

THE CAMBRIDGE
HISTORY OF JUDAISM

VOLUME VIII

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MITCHELL B. HART

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JEWISH CULTURE: WHAT IS IT?

In Search of Jewish Culture

ZOHAR SHAVIT AND YAAKOV SHAVIT

In the consciousness of the nation, the term culture, in its comprehensive and human sense, has replaced the theological term Torah.

Haïm Nahman Bialik, 1925¹

I

In 1899, the young Martin Buber read the first volume of Jacob Burckhardt's monumental *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*, which appeared in four volumes between 1898 and 1902. In a letter to a friend Buber wrote: "I ask myself when we shall have such a book, A History of Jewish Culture."² More than a century has passed since then, and we still have no comprehensive book on the history and nature of Jewish culture.

There are at least two explanations for this long-standing omission. The more general one is the difficulty of defining culture. In writing about it, authors have narrowed or broadened its scope to suit their own points of view, and their discussion of culture is frequently characterized by obfuscation, ambiguity, and elusiveness.³ The more specific explanation is that Jewish culture is a dynamic phenomenon – with a variety of contents, forms, and styles – which has undergone many changes, and even upheavals, from its inception. Throughout Jewish history there have been particular Jewish cultures that were shaped, inter alia, by the influence of the host cultures in the varied geo-cultural environments in which Jews lived: for

¹ Haïm Nahman Bialik, "Liftichat haUniversitah haIvrit biYerushlayim" (On the Inauguration of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem), in *Divrei Sifrut*, 2nd ed, ed. Haïm Nahman Bialik. (Tel Aviv, 1965), 127–135 (Hebrew).

² In Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Hale'umiyut shebalev," in *In Memory of M. Buber on the Tenth Anniversary of his Death* (Jerusalem, 1987), 34 (the title represents the German title: *Nationalismus der Innerlichkeit*).

³ See Alfred Louis Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concept and Definitions* (New York: Kraus Reprint, 1953).

example, the Hellenistic Jewish culture or the Jewish culture in Spain in the Muslim period.⁴

In his introduction to *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Burckhardt modestly described his work as “*Ein Versuch*” (an Essay).⁵ What he probably meant to say, among other things, was that even such a comprehensive and detailed panorama of a particular culture could not include all its components and innumerable strata and, at the same time, also describe its complex dynamic. Burckhardt was writing about the history of Greek culture and of Renaissance culture in Italy, that is, “closed” cultures, which no longer exist and of which only the memory and heritage remain. In contrast, Jewish culture has not ceased to exist and is not only a heritage. Therefore, any attempt to describe its development and to paint a comprehensive panoramic picture of it is a much more difficult undertaking and certainly can be no more than an attempt.

The nineteenth century saw the emergence of an understanding of Judaism as a supra-temporal and unchanging entity, characterized by a singular essence. Consequently, Jewish culture was perceived as an embodiment of this essence, that is, as an all-inclusive system whose components manifest this essence. It was also seen as an entity which develops and renews itself without relying on external influences and without borrowing from them.

This essay does not attempt to discuss the essence of Judaism. Instead, it maintains that the view of Judaism that emerged in the nineteenth century, as an immanent entity rather than a set of beliefs and commandments, created an urgent need to anchor that entity in inherent traits, race, national psyche, and unique genius. This new view reflected the transition from a theocentric approach to an ethnocentric one, which constituted an important chapter in Jewish intellectual history in modern times. This ethnocentric view will serve as our point of departure; it is an understanding that the culture of a certain human group is a whole way of life – that group’s intellectual, artistic, and material achievements – and that it is expressed and embodied in, inter alia, a value system, a symbolic system, a worldview, cultural codes and their practical translation into everyday life, creative products, organizations, and institutions.

⁴ The literature on Jewish culture comprises hundreds, perhaps thousands, of essays, articles, and books which cover a variety of aspects and issues. Because of this literature’s vast dimensions, we will refer to just a few of these works in the selected bibliography.

⁵ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 19. The original German edition bore the subtitle: *Ein Versuch*, and the English translation reads: “this work bears the title of an essay in the strictest sense of the word” – an attempt.

In the specific context of Jewish history, the discussion of the culture of Jews and of Jewish culture should deal with two preliminary questions:

- First, are we talking about a single cultural unit whose components share a unifying platform, or are we talking about an assembly of distinct and separate cultures, which nevertheless have some shared elements? Second, what is the “Jewish content” of Jewish culture? That is, what are the uniquely Jewish characteristics of the cultural components that are common to all the sub-cultures of the Jews?

These two questions have engaged Jewish thought and discourse over the past two centuries and they have received numerous, varied, and even diametrically opposed answers. The continuous historical existence of Jews for 3,000 years as a singular collective characterized as distinctive – both by itself and by others who describe its unique attributes – and the broad geo-cultural dispersal of Jews make it difficult to write a general and comprehensive history of Jewish culture as a unified and uniform culture. It is difficult, too, because we are dealing with three different historical spheres:

1. Jewish culture as a minority culture existing within hegemonic non-Jewish cultures, manifesting unique patterns and maintaining complex, stratified, and dynamic relations with the non-Jewish cultures.
2. The participation of individual Jews in non-Jewish cultures.
3. Jewish culture as a majority culture in a hegemonic and sovereign Jewish society.

II

Tarbut (the Hebrew word for culture) is a new concept in Jewish history. When it was first used, some Jews opposed it because traditionally it signified idolatry and apostasy. Consider, for example, *tarbut anashim chata'im* (a brood of sinful men), Num 32:14, or *tarbut ra'ah* (bad ways) bHag.15a. Therefore, the early Hebrew discourse on the topic used the Russian *kultura* or German *Kultur*. In 1902, Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginsberg) described the opposition to the use of *tarbut* thus:

One has only to utter from the podium the terrible word *kultura* – perhaps the loftiest and most exalted word in the entire human linguistic treasury – to arouse tremendous excitement on all sides as if the great Day of Judgment had arrived.⁶

⁶ Ahad Ha'am, “The Spiritual Revival,” in *Selected Essays*, ed. and trans. Leon Simon (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1944), 253–307.

The opposition to the Hebrew word for culture stemmed not only from the traditional negative connotation of the word, or from resistance to the acceptance and internalization of certain non-Jewish cultural components, but mainly from the perception of culture as a total alternative to religion, an alternative that is the product of human creation.⁷ However, it was difficult to oppose the acceptance of the term, and thus, from the end of the eighteenth century, and primarily during the nineteenth century, the great change that took place in Jewish life in Europe was marked by the growing use of the term. It signified a worldview, a value system, and daily practices and their concrete manifestations in daily life. In other words, culture now referred to a complex of specific manifestations of human endeavor. This complex was seen by more and more Jews as a comprehensive system, all-encompassing and sovereign, which should become an alternative to both religion and religious tradition. It seems safe to argue that the acceptance of the Hebrew term for “culture” in Jewish discourse can be seen as an expression of both acculturation and internal revolution. It ceased to signify apostasy, and instead became self-evident as a socio-historical phenomenon. This was expressed, for example, in the emergence of various other modern terms, such as Jewish religious culture, rabbinical culture, and traditional culture. Sometimes the term Judaism was used synonymously with the term culture, and “Jewish culture” came to mean that Judaism incorporated all the elements included in the newly accepted term culture.

The acceptance of the term culture and its widespread use in both scholarly and public discourses led the Hebrew author David Frischmann to write: “The word *kultura*, after all, [is] an indeterminate word which says nothing, or even worse than that, one that says too much. Whenever they cannot precisely designate some spiritual concept, they take the vague word *kultura* and sport it before us...”⁸

We contend that the term culture was adopted in Jewish polemics and literature to give new meaning to the term Judaism, or, in more radical cases, to provide a new definition of Judaism (“new Judaism”) – a definition that would serve as a shared new platform for the affiliation and identity of Jews. According to this radical view, the Jews are not an ethnic group or a religious community but rather a *Kulturvolk*, a people with a culture, whose identity and uniqueness are expressed not only – nor

even mainly – through religious practices and religious creativity. At the same time, this view broadened and enriched the scope of Judaism, which now included a larger repertoire of cultural components. Even if these components had existed previously, they had not been considered inseparable, central, or crucial parts of Judaism, but rather marginal or neutral appendages to it. In contrast, according to the radical view, religion is but one of many cultural products and manifestations. Jewish culture was regarded as secular even though it drew on components from the religious tradition and secularized them. Part of the religious sector in modern times responded to this radical view by offering a new and broader understanding of Judaism, this time including a cultural repertoire that previously had not been defined as part of Jewish life and culture.

III

Jews always had a culture, but, as we have seen, they did not always use this term for it. That is because before modern times no distinction was made between religion and “non-religion,” and because the term culture (like the term civilization), as distinct from religion, appeared only towards the middle of the eighteenth century. Without using the term culture, the Sages used to distinguish between Jewish culture and non-Jewish culture, not only in the religious sense but also in the human-existential sense, as can be learned from the words of R. Levi: “All Israel’s actions are distinct from the corresponding actions of the nations of the world: this applies to their ploughing, their sowing, their reaping, their sheaves, their threshing, their granaries, their wineries – their shaving, and their counting” (Num. Rabbah 10:1 to Deut. Rabbah 7:7). Similarly, when a gentile said to R. Yohanan Ben Zakkai that gentiles and Jews have different holidays, and asked him: “Which is the day whereon we and you rejoice alike?” the response he received was, “It is the day when rain falls.” In the same vein, the Sages warned: “Nor shall you follow their customs, the things engraved in their hearts, such as theatres and circuses and stadia” (Sifra, Acharei, 9:13, ed. Weiss, 86a).

At the same time, Jewish tradition sought to define permissible and non-permissible borrowing from other cultures. Despite the ideology and practice of isolationism, Jews were very much aware that no culture can be isolated, nor can influences and borrowings from other cultures be rejected totally. They understood that cultural influences are a necessary evil whose scope must be controlled. There were always broad and varied intercultural contacts between Jews and their surroundings, and a large repertoire of cultural items and cultural properties broke through from outside into

⁷ On *Pulmus hakultura* (The Culture Debate) in early Zionism, see Ehud Luz, *Parallels Meet: Religion and Nationalism in the Early Zionist Movement (1882–1904)* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1985), 187–213 (Hebrew).

⁸ Quoted in Joseph Haïm Brenner, “Bachayim u-vasifrut” (In Life and in Literature) in *Kol kitvei J.H. Brenner* (Collected Writings), vol. ii (Tel Aviv: Magnes, 1961), 55–65 (Hebrew).

Jewish culture, broadening it, enriching it, and being internalized by it, sometimes by being “judaized” and undergoing a change in appearance.

Before modern times, the content and boundaries of Jewish culture were dictated by religion (the Torah and the halacha) and by practices that shaped traditions and customs. The halacha covered large parts of Jewish life: It determined the value system, the patterns of behavior, and the rules and codes of behavior in social and cultural contexts; it defined what was permitted and what was forbidden with regard to the consumption of cultural products; and to a great extent it determined the nature of those cultural products. The customs, in turn, determined and shaped rituals and obligatory rules of behavior in various parts of the Jewish life cycle. In addition to the halacha and *Minhag* (custom), there was the rich world of folklore, folk beliefs, and folk practices (folkways), and magic and witchcraft, some of which had a semi-halachic value.⁹ In addition to all these, the culture of the Jews included the creation of literary and artistic works and philosophical and scientific treatises. The Jews had their own material culture whose components were only partly determined by halacha and *Minhag*. Halacha and custom included mainly restrictions and prohibitions that determined which cultural practices were to be regarded as an abandoning of tradition (*Darcho Avot*, “the ways of the ancestors”), as “following in the footsteps of the gentiles,” or as apostasy. They did not, however, set guidelines concerning the desired and permitted cultural products. The need to formulate such detailed guidelines developed only in modern times, for three reasons.

The first reason is that the notion of “culture” filled the void created by the “breaching of the fence,” that is, the abandonment of the Jewish sphere (which was defined and enclosed by sets of commands and prohibitions and by communal scrutiny) and the departure for the world “outside the fence” (the non-Jewish sphere), a departure variously described as dissipation, acculturation, secularization, modernization, or westernization. Whatever name it was given, this departure shattered the old social frameworks and created a vacuum which was quickly filled by modern Jews’ notion of “culture,” consisting of elements, models, and repertoires which previously had not occupied a significant place in the Jewish sphere. The establishment of these new frameworks was usually the result of ideology, a program, and the activities of numerous cultural agents who collectively organized and even established Jewish endeavor. Moreover, the building of a new Jewish culture (or rather, Jewish cultures) was the most salient expression of the understanding that “Jewish culture” refers not only to life

⁹ Israel M. Ta-Shma, *Early Franco-German Ritual and Custom* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1992), 13–105 (Hebrew).

in a secular sphere or to a moderate or radical change in the way of life but to an all-inclusive, singular Jewish system of culture.

The second reason is that the boundaries between Jewish and non-Jewish cultures had become blurred, and thus it was necessary to re-define the cultural boundary between what belonged to Judaism and was thus within it and what was outside it. Consequently, it was necessary to confirm the criteria for determining what was permitted or forbidden in adopting elements from the surrounding cultures. In modern times, the need to define cultural boundaries increased when many new cultural components – considered important and valuable by modern Western culture – were incorporated into the Jewish cultural system; these included, for example, literature, music, plastic arts, and science. These components entered Jewish culture with greater intensity than ever before and in unprecedented quantities, and their incorporation received legitimization and encouragement from circles that saw in them a sign of openness and an expression of cultural renewal and modernity. There was a great need to define the cultural boundaries because from that point on the cultural system was understood as a comprehensive whole that defined Jewish identity.

The third reason for the need to formulate guidelines is that Jews began to be active in cultural areas in which they had not been involved previously. This resulted in questions about the precise nature of the Jewish content or Jewish style of their work, and it became necessary to define the unique characteristics of that content and style. What is Jewish literature, what is Jewish art, what is Jewish music?

IV

The use of the term culture in the nineteenth century, which prompted these discussions and deliberations, appeared for the first time in the writings of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (science of Judaism) scholars in Germany, and was reflected in the name Verein für Kultur und Wissenschaft der Juden (The Society for Jewish Culture and Science), founded in Berlin in 1819. Its members strove to describe culture “in its fullest scope”; in their view, it included all types of written texts: literature, philosophy, and science. They were not trying to revive Jewish culture, but rather to assemble the corpus of past Jewish creation. In this, they, and the Haskalah movement before them, began a process, which grew more intense and comprehensive in later generations, of discovering and publishing all the assets of Jewish high culture. In doing so they were greatly influenced by their German intellectual environment. As is well known, before developing their national and political might, the Germans (especially the middle

classes) based their national pride and self-esteem on achievements in science, literature, philosophy, and music – in short, on German *Kultur*.¹⁰ The new ensemble of Jewish works was termed culture, and that created a need to find an organizing factor which would give this ensemble a “Jewish character,” “Jewish originality,” and a “Jewish identity.” This need led to the adoption of a “holistic approach,”¹¹ that is, a view of all the manifestations of culture as rooted in a single principle.

The need to redefine the fundamentals of Jewish culture and to describe all its components led to scrutiny of the earlier culture in an attempt to find the constitutive principles of Jewish culture. In the nineteenth century this resulted in an upsurge of research into the history of culture, which sought to rediscover and portray all the manifestations of what would now be termed “Jewish culture.” The aim of this intellectual activity was to prove that there had always been a wide-ranging and all-inclusive Jewish culture, that Jews were not isolated and cut off by their religious life, that they did not lack the mental capacity required for the creation of culture, and that therefore they were no less “cultured” than any other “cultured” people; perhaps they were even more so. This look to the past resulted from the growing rifts in the social and cultural barriers between Jewish and non-Jewish society in Western Europe, a process that began even before the nineteenth century as the contacts between them expanded. This process was facilitated by the secularization and modernization of European societies and by the emergence of the notion of cultural particularism and the view of national identity as rooted in the national culture. Thus, the history of Jewish culture became a cultural battleground and a vital and useful tool in the *Kulturkampf* between various factions in the Jewish community.

The search for the past served several objectives:

First, to counter the claim that “the Jews never worship the Graces,”¹² and to prove, instead, that they were endowed with the necessary abilities to participate in all aspects of cultural endeavor, thus ensuring their admission into non-Jewish society and leading to their integration into the culture of its elite;

Second, to supply internal legitimization (to the conservative Jewish community) for the expansion of the cultural field and the introduction of

¹⁰ Norbert Elias, *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, trans. Eric Dunning and Stephen Mennell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 323.

¹¹ E. H. Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 29.

¹² Henri Baptiste Grégoire, *Essai sur la régénération physique et politique des Juifs* (Paris, 1789), chap. 25, p. 182.

cultural change, by arguing that similar past endeavors were granted legitimization and by describing those past endeavors; Third, to prove that Jewish culture had enough internal vitality to generate a cultural revival that would include all the fundamentals and components which, by modern standards, turn an ethnic group or a religious community into a people (*Kulturvolk*).

V

The study of the nature of the “new Jewish culture” focused largely on the massive entry of Jews into non-Jewish culture, which led to the hyperbolic description of the nineteenth century as a “Jewish century.” Thus, for example, the enthusiastic description of Kalman Schulmann, a maskil from Vilna, who in 1869 noted the fast pace and great intensity of Jews’ involvement in every aspect of cultural activity in the nineteenth century:

Anyone who can see clearly will gaze with astonishment at the Jews’ rapid ascent to the heights in modern times in all areas of wisdom and knowledge, in all arts and crafts. This they achieved in just a short while, whereas other peoples did not succeed in attaining such heights even over a period of many hundreds of years. For no sooner did the kings and counts of the land unloose their bonds, and favor them with civil rights and laws, than they opened their treasures and displayed precious qualities and fine talents that had lain dormant in their souls during dark years when they were persecuted by their foes, who gave them no respite until they devoured them.

Before many days had passed, there arose proudly from their midst great poets, wondrous rhetoricians, lauded authors in all realms, renowned mathematicians, and engineers, astronomers, chronologists, men well versed in religion and law and knowledgeable in all branches of the natural sciences, famous physicians, psalmists, musicians, diplomats, sculptors, visionaries. And there is no wisdom, art, or craftsmanship in which the Jews did not engage and become famous in the land for their prowess.¹³

Similarly, the historian Heinrich [Tzvi] Graetz wrote in 1883: “And now, dear friend, take a look at what the Jews have achieved in less than one century. They perform in all branches of science and literature and in some they are the leaders.”¹⁴

In other words, it was not only a matter of the entry of Jews into a non-Jewish culture, but also of their growing and intense presence in it and

¹³ Kalman Schulmann, *Divrei yemei olam*, iv (Vilna, 1867), 13–16.

¹⁴ Heinrich [Tzvi] Graetz, “Correspondence of an English lady on Judaism and Semitism” letter eight (1883) in Heinrich Graetz, *The Structure of Jewish History and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Ismar Schorsch (New York: Ktav, 1975), 220.

their increasing influence on it. The scholarly literature of the past one hundred and fifty years deals extensively with the question of the incorporation of Jews in various areas of cultural endeavor and their contribution, and it also attempts to explain the underlying incentive. Both scholarly literature and polemical texts tried to foster Jewish self-esteem by portraying the unprecedentedly intense participation of Jews in all these aspects of cultural life from the beginning of the nineteenth century as a central phenomenon of Jewish culture in the modern period. Some even argued that the “Jewish spirit” and its main assets (foremost among them the Hebrew Bible) were the “founding mother” of Western culture and of the modernization process that was leading humankind to the pinnacle of its achievement. Others went so far as to argue that the Jews were the initiators and fosterers of certain national cultures. The participation of Jews in the surrounding cultures and the great extent of their identification with them, to the point of giving up many earlier traits of Jewish culture, was seen by religious and nationalist Jews as assimilation. In anti-Jewish literature it was described as the Jews’ gaining control over the surrounding culture and as a judaization of that culture. However, it was individual Jews who participated in non-Jewish culture, and the extent to which that participation can be considered part of Jewish culture is doubtful.

The great change that transpired in Jewish society in the nineteenth century and especially towards the end of that century was characterized by Jews leaving their religious and communal frameworks – controlled and directed by halacha, custom, and tradition – and entering the cultural world outside and integrating into it.

This led to the acceptance and absorption of non-Jews’ value systems and behavioral patterns. The extent to which this occurred is evident from the reproaches against those Jews who had left: they were no longer classed as heretics or sceptics but were seen, instead, as dissipated, that is, as those who had abandoned the obligatory and accepted norms and behaviors in both private and public life and who had adopted a corrupt lifestyle and dissolute habits of cultural consumption. Later, what had been viewed as dissipation – such as shaving off a beard, sexual license, reading of non-Hebrew literature, attending the theater, or entering a tavern – was described as a sign of secularization. Entry into a non-Jewish culture was usually not the outcome of a change in the Jewish worldview, but rather the result of a lowering of some of the barriers that separated Jews from non-Jews and of the new opportunities which allowed large groups of Jews not only to consume cultural products but also to participate in their production. The nineteenth century was the century in which a passion for culture, in the sense of consumption of numerous cultural products,

appeared at the same time as a surge of Jewish creation in many cultural fields.

In 1833, Michael Benedict Lessing published the following description of urban Jewish society in Prussia:

Let us look at the tremendous change in the language, dress, way of life, needs and entertainments, morals, and customs of the Jews! [...] Even their external appearance, [notice] how it has changed since then. Who would not have immediately identified a Jew by his clumsy eastern dress, by his wide and dark kapote, by his fur visor slung over his forehead, by the slippers, and by the beard that damages his face? Who would not have immediately identified the Jewish matron by her silver-embroidered cap, her severe visage with no adornment of hair? And how many Jews still look like that today, unless they are relics of the past or immigrants from Poland? With what strictness they then held on to the petty customs, and which Jew would have had the inner strength to open his shop on the Sabbath thirty years ago, or go about his business, write, or travel? [...] Was it indeed possible thirty years ago to see a Jew sit down with the Christian guests of a tavern or restaurant, speak freely with them, eat the same food as them, and consume the same drink as them? [...] Now nearly all the Christian schools in the towns admit the children of Jewish residents, especially in the upper grades [...] Only in a very few homes do old members of the household use the Jewish dialect, whereas the children – and yes – and mainly – the urban ones, speak, at home and in public, the same language as that of their Christian co-citizens [and] brethren [...] Apparently, there are still hundreds of thousands of people alive from the second half of the past century, and we call upon them to confirm whether, in their youth, they ever found a Jew at concerts, parties, balls, folk fests, [...] in cafés, and in the halls of the bourse, or saw them poring over daily newspapers, [...] or met them in the theatre, in music, and in art ... whether they ever found intellectual Jews in scientific circles and other circles who were not inferior to the rest of society in their social manners or knowledge.¹⁵

The portrayal of two diametrically opposed social and cultural realities – the traditional and conservative old one and the modern new one – apparently referred only to a small circle of Jews, probably bourgeois urban Jews in Western Europe. Lessing described the cultural portrait he painted not as German culture, but rather as modern culture, that is, the culture of the European bourgeoisie.

The appearance of this culture was partly the outcome of a social and cultural project of the Haskalah movement which, at the end of the eighteenth century, initiated a social reform that was meant not only to add knowledge and expand the Jewish textual world, but also to thoroughly reform Jewish society and culture. This reform aimed to change Jewish

¹⁵ M. B. Lessing, *Die Juden und die öffentliche Meinung im preussischen Staate* (Altona: Hammerich, 1833), 129–132.

culture by replacing old norms with new ones, namely, with a new and different cultural repertoire, and by changing part of the *habitus* of individuals in the private sphere, that is, by introducing changes in the areas of both *Kultus* and *Kultur*. The maskilim (the members of the Haskalah movement) defined Haskalah as “true culture,” “which is useful and necessary for every Jewish man.”¹⁶ Although the maskilim did not declare their goal as creating a new Jewish culture that was an integral whole, and although most of them were not secular, in practice they strove to build a comprehensive Jewish culture that would serve as a complement, or even as an alternative, to traditional Jewish culture, and which at the same time would establish new boundaries between the Jewish and the non-Jewish cultures. In other words, the Haskalah and other movements that succeeded it sought not only to set boundaries and restrictions on processes of acculturation in order to prevent the introduction of what they saw as the harmful components of non-Jewish culture, but also to propose an alternative to acculturation by filling the Jewish cultural system with cultural components that it lacked. Because the Haskalah movement tried to reconstruct Jewish culture by selectively combining old and new cultural components, it had to determine which components were lacking. Further, it had to decide which components, which had existed in the past and could be revived, were necessary, and which should be adopted from the surrounding cultures. In this sense, the Haskalah was the first to outline a cultural program. In practice, however, socio-cultural processes determined the pace, extent, and areas of acculturation.

VI

The culture of Western European Jewish society developed in modern times along two paths. The first was *integration into European culture*. This led to the belief that parts of the Jewish people in Western Europe were losing – or had already lost – their authentic shared culture, that the shared platform had disappeared, and that the Jewish people was splitting and dividing not only along religious or local lines, but also in accordance with the intensity of the processes of acculturation that it was undergoing. Jews were divided by their nationalities and became, for example, German Jews, Russian Jews, and American Jews. They were active in the surrounding culture and they adopted its value system and daily practices and lifestyle. Even if their cultural products had a distinctly “Jewish” character, they were not part of Jewish culture.

¹⁶ Naphtali Herz Wessely, *Divre shalom veemet* (Words of Peace and Truth) (Warsaw, 1886), 5–6. Originally published Berlin, 1782.

The second path was the *construction or re-construction of Jewish culture* by expanding the areas and the number of cultural activities and by inventing traditions: The most prominent manifestation of this was the national-cultural revival called *Ha'tchiya Ha-ivrit* (*The Hebrew Revival*). Autonomous Jewish cultural institutions were established, offering an equivalent to those of the surrounding cultures. Most prominent among them were institutes of Jewish education, public libraries, publishing houses, cultural clubs, theaters, newspapers, and periodicals. This process of filling up a distinct Jewish cultural system was intensive and multi-faceted, both in areas of “the great tradition” and of “the little tradition.”¹⁷ Here one can distinguish between those Jews who raised a barrier between themselves and the surrounding culture in an attempt to prevent its influence and those who lowered it. In general, relations with the surrounding cultures were characterized by a wide range of interactions, all of which involved absorbing and internalizing components of the modern pan-European culture. Such an alternative system existed in both Western and Eastern Europe, but it was much more typical of Eastern Europe with its 5 million Jews, and the areas of activity there were much more numerous than in Western Europe.

All Jewish subcultures absorbed and internalized new cultural components, including new areas of knowledge, such as the sciences. Jewish intellectuals, writers, artists, and scientists created a rich corpus of non-religious literature and offered the public the possibility of consuming various cultural products, such as theater, dance, and music. They established frameworks for modern education and participated in non-Jewish educational frameworks from kindergarten to university, created new patterns of leisure and entertainment, participated in sports, changed their external appearance and dress, took part in political activities, and so on. Jews who lived in these subcultures adopted, as we have said, a new *habitus*.¹⁸ For some Jews, the autonomous cultural system acted as a subculture in the sense that they also participated – both as creators and consumers – in the hegemonic culture; thus they lived in a cultural reality that was split in two and they had a dual identity (*Zweiheit*). We will discuss the two cultural “realities” by briefly examining two components which played a major role in the creation of the new Jewish cultural reality: language and literature.

¹⁷ Milton B. Singer, *When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization* (New York: Praeger, 1972), 3–10.

¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Habitus and the Space of Life-styles,” in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 170–225.

The Hebrew language had always been a written language; in various contexts and periods it also served as a spoken language. Jews, however, had always lived in a state of linguistic diglossia, that is, in a state of a division of labor between the languages.¹⁹ Especially from the nineteenth century, Jews were bilingual and often trilingual. Both the religious and the non-religious Jewish textual world, too, was bilingual or multilingual, and important works, such as, for example, Maimonides's *The Guide for the Perplexed* or Yehuda Halevi's *The Kuzari*, were written in "non-Jewish" languages (whereas languages such as Yiddish, Hebrew, and Ladino were used only by Jews).

From the end of the eighteenth century, and mainly during the nineteenth century, languages began to be considered both as giving expression to the inner life of a nation and as defining the unique worldview of an ethnic or national group. Language was also seen as having a central role in nation building and identity building. Various languages underwent standardization and became the unifying force of nations. But the status of the Hebrew language in Europe decreased as the command of the languages of the majority cultures – German, French, or Russian – became a necessary condition for civil integration, not to mention cultural and natural integration; to quote the learned Moritz Lazarus, who said, "*Die Sprache allein macht uns zu Deutschen*" – It is the language that makes us Germans.²⁰

In Eastern Europe, Yiddish was the lingua franca of the large Jewish population. By the middle of the nineteenth century it was seen as an authentic national language and it developed as the language of high modern culture while continuing to function as the language of the folk. The revival of Hebrew as both a literary and spoken language in the Diaspora had a crucial role in creating "culture in Hebrew" and "Hebrew culture." Ideologues and agents of Hebrew culture saw it as the natural language of the Jews and as a necessary condition for national revival. Thus, it was necessary to expand Hebrew so it could function as a written language and as a language of communication in every aspect of life. Expanding the language, ensuring that all its levels and registers were filled, and disseminating it were the goals of the

project of Hebrew language revival. Yiddish and Hebrew, the languages of Jews in Europe (though not in other places), attained high status in both the practical and the symbolic dimensions. Jews continued to live in a state of linguistic diglossia, but the Jewish languages began to play a major social and cultural role because of the symbolic value granted to them.

Jews wrote non-religious literature even before modern times, but only in modern times did this literature attain status as simultaneously expressing and creating the culture. In response to a description of Jewish literature as being poor and limited, various intellectuals argued that the Jews' creative imagination did enable them to produce all forms of literature (and art).

Jewish writers were now called upon to write Judeo-German literature (in German), or Judeo-Russian literature (in Russian), that would depict the Jewish world and the world outside it through Jewish eyes. "Jewish authors, start working," urged Moritz Goldstein,²¹ who was referring to the writing of Jewish literature in German, not in the languages of the Jews. We will not address the question of what was "Jewish" about the literature written by Jews in non-Jewish languages, even when it was aimed mainly at a Jewish public, or what was "Jewish" in the literature written in Jewish languages addressing the Jewish public (except for the language in which it was written and occasionally its themes). In any case, as we have pointed out, in this context and in similar ones we are talking about individual writers and not a literary sub-system, and we are certainly not talking about a national literature.

In Eastern Europe there was a large circle of writers in Hebrew and Yiddish and a varied corpus of modern literature in the two languages that had played a significant role in reviving Jewish culture in general and Jewish national culture in particular. While Jewish literature in Jewish languages was growing and developing, a large and intensive project of translation from various languages into Yiddish and Hebrew developed simultaneously; the translated literature became an indispensable part of Yiddish culture and Hebrew culture.

VII

The Jewish culture created by the Jewish community (Yishuv) in Palestine-Eretz Israel starting in the 1880s was the product of a conscious and planned attempt to construct a different Jewish culture from that of the Diaspora, even if, to a great extent, it was a continuation of

¹⁹ Charles A. Ferguson, "Diglossia," *Word* 15 (1959): 325–340; Itamar Even-Zohar, "The Nature and Functionalization of the Language of Literature under Diglossia," *Ha-Sifrut* 2, no. 2 (1970): 286–303 (Hebrew).

²⁰ Moritz Lazarus, *Was heißt national?* (Berlin, 1879), 29–30.

²¹ Moritz Goldstein, "Deutsch-jüdischer Parnass," *Kunstwart* 25 (1912): 281–294.

the Jewish cultural systems created in the Diaspora. Only in Palestine-Eretz Israel was it possible to try to construct a comprehensive Jewish culture based on an ideal and a program, which would be the hegemonic culture of the Jewish community and would give that community its uniqueness, identity, and unity. Only in Palestine-Eretz Israel could Jewish culture be self-sufficient, an autarchy “drawing on its own roots and nourished by its own strength,” wrote Rachel Yanait Ben-Zvi in 1911,²² adding, “A *free* [emphasis in the original] cultural autarchy like this would not be possible in the Diaspora.” At the end of the Ottoman period, Palestine-Eretz Israel seemed a tabula rasa and thus the proper soil for planning an entirely new culture which would not need to answer to traditional Jewish culture or the surrounding culture. Jewish culture in a hegemonic society would be able to freely select the desired and required cultural components and implement mechanisms of cultural planning. Zionism, the Jewish national territorial movement, sought to create a modern Jewish society and polity that would ensure a high cultural standard and a cultural market that would meet all the needs of that society – in Hebrew. This was the rationale that underlay the initiation and implementation of a process of “filling the cultural system,” both with regard to building cultural institutions and supervisory cultural mechanisms and to establishing cultural norms, a cultural repertoire, and a market of cultural products. Thus, in the context of Jewish culture in Palestine-Eretz Israel, from the end of the nineteenth century onward one can speak about both a “society creating culture” and a “culture creating a society.”

The vision of Hebrew culture in the homeland – Palestine-Eretz Israel – required a cultural revolution in which a new Jewish cultural cosmos would be created, a set of values would be replaced, and Jewish creativity would burst forth to produce a free, total, and authentic Jewish culture. Yitzhak Tabenkin wrote:

All the elements of life and existence were re-examined. All the values and relations in life, the relation to man and to nature, to religion and to work, the relation to the child and the family, to Eretz Israel and the gentiles, everything was presented as problems to be discussed. For the first time an attempt was made to understand Jewish history, that there is Jewish-national poetry and Jewish folk poetry and Jewish performance of music.²³

²² See the series of articles by Rachel Yanait Ben-Zvi, “Lisheelat hakultura beEretz Israel” (To the Issue of Hakultura in Eretz Israel), *Haahdut* 15–24 (February–March 1911).

²³ Yitzhak Tabenkin, “Ha-mekorot” (The Sources), in *Sefer Ha-aliya Ha-shniya*, ed. Bracha Habas (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1947), 24.

And according to Nahman Sirkin:

To develop the spirit of the people, to improve its characteristics, to glorify and to protect all the assets it had acquired in its historic life – assets such as language, tradition, ethics, faith, and ways of life [...] The spirit of the people is the sum of all its strengths, attributes, and content, and also of its ethics, tradition, faith, feelings, opinions and morals, the concept of the good, the beautiful, the true – which are culture.²⁴

In practical terms, the creation of culture, or in the language of that period, “a state of *Kultur*,” necessitated the establishment of all the institutions and services that create culture and tell about culture. Thus, for example, the program of Ze’ev Jabotinsky from 1910 declared: “It is necessary to create schools, night classes, kindergartens, playgrounds, Hebrew theaters, textbooks, reading books, scientific books, dictionaries, scientific terminology, maps to delineate the country, maps to portray nature, a university, a technical college, a polytechnic college – and there is no end to the list.”²⁵

Changes in the private sphere were also discussed, as was the ecology of the physical and aesthetic public space. But most important of all was the uniqueness of Palestine-Eretz Israel. Only there could one create and define *Tarbut Moledet* a “culture of the homeland,” that is, create and define all the components of a distinct national culture based on a linkage to a particular territory, its history, its nature, and its landscape.

Building the new society and culture entailed the establishment of a normative system. It also meant planning and realizing several cultural projects in the various areas of the cultural system, including the establishment of an educational network and a curriculum and inventing holidays, ceremonies, and the ingredients of popular culture. Rituals, celebrations, and ceremonies were created and staged for the emerging Jewish community; children’s songs, tunes, and folk stories were written; folk dances were invented as vital ingredients of the “folkway”; and non-official culture consisting of popular literature and entertainment was also created. Cultural institutions and a cultural repertoire that could not exist even within the autonomous culture of a minority society in the Diaspora could be created for the first time in Palestine-Eretz Israel as part of the hegemonic society and even before Jewish society became the majority society. Therefore, the cultural system that was established

²⁴ Nahman Sirkin, “Min ha-huza ha-ohela” (From the Outside into the Tent) in *Kitvei N. Sirkin*, ed. Yehezkel Kaufman and Berl Kazenelson (Tel Aviv, 1939), I, 134–172 (Hebrew).

²⁵ Ze’ev Jabotinsky, “Avoda u-mazav ruah” (Work and Mood) *Hadashot mehaaretz*, October 27, 1919 (Hebrew).

in Palestine-Eretz Israel was the most extensive and comprehensive system the Jewish people ever had. Part of it was established by political and public bodies and part by private cultural entrepreneurs, and it was accepted by the majority of Jewish society.

This system consisted of a range of products of both high culture and folk and popular culture. Many of the components were a continuation of what had already appeared and developed in Europe, others resulted from a revival of Jewish traditional cultural assets that were adopted and adjusted to the needs of the new cultural system, and yet others were invented in Palestine-Eretz Israel. Because of all this, we contend that it is more accurate to describe this culture as a Jewish national-territorial culture than as a secular Jewish culture.

The new Jewish culture of the Jewish community in Palestine-Eretz Israel was often described by its ideologues and those who participated in its construction as Hebrew culture (and occasionally as “Eretz-Israeli culture”); the term Hebrew indicated the central and exclusive status granted in it to the Hebrew language as the distinctive expression of cultural revival and was meant to symbolize the fact that this culture was different from Jewish cultures in the Diaspora (“Diaspora culture”). The term Hebrew culture also signified that this was not an immigrants’ culture but rather a national culture in a historical homeland, a culture that was being created according to models that established its ideals, ideology, and program. No less important was the fact that for the first time a Jewish culture emerged that was not the culture of a minority, and thus, even though it was filled to a very great extent with components imported from other cultures (especially Western culture), it was not a twofold culture.

Contemporary scholarship often tends to emphasize the deviations from the ideals and the ideology, to show that they were not always and fully realized, to point out that many of the components of the old culture were brought to Palestine-Eretz Israel by immigrants, and to argue that even in Palestine-Eretz Israel the culture was stratified and included subcultures. This critical perspective focuses on cultural realities that have been excluded or obliterated by the hegemonic narrative. Drawing attention to the much more complex and diverse cultural reality than the one portrayed by the ideological and propagandistic narrative is of course important. The notion of a single hegemonic culture with no subcultures is false in any discussion of culture. However, one must remember that the hegemonic, multi-layered system of Hebrew culture in Palestine-Eretz Israel was established in a very short period by a society that in 1948 numbered no more than 700,000 Jews, not all of whom shared the ideology of hebraization, and yet succeeded in creating a cultural reality that established a shared and unifying identity.

The culture of the Jews that was created and consolidated in Palestine-Eretz Israel consisted of several seemingly contradictory features, which in fact complemented each other:

- Modernization and secularization;
- Fostering of a homeland culture, that is, of romantic sentiments, symbols, and practices linked to the history, nature, and landscape of Palestine-Eretz Israel and manifested in such aspects as agricultural holidays, excursions, and interest in archaeology;
- Establishment of institutions and organizations that created culture and disseminated it;
- Appropriation of “foreign” values and cultural components, especially European ones, into the cultural system of the Jews;
- The existence of a parallel system of cultural import, which could not always be supervised and censored;
- The coexistence of partial subcultures, such as Orthodox culture or various ethnic cultures; and
- The existence of class subcultures, such as the workers’ culture, bourgeois culture, urban culture, and rural culture.

VIII

The term Hebrew culture referred to the core of the cultural system of the modern Jewish community in Palestine-Eretz Israel, a community which created most of the cultural assets and symbols and forged its unity and identity. A description of this reality requires a separate analysis of each of its components. Thus, for example, one must discuss the debate over the nature of Hebrew literature as opposed to Jewish literature and to clarify what about it was Hebrew rather than Jewish.

The establishment of Israel in 1948 as a Jewish sovereign state created two cultural phenomena. On the one hand, the state had tools with which it could speed up the processes of modernization, fund cultural institutions and in some cases even supervise them, disseminate culture, and in the 1950s foster what is termed “the cult of the state.” On the other hand, the profound changes in the demographic structure and the socio-cultural processes that characterized the newly established state enhanced the status of the cultures that had previously been considered secondary; they were now pushed from the margins towards the center, or into the center itself. Scholars offer differing evaluations of the melting pot policy of the 1950s and the degree of its success. To a great extent, the ideology of the melting pot was replaced by an ideology of multiculturalism. Yet the cultural reality of the Jewish community in Israel – Israeli culture – is

the product of many components, including those that are a continuation of components from the Yishuv period, those that entered it as a result of the Americanization or globalization of the society and its culture, and those connected with traditional Judaism and the emergence of new orthodoxies.

IX

Studies of the development of the cultural reality of the Jews in the past 200 years – of the polemics with regard to culture and the culture wars – are an inseparable part of Jewish historiography; they give it expression and even shape it. The purpose of a history of Jewish culture and of the cultures of the Jews is to map the entirety of Jewish culture, all its expressions and strata, including both its organized and non-organized manifestations, its cultural products and their publics, the various cultural markets and their hierarchical relations, and the contacts between sub-cultures and the hegemonic culture. In all these respects, this dynamic, lively, multifaceted, rich, unifying, and divisive cultural map has neither peer nor precedent in the history of the Jewish people. Worldviews and ideologies will determine what is “Jewish” and what is “Judaism” in this map.

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CHAPTER 25

SEPHARDIC AND MIZRAḤI LITERATURE

NANCY E. BERG

Sephardi and Mizraḥi cultures and traditions have often been seen as synonymous. Whereas there are significant commonalities, the two are distinct. This chapter will delineate the distinctions while also identifying points in common, discussing each separately except for where there is overlap.

THE SEPHARDIC SPHERE

LANGUAGE

Just as Sephardi is a term of some confusion and disagreement, so too is the name of the corresponding language. Sephardi (or Sephardic) refers to the Jews in the Iberian Peninsula, those expelled in 1492 and their descendants. It also refers to the style of prayer, customs, and traditions followed by these Jews. While the term Sephardi has also been used more broadly to include Jews from Arab and Islamic lands – that is, other than Ashkenazi – the term Mizraḥi (lit. Eastern) is considered a more accurate term (see below). And Sephardi, once needing the modification *Sephardi tavor* (lit. “pure Sephardi” i.e., from the Iberian Peninsula), has been – mostly – restored to its specific meaning.

Ladino, also known as Judezmo, Judeo-Spanish, (E)spaniolit, Muestra Spanyol, Djidyó, and variations thereof, was for many years the common tongue of Jews who could trace their ancestry to the Iberian communities. Some scholars reserve the term Ladino to refer more specifically to a word-for-word translation from Hebrew into Spanish.¹ As a calque of Hebrew it retains the syntax and some of the elements of the source language (Hebrew) rather than being a true translation. Over time Ladino has come to mean the family of dialects spoken by Sephardi Jews. What these dialects have in common is a base language of fifteenth-century Castilian;

¹ See for example, David Bunis, “The Language of the Sephardim: A Historical Overview” in *The Sephardi Legacy*, Vol II, ed. Haim Beinart (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1970).