher authority to which rulers and the community were accountable.

It is also important to note that some basic characteristics of the social structure of Jewish communities and of the inter-communal settings were – in a way amazingly – continuously reconstituted throughout Jewish history, representing a sort of mirror image of the symbolic repertoire, whereby the symbolic and institutional dimensions could reinforce each other. In fact, the basic structural characteristics of Jewish communities have persisted throughout most of the periods of Jewish history, although the concrete contours could change. This change is most apparent in the transition from the period of the First to that of the Second Temple which saw the weakening of ascriptive elites and their communal legal frameworks and exegeses.

Since it was during the long exilic period that the multivalence of the symbolic repertoire of the Jewish collective consciousness became most visible and the problem of Jewish continuity and survival most acute, it might be worthwhile to take a closer – though only preliminary – look at the social contours of Jewish communities in this long period.

During that time, the major elite groups in most Jewish communities comprised a combination of three elements which tended to develop a certain degree of specialization and autonomy: the stronger, wealthier oligarchic stratum; would-be popular political leaders; and the learned class of rabbis, scholars and mystics. All three groups developed strong orientations to the mundane, especially the political and social arenas. However, the distinction between religious and other functions was not total; even when these groups specialized in one arena, they maintained strong orientations to the other arenas. All three groups were closely interwoven – often through family relations. They usually composed the ruling coalitions that controlled community life; they were also the ones that developed trans-communal, commercial and intellectual networks. These elites continued to transmit, develop and elaborate – through their educational, cultural

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and communal activities – the common cultural orientations, especially the emphasis on the open, unmediated access to the sacred (and the corresponding denial of mediation concerning the covenantal relation between God and His chosen people). Although there was no permanent single centre or organization, these elites maintained a common identity and a continuing social network. At the same time, there developed continual tension, contestation and competition between these different leadership groups – between the rabbis, different groups of scholars (mystics, philosophers etc.) as well as between the oligarchic and the popular ''democratic'' tendencies.

It was the combination of these different types of leadership and of the different modes of communal organization with their respective political orientations that gave rise to the intense dynamics of Jewish communal life and patterns of cultural creativity. It led to the promulgation of multiple cultural and religious themes and orientations and provided the setting for their constant reconstitution – usually through incorporation of new themes and orientations into the repertoire of Jewish collective identity. The fact that many of these networks have been in continual contact – and confrontation – with the commercial, religious or philosophical strata of their host societies often intensified their Jewish self-consciousness.

Of central importance in this context is the fact that dispersion and lack of a centralized unified authority provided the possibility for the development of multiple arenas for relatively independent, autonomous – even semi-anarchic – elements inherent in some of the basic cultural and social orientations prevalent among Jews. This was true of communal arrangements, but also of the field of learning in general, and the sphere of the Halakhah in particular. Here too, there was no single accepted authority, and different scholars and centres of learning jealously guarded their right of collegial and even individual interpretation and legislation within the common bounds of accepted tradition. The decisions of one court were not necessarily binding for others, although they could serve as references and precedents. On the whole, in both communal and halakhic matters, a strong emphasis developed on the relative autonomy of different courts and scholars in matters of legal interpretation. Some of the controversy around Maimonides, the towering intellectual figure of medieval Jewry, focused not merely on his strong philosophical predilections and the concrete details of his halakhic interpretations and modes of codification, but on the possibility that he, and later his work, would attain some sort of monopoly in all these fields and bar further interpretation.

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This plurality or pluralism could find its expression also at the very centre of the Halakhah – as manifested in different prayer books (*Siddurim* and *Mahzorim*) – Ashkenazi, Sephardi and variations within each of them – and in different legislations, touching even on such central issues as polygamy vs. monogamy (the former upheld in the Sephardi, the latter in Ashkenazi communities). Paradoxically, such heterogeneity was in many ways the source of authority of these courts. Thus, the combination of dispersion, of the lack of a single ultimate authority, together with numerous contacts that developed between these communities, networks and centres of learning, provided a flexible common framework which allowed for cultural creativity and, in turn, assured the continuity of this framework.

The authority of courts was, nonetheless, limited and circumscribed. It was limited to internal community affairs – usually to the respective localities or to trans-local arrangements such as the Council of Four Lands. It did not address the political institutions of a sovereign entity. The courts never faced the problems already prominent in the period of the First Temple – which became crucial in the period of the Second Commonwealth and later on in the State of Israel: the confrontation between the law of the Jewish State and the higher authority of the Halakhah. At most, they were concerned with problems concerning the validity of *dina de-malkhuta* (the law of the land), usually stressing the obligation to accept it in all secular matters. Even their ultimate sanction against potential secession – the *Herem*, through which people could be threatened with ostracization and even with expulsion – was often upheld not by internal leaders but by the authorities. Indeed later on, in open modern societies, when the Kehillot became voluntary bodies, the secessionist centripetal tendencies often became very strong within them.

XIII
The Modern Era – Preliminary Observations

The basic framework of the relation between Jewish civilization, i.e. multiple Jewish communities, and the Christian civilization, i.e. the different Christian, especially European, societies changed radically in the modern era. The place of Jews within European civilizations and societies changed as a result of a changing social and political order that had its roots in the Reformation, the Counter

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Reformation and later in the Enlightenment: far-reaching changes in the basic cultural premises of European societies, in the definition and premises of political communities attendant on the developments of the modern territorial state; the growth of religious tolerance and secular ideologies, and of new conceptions of citizenship attendant on the French Revolution and the institutionalization of ''post-revolutionary'' regimes; the changing relation between broad civilizational frameworks and different political, territorial and national communities.

These changes, above all the crystallization of the modern territorial and nation state, have opened up the gates of European societies before Jews. The economic and professional life of Jews changed, as did the structure of their communities, the constitution of the collective boundaries of the Jewish collectivity or Jewish collectivities, the relations to their host civilizations – thus sharpening the problem of Jewish continuity and survival.[25]

All these developments form the core of Jewish modern historical experience. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to present any detailed analysis of these developments.[26] But I would like to present some tentative general observations, especially with regard to the changes of the Jewish exilic historical experience.

Changes did develop, first of all, in the internal structure of Jewish communities. Jews were no longer legally segregated in distinct communities according to the premises of the Halakhah. These changes were most apparent in the official, juridical standing of Jewish communal organizations. When their traditional powers and jurisdiction were taken away from them, the symbolic rabbinical, halakhic institutional mould was eroded. The specific institutional features of Jewish communities, above all the synagogues, organizations of mutual help and to some extent also the traditional institutions of learning, no longer constituted the central matrix of Jewish life. The various Jewish communal organizations that sprang up (many of them in new centralized patterns such as the Board of Deputies of England and the Consistoire in France), including the new institutions of Jewish higher learning, no longer encompassed the entire life of Jews, except among the neo-Orthodox (and even among them, only partially). Their lives became more and more structured according to the premises and

[25] On modern social developments, see Eisenstadt 1999a, 1999b.

[26] On this period of Jewish history, see in greater detail Eisenstadt 2004c; Birnbaum and Katznelson 1995; Frankel and Zipperstein 1992; Katz 1987.

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principles of modern civilization; they became closely interwoven with the institutional arenas of their respective host societies. Large parts of the Jewish population continued to move mostly in Jewish circles, especially in their private lives; but they were no longer defined in specifically Jewish terms, nor were they bound to relatively closed communal frameworks. Specific Jewish patterns of life became increasingly secondary in their life experience. Jews began (as professionals, writers and journalists) to enter the central arenas of the societies in which they lived, and their visibility in these fields became pronounced – especially in Germany and Austria, to some degree later in France, England and Russia, and later on and very forcefully in the United States. They also entered another arena formerly barred to them – that of active participation in general social and political movements. As conservative parties in Europe did not favour emancipation and were, at least de facto, closed to Jews, the latter were active in more radical political movements in Europe – a situation which was going to change dramatically in the United States.

These developments were connected to changes in the civilizational premises, historical self-conceptions and institutional frameworks of the respective European societies. They also entailed radical changes in the mode of Jewish participation – not only in their major institutional arenas, but indeed in their participation in shaping the modern history of these societies.

These changes were rooted in the radical transformation that started with the Reformation and culminated in the Great Revolutions. These Revolutions were themselves the culmination of sectarian, heterodox potentialities that had developed in Axial civilizations, especially those in which the political arena was seen as an arena for implementing their respective transcendental visions. They transformed the historical self-conception of modern societies: the essence of modern "sacred history" changed – with the tendency to conflate mundane and sacred history. The emancipation of the Jews, the struggle for which constituted a central focus of Jewish history in nineteenth-century Europe, entailed not only the granting of "formal" citizenship to Jews but also the possibility and the challenge of their active participation in the constitution of their modern histories, of the new, secularized *historia sacra*.

That this was a radical process is evident in the fact that in all Jewish communities, elements of the Jewish collective consciousness and the religious, intercivilizational collective organizations were continuously decomposed and reconstituted in new patterns. Religious

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premises and observance on the one hand and civilizational visions on the other dissociated. Each movement or sector that developed within Jewish communities was marked by its own selection, reconstitution and combination of the components of Jewish collective consciousness; each had its own interpretation of the Jewish historical experience. Most modern Jewish movements – Jewish "Enlightenment" (Haskalah), "liberal" or "reform" Judaism in Europe, "conservative" and "reform" Judaism in the United States; movements with strong political, collective orientations especially in Eastern and Central Europe – entailed a particular selection and reinterpretation of major themes of Jewish civilization in its relation to other civilizations and to their respective host societies. Consequently, different, often divergent patterns of observance, of life, of communal arrangements emerged in different Jewish communities.

These movements also differed greatly in their relation to the Halakhah. In many movements, this relation was not of central importance, it only retained its centrality in those groups that focused on the specifically religious dimension of Jewish collectivity – such as the various reform, liberal or conservative groups. But even within these groups, emphasis on the "external" legitimation of the Halakhah increased, which entailed a gradual shift to ethical or philosophical themes as the major components of legitimation of Jewish collective existence and civilization. Such developments were often connected with attempts to reconstruct Jewish religious practice in ways more attuned to the premises of the modern "secular" or liberal age; and they entailed a distancing from Halakhah as the major arena for the implementation of the Jewish civilizational vision in favour of other arenas of cultural activity or study. The obverse of this development was the growing "proto-fundamentalist" transformation of the Halakhah, involving rigid sectarianism and self-containment, in contrast to the great creativity and relative openness of the halakhic framework in the period of its hegemony.

Significantly, on the more intellectual level, attempts were made to imbue the very process of emancipation and assimilation with an ideological dimension, in terms derived from Jewish civilization and historical experience. Assimilation became formulated, as Jacob Katz has shown, in almost eschatological terms.[27]

> Naturalization and emancipation were hailed as traditionally reserved for the Messianic Age, to the point of identifying kings and princes, the guarantors of the new civil status, with the person of the Messiah. This identification should

[27] Katz 1972.

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not be dismissed as an ideological embellishment of the new political and social achievement. It was more than that the various segments of the nation would be granted a home in their respective environments, thus achieving for the individual, in terms of legal and political status, what the messianic expectation held out for the nation as a whole.

A different approach to the reconstruction of Jewish collective identity was promulgated by various collectivist political movements that developed above all in Eastern and Central Europe in modern Jewish history – autonomist movements like the Bund, the Territorialists, and, of course, the Zionist movements. These movements focused on the reconstitution of Jewish collectivity under modern conditions, defined in a combination of ethnic, territorial, civil and universal cultural terms. Here, the attitude toward Halakhah was less central – although it was to re-emerge in confrontational terms in the State of Israel and in contemporary Jewish communities.

XIV

One of the most interesting developments with regard to the reconstitution of Jewish collective identity and its intercivilizational relations has been that of neo-orthodoxy. The first neo-orthodox groups emerged in Germany and Western Europe in contrast to traditional orthodoxy, which was very strong in Eastern Europe and which denied the legitimacy of the secular modern world, propagating segregation between modern and traditional sectors of Jewish life. After the Second World War, a new type of radical, fundamentalist religious movement emerged throughout Jewish communities – in line with the general resurgence of religion in many nation states. These movements appropriated many modern organizational components, but embedded them within relatively closed and segregated spaces with strong militant tendencies – becoming eventually very influential within Jewish communities throughout the world.

XV

These modern developments can be seen as a transformation of latent antinomian, sectarian and heterodox tendencies that were prevalent in Jewish communities during the long medieval period. Although it is difficult to speak of heterodoxy in modern Jewish history as there is no longer any reigning orthodoxy, the different interpretations of Jewish

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civilizational premises and Jewish collective identity have taken on a sectarian-like form; each tended to perceive itself as providing the proper answer to the perennial questions and problems of Jewish existence. It is impossible to understand the dynamics of modern Jewish history without taking into account these seemingly heterodox tendencies and the sectarian attitudes of their carriers.

These movements were not direct descendants of the heterodox groups that existed in earlier periods. They developed as a result of the encounter of Jewish communities with the radical changes in European societies; they constituted, as it were, the answer of Jewish collectivity to the challenges of modernity. But in these answers, many of the earlier heterodox themes were taken up and were reformulated in new ways. These ''heterodoxies'' were not confined to the internal arenas of Jewish communities. They participated in the institutional arenas of society in general, thus marking the entry of Jews into modern history.

For example, traditional metaphysical themes were transformed into new political – ''liberal'' or revolutionary – directions, with Jews being sometimes presented (and certainly seen by their detractors) as the bearers of such tendencies. Older mystical or esoteric themes could be transposed into modern secular pantheistic or gnostic directions.

XVI

One of the characteristics of the modern era in Jewish history is the fact that the concrete ways in which the patterns of Jewish life emerged varied greatly in different European countries and later also in the United States, Latin America and Israel – far beyond the heterogeneity of the Jewish collectivities in medieval time. In a way, the sectarian tendencies became transformed into the problem of Jewish pluralism – accentuating the problem of Jewish continuity and survival in a new way.

All these developments attest to the fact that the collective Jewish entry into modern history did not begin with Zionism: it started with the various movements which developed in the wake of Jewish Emancipation, and which constituted, together with the orthodox sectors, the major fronts of confrontation with Zionism. The distinctiveness of the Zionist movement lay not in the fact that it was the first

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attempt to bring the Jews back into history – but in its radical stance against any attempt to do so within the territorial boundaries of Western societies. This opened up a new dimension for the Jewish civilizational vision. It was the Zionist movement that, through the promotion of Jewish settlement in Palestine and later the establishment of the State of Israel, constituted a radical new mode of Jewish participation in world history. For the first time since the period of the Second Temple, Jews established a distinct, independent collective political entity which could play an autonomous collective role in the international arena.

XVII

The fate of these different entries into modern history was greatly influenced by the relation between the Jewish communities and their host societies – especially in Europe. The attempts made by Jews to participate in the broader civilizational framework and to redefine their collective boundaries were confronted with the universalistic premises rooted in the Enlightenment (and embodied in the modern conception of citizenship) and the new primordial components as they crystallized in different nation states. They were caught, as it were, between a universalistic tendency that encouraged the participation of Jews as citizens in the major institutional arenas of their host societies, and the development of modern ''racist'' anti-Semitism, which crystallized in different movements, especially in Central Europe, culminating in the Nazi movement and ideology. It was within this framework that the problem of Jewish survival and continuity was continually reformulated and challenged in Europe.

Thus, the confrontation of the Jewish historical experience with ''history'' and the attempts made by Jews to enter into history were rooted in the specific European historical experience, in the double heritage of the Revolutions and the modern nation state – and they ended tragically with the Second World War and the Holocaust.

A different mode of Jewish historical experience (and of Jewish entrance into history) had, however, developed in the United States. The American historical experience was markedly different from the European one. The American collectivity was not defined in historical or primordial but in ideological, religious-political utopian terms, in terms of the American myth or what Robert Bellah called the

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American ''civil religion''. Although anti-Semitism existed, emancipation and the granting of full citizenship, did not constitute a problem. This facilitated the collective participation of Jews – not just as a distinct ''minority'' (as in Eastern Europe), but as part of American collective life and politics, even if this process took a long time to be realized. After the Second World War, the American Jewish community became the largest Diaspora. With the weakening of the classical European nation state, with the crystallization of the European Union and the search for a European identity, new patterns of Jewish trans-national organizations emerged also in Europe.

XVIII

The developments of the modern era have intensified and sharpened the problems of the constitution of Jewish civilization and of Jewish continuity. The Shoah posed of course the most terrible threat to Jewish continuity, demonstrating the fragility and basic insecurity of Jewish diasporic existence.

But even beyond this terrible experience, the multiplicity of Jewish entries into history presented new challenges to the problem of Jewish continuity. The growing openness of European culture had increased the flexibility of Jewish communities and seemingly enhanced their capacities to adjust to new social and cultural realities. At the same time, this could weaken the internal solidarity and facilitate the processes of leaving the fold, not only through conversion (as in the medieval and early modern period), but through a slow process of dropping out, of growing indifferent to one's Jewish origin. The differences in the historical experience of Jewish communities could increase the dissociation among them. However, the continuing interrelations among various Jewish communities, their shared commitment to aspects of their tradition and to the modern State of Israel, their feeling of solidarity with repressed Jewish communities, for example in the Soviet Union, as well as the upsurge of ''new'' anti-Semitic tendencies throughout Europe and the Middle East were the source of continuing solidarity among Jewish communities.

The relations of Jews to their respective host societies have greatly changed since medieval times, especially in the process of the incorporation of Jews into modern civilization from the late eighteenth century on up to the Second World War. After the Second World War,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975609990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

this change included the seeming abatement of hostile relations between the Jewish civilization and Western European societies, a growing tolerance in Western societies toward cultural and social heterogeneity and the widespread, at least official, delegitimation of anti-Semitism after the Holocaust. The growing tolerance was manifested not only in the acceptance of Jews as citizens of full standing, but also in many attempts at interfaith meetings between different Christian churches and organizations and Jewish groups, culminating, in a way, in the Vatican's recognition of the State of Israel, in the continual interreligious encounters or dialogues, as well as in the attempts in many European societies and in the United States to incorporate the memory of the Holocaust into their collective consciousness.

However, there also developed a negative tendency, manifested, for example, in the resurgence of ''traditional'' anti-Semitism in Russia and many Eastern European countries after the downfall of the communist regimes, in an increased anti-Semitism in Western countries in the late 1980s, which was closely connected with the development of strong anti-Israeli tendencies, including attempts to undermine the legitimacy of the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish state. Furthermore, there developed a new type of anti-Semitism in the West – promulgated by middle-class intellectual ''leftist'' groups and opinion leaders, often in paradoxical coalition with extreme fundamentalist Islamic groups, challenging the liberal foundation of European civilizations. These developments indicate that the hostile relations between Israel and most of its neighbouring states are not only political conflicts between states; they have a deep intercivilizational, religious dimension. The reactions to the Israeli-Arab conflict throughout the Western and Muslim world, the organized anti-Israeli outbursts in many arenas, resemble albeit already in transformed modern highly ideological terms the ambivalent, hostile relations between the Jewish people and their host civilizations in history.

Which of these tendencies will become predominant in the future? Only time can tell. The outcome of these developments will provide an answer to the question of Jewish continuity in the modern era.

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Résumé

L'article analyse en perspective comparée l'expérience historique juive, civilisation axiale particulière – la première qui soit monothéiste – et ses caractéristiques principales. Il accorde une importance particulière à la pluralité de sens des principales composantes de la culture, de la conscience collective et des dispositions institutionnelles, porteuses dans une longue continuité historique même des hétérodoxies. Il finit avec une mise en évidence de quelques-unes des différences majeures entre l'expérience juive contemporaine comparée à son histoire médiévale.

Mots clés : Expérience historique juive ; Civilisation axiale ; Monothéisme ; Hétérodoxies.

Zusammenfassung

Die vergleichende Studie widmet sich der geschichtlichen jüdischen Erfahrung, eine besondere axiale Kultur – die erste monotheistische – und ihre Besonderheiten. Ein großer Platz wird der Sinnesvielfalt der wichtigsten kulturellen Komponenten, des Gemeinschaftsinns und institutionnellen Prämissen eingeräumt, die über einen langen historischen Zeitraum Träger der Heterodoxie sind. Der Aufsatz endet mit einem Vergleich der größten Unterschiede zwischen der jüdischen Gegenwartserfahrung und seiner mittelalterlichen Komponente.

Schlagwörter: Jüdische Geschichtserfahrung; Axiale Kultur; Monotheismus; Heterodoxie.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975609990130 Published online by Cambridge University Press