JEWISH HISTORY
A Very Short Introduction
most exciting intellectual pursuit imaginable. That it has remained so to this day is an ongoing testament to the power of Yosef Yerushalmi's example as scholar and teacher. It was his insistence on studying the entire course of Jewish history that has enabled this book.

Introduction

"Why have Jews survived through the ages while other civilizations and religions have come and gone?" Thus begins the online "Ask the Rabbi" Web page sponsored by Chabad, one of the most prominent and active Orthodox groups in the world. The response delivered by Rabbi Moshe Goldman, a Chabad emissary in Canada, is not surprising: "G-d did it and continues to do it."

The rabbi's answer rests on the claim that Jews are God's Chosen People and thus guaranteed a special form of divine protection. This assertion is deeply rooted in Jewish history and figures prominently in the Hebrew Bible and many other traditional Jewish writings. The Book of Genesis reports on the "everlasting covenant" that God forged with Abraham and his descendants. Later the medieval and early modern Jewish mystics referred to the Jewish people as "natzah Yisrael," the eternal Israel that would survive all earthly trials.

This traditional claim does not lend itself to sustained historical inquiry into how exactly the Jews survived. Indeed, we still struggle to understand what explains the endurance of this small people, when so many other larger and more powerful groups—great world empires from the Romans to the Mongols to the Ottomans—have passed from the stage of history.

Complicating the query are two recurrent characteristics in the annals of the Jews. First, throughout history, they have been a
people in movement, beginning with the mythic account of the sojourn of their founding patriarch Abraham from Ur (in present-day Iraq) to the land of Canaan some four thousand years ago. They have never ceased moving throughout their history and have made their ways to all corners of the globe, from Yemen to the Netherlands to Brazil to Australia; in fact, they pioneered the very notion of a “dispersal,” a Greek term invented to describe their dispersed state. One scholar has labeled Jews the classic “Mercurians” in the world, alluding to their constant mobility and resourcefulness in adapting to new settings.

Along with the Jews’ constant motion throughout their long and wide dispersion, there is a second striking feature of their history: they have consistently been disliked. The long history of antisemitism—a modern term applied anachronistically to an old phenomenon—has few peers. For thousands of years, Jews have been subject to stigmatization, marginalization, and full-blown attempts at elimination. Perhaps no group in human history has been regarded with such disdain for so long by so many. What is especially remarkable is the malleability of the phenomenon. Jews have been hated as jealous Christ-killers and godless atheists, rootless cosmopolitans and insular ghetto dwellers, internationalist communists and arch-capitalists.

And yet, they have survived. They have repeatedly defied the odds by overcoming challenge, crisis, and tragedy with new forms of religious, cultural, and political expressions. Tellingly, in the wake of the most sustained attempt to eradicate them during the Holocaust, they have developed two of the largest and, by many measures, most successful communities produced during their long journey: Israel and the United States.

Their resilience has reduced even avowedly secular observers to mystical reverence. The early-twentieth-century historian Simon Dubnow, one of the three towering Jewish historians of the modern age (along with Heinrich Graetz and Salo W. Baron), wrote of the “secret of the existence” of the Jews. Despite his own abandonment of religious belief as an adolescent, he echoed the explanation of traditionalists for whom Jewish survival was a supernatural miracle.

The veil of mystery has inspired many explanations. Apart from the traditional biblical view that Jews are God’s Chosen People, they range from the assertion of Church Fathers in the fourth century that the Jews were preserved, albeit in a debased state, in order to bear witness to the truth of Christianity to Hannah Arendt’s notion in the twentieth century that it was the alliance of Jews with political sovereigns that saved them—until the rise of the Nazis, when it proved to be their undoing. More recently, scholars have argued that it was the premium placed on literacy in the post-Second Temple era that provided Jews with a competitive advantage that enabled them to survive.

Amidst the welter of explanations, this book pursues a different tack, seeking to explain how, rather than why, the Jews have survived. It does so as part of the effort to chronicle, in a very short space, the long history of the Jews, for their very survival is the main drama in that tale. We begin by recalling what evolutionary biologists teach us, namely, that human survival writ large has been enabled by the capacity to respond and adapt to a variety of challenging environments, not just one.

The Jews are an especially illuminating case study of this proposition, having weathered frequent challenges by developing a mechanism that allowed them to adapt to new environments without losing a distinctive sense of cultural self. Ironically, the two factors mentioned above—the constant mobility of Jews and the persistent hostility toward them—have been key components of that adaptive mechanism.

This seems curious, if not delusional. How could it be, for example, that the enmity that Jews have faced throughout their history could preserve them? Drawing on the Roman historian
Tacitus, the seventeenth-century renegade Jewish philosopher Benedictus Spinoza wrote that the stubborn adherence of the ancient Jews to their particular laws led them to separate from their Gentile neighbors. This segregation made them alien and despised in the eyes of the Gentiles. Far from leading to their disappearance, Spinoza argued, it was “Gentile hatred” that preserved the Jews. On his provocative reading, it was not just the external barriers posed by Gentile society that kept the Jews apart. It was also the Jews’ own consciousness of being reviled that fortified their sense of being distinct. This dynamic took on curious new form in the post-Enlightenment era, when Jews began to lose the high degree of faith and commitment to ritual observance of their medieval predecessors. In the absence of those pillars, Gentile enmity—and the organized fight against it—became central modes of Jewish identity. Spinoza’s insight holds true up to today; both antisemitism and the efforts to combat it define how Jews see and define themselves.

But there are obvious constraints on the surprising logic of hatred as a preservative force. When hatred leads to mass murder, as in the Holocaust, then it destroys rather than preserves. But throughout much of their history, Jews were disliked in ways that reinforced their sense of being a distinct people. Seen in isolation, this perspective risks reducing Jewish history to an unrelentingly “lachrymose,” or tearful, view, to borrow the memorable phrase of Salo Baron. But Jewish history is far more than the static tale of antisemitism.

It is also a story of constant motion that kept Jews in the rush on their feet, moving from place to place when the need arose, like a good boxer (of which there were more than a few Jews) who is able to dodge and deflect the full brunt of blows directed against him. The ceaseless mobility of the Jews led to a second key factor in enabling their survival—what we may call in shorthand “assimilation” (otherwise known as “acclimatization”). In contemporary parlance, this word induces panic in Jewish community officials, who point to high intermarriage rates and weakening organizational affiliation as signs of the impending disappearance of the Jews. In historical terms, assimilation refers to the process by which Jews, in making their way to new locales, absorbed the linguistic and cultural norms of their Gentile neighbors—and then shared their own. This peculiar understanding follows the usage of historian Gerson Cohen, who argued in 1966 that assimilation as a means of cultural interaction was not only unavoidable in Jewish history, but also necessary to the survival of the Jews. Without the constant cultural encounters, enacted every day over the course of millennia, Jews would have become fossilized, as the British historian Arnold Toynbee famously and mistakenly claimed they had. In fact, it was the interaction with non-Jews that allowed for the explosive diversity of Jewish culture and the ongoing vitality of its practitioners.

An instructive example of this process is the range of Jewish languages that Jews developed apart from Hebrew, beginning with Aramaic and Greek in antiquity and extending to Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Persian, Judeo-Italian, Judeo-Spanish (Ladino), and Yiddish, among many others. These languages emerged out of the daily exchange that Jews had with Gentile neighbors and the vernacular they spoke. Prior to modern times, Jews typically acquired fluency in the tongues of their host societies, but they still felt a need to create their own encoded version of them, accessible only to other Jews. In most instances, they did so by transcribing the language not in vernacular script but in Hebrew letters, while at the same time adding Hebrew words to the linguistic mix. What resulted was a rich and entwined bilingualism, whereby Jews spoke and wrote both in the vernacular and in the Hebraized cognate. Out of this web emerged great works of cultural production—legal tomes in Aramaic, philosophy in Judeo-Arabic, biblical commentary in Judeo-Spanish, and belles lettres in Yiddish.

This kind of cultural work reflects not only the potential, but also the limits of Jewish “assimilation.” Jews were able to tone their
cultural muscles as they balanced between adaptation to the
broader world and preservation of the borders of their narrower
Jewish community. Maintaining this balance was not simply a
matter of Jewish will. It also depended on a wide range of external
conditions, including, most especially, the persistence of
antisemitism.

It is at this point that the two key factors converge. Assimilation,
understood in the idiosyncratic sense above, ensured ongoing
cultural vitality, allowing Jews to survive for millennia in a variety
of settings beyond their homeland. Antisemitism, meanwhile,
guaranteed that the path of Jews to full integration was frequently
blocked. Unlike as it may seem, these two forces have interacted,
allowing Jews to persist, when many other groups faded.

In following this fascinating story, I have opted not to divide the
book in conventional fashion, namely into chronologically based
chapters. Instead, I have chosen five themes to capture some of
the major animating forces of the Jewish past. Each of these
themes is rendered in the plural; thus, “Culture” is not employed
but rather “Cultures” to reflect the diversity of cultural encounters
of a widely dispersed group in many different venues. The five
themes are meant to be representative but by no means
exhaustive. At the same time, they are intended to be interwoven
and cumulative, as well as occasionally overlapping to reinforce
points of particular import.

Invariably in an undertaking of this sort in which selectivity
and distillation are key, not all major categories of historical
experience that deserve attention—for example, economics—can
be included. It is my hope that, notwithstanding this and other
deficiencies, the reader will gain a rich enough sense of the
flowing currents of the Jewish past to grasp its intrigue and,
even, its marvel.

Chapter 1
Names

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name
would smell as sweet.” This memorable line uttered by Juliet to
Romeo reminds us that people, like the thing we call a rose, have
an essence beyond the names we use for them. One thinks of this
in the case of the Jews who have assumed several names over the
course of their collective life, including but hardly restricted to
the term “Jews.”

Alongside this designation the group was known in antiquity by
a number of other names: Israelites, Hebrews, Judeans, and
Judahites. In later periods, they became subdivided into different
categories with distinct names including Samaritans, Karaites,
Rabbanites, Ashkenazim, Sephardim, and Mizrahim. The shifting
names remind us of the dynamism of the Jewish past. In
appraising the religious tradition that emerged out of it, the great
twentieth-century scholar Gershom Scholem once declared that
Judaism was marked by the fact that it had no single essence to it.
How then might we conjure up a stable image of Jewish history
if the religion that anchors it has no essence? We might conceive
of it as a great and well-excavated archaeological site: accretions of
culture are layered on top of one another, each of which represents
a different spirit of the time. Seen as a whole, the site conveys the
image of a highly sophisticated and evolving civilization.
This image, helpful as it may be, has real limits, for it suggests a single site in which the group was born and reached maturity. But the Jews were, for much of their existence, a diaspora people. Accordingly, we have to modify our guiding image of Jewish history to include multiple sites scattered over time and place, enabling a wide array of cultural expressions but at the same time mandating the cultivation of an ongoing network of communication and mutual aid.

This web of connected sites prompts us to speak not of one unvarying Jewish identity, but rather of connected "identities" that bridge the experience of Jews over time and place. The link between these identities is not mere ancient mythology nor the invention of modern ideologues, imposed, as some have argued, to justify latter-day politics. There are long-standing beliefs, rituals, kinship ties, and an historical consciousness that have lent a deep sense of a common fate and experience to Jews. The task ahead is to understand the different, though connected, ways in which Jews have chosen to identify themselves. In so doing, we can see the continuity and change that add such animating tension to Jewish history.

**Tribe**

In jocular parlance today, Jews often refer to one another as "members of the tribe" (MOTs). The term serves as code to establish an affinity between two people who otherwise bear no visible trace of their Jewishness. To be sure, the absence of discernable markers is a new phenomenon, but the assertion of a Jewish tribal bond has deep historical roots. Indeed, as Jews came into being as a collective thousands of years ago, they, or their precursors, organized themselves according to tribal patterns.

But when exactly did that occur? The difficulty is not merely that the Jews did not announce their entry onto the stage of history with a grand proclamation. Even more confounding, we don't really know when the story begins. The traditional explanation places the starting point sometime around 2000–1900 scn and revolves around the figure of Abraham, the founding patriarch of the Israelite religion.

According to the traditional account, Abraham, or Abram as he was then known, left his home in Ur in southern Mesopotamia for the land of Canaan at God’s behest. Also, the only evidence of Abraham's existence—or for that matter of his heirs, Isaac and Jacob—is in the Hebrew Bible, making it difficult to corroborate.

Scholars have also puzzled over the next major chapter in the received biblical narrative—the story of the flight to Egypt to escape famine in the land of Canaan by the children of Jacob, or Israel, as he was renamed. The children of Israel, the Bible tells us in the Book of Exodus, fell into servitude to Egyptian pharaohs, but were led to liberation by the greatest prophet of the Israelite religion, Moses. It was Moses who decisively separated himself and his followers from the regnant polytheism of the ancient Near East by declaring belief in one God. And it was he, the tradition tells us, who guided his people across the Red Sea into freedom in the Sinai Desert.

But again, we lack basic extra-biblical evidence that could attest to the existence of the Israelites and Moses in Egypt and, more particularly, to their flight to freedom. Even without overwhelming external evidence, the Israelites' tale of Exodus has had deep resonances beyond the Jews, becoming one of the most widely replicated and admired narratives of liberation from oppression.

What we do possess is an important piece of external evidence from the thirteenth century scn that makes explicit reference to "Israel." It is the Merneptah stele, a stone inscription that describes, in verse, the triumph of an Egyptian king, Merneptah, over a number of groups in the land of Canaan. The final line
relates: "Israel is laid waste, his seed is not." It is not clear what battle the stele is describing, but it seems to be referring not to a place name but to an ethnic group. Indeed, we begin to pick up the trail of a group or groups associated with that name in the thirteenth century, when Egyptian imperial control over the land was beginning to wane. Neither a unified social cohort nor an established polity existed at this point, but rather a network of nomadic tribes, which may have been divided according to the sons of Jacob—otherwise known as the *benai Yisra'el*, the children of Israel. (The names of the twelve tribes are Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulon, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Joseph, and Benjamin.)

The Bible is replete with references to the distinct tribes; the Book of Joshua, for example, offers a detailed description of the disparate tribes joining forces to regain the land of Canaan, which God had promised them. Whether they consolidated themselves outside of Canaan or molded their distinct tribal identities within, we do not know. But it is reasonable to assume that between the thirteenth and eleventh centuries BCE, residents could be found in the central mountain region of Canaan who shared a number of key properties that identify them as precursors to today's Jews:

- **Family:** The most basic unit of social organization for the Israelite tribes was the tight-knit family with its own land presided over by the head male figure, father or grandfather, from whom identity was transmitted at this point.

- **Genealogy:** Members of families traced their own histories back several generations and linked their particular stories to the wanderings of the children of Israel. This became the foundation for Israelite historical consciousness.

- **Language:** Israelite tribes of Canaan spoke an indigenous Semitic language that would later be referred to as Yehudit and which we call today Hebrew. The formation of this language reveals the extent to which its speakers belonged to the larger Canaanite cultural world of the day.

Little concrete evidence exists of a fully developed religious system by this point, apart from the Bible. The Book of Exodus makes reference to a portable Ark of the Covenant that the tribes brought with them from Mt. Sinai that contained the Ten Commandments. This terse set of prescriptions would become one of the Israelites' most notable contributions to the world—a moral code that has anchored both religious and political systems ever since. One of the Commandments declared that they should worship no other god than the God of Israel. But when exactly to date the advent of this important development—the rise of the monotheistic faith in a single god—remains an open question. Some scholars trace the idea to the preceding Egyptian period. Others date it centuries later, noting that the tribes continued to worship a variety of local gods such as El, Asherah, and Baal, only gradually developing the conviction in the supreme power of a god known by the letters YHWH. Even at this early stage, we can imagine a process by which the Israelites reformed local practices and ideas with which they were intimately familiar into their own distinctive forms.

Meanwhile, the process of political consolidation of the tribes continued. An important step forward was the introduction of kingship into Israelite life at the end of the eleventh century in the person of Saul. Saul's ascent resulted from the desire for more stable leadership, as well as from a degree of borrowing from surrounding cultures (including the enemy Philistines).

Although some archaeologists have questioned the pace and scale of the next set of developments, it is reasonable to assume that Saul's successors, David and Solomon, took two key steps in the tenth century that would leave an indelible imprint on subsequent Jewish history: the creation by King David of a capital for the Israelite tribes in the city known as Jerusalem; and the construction by his son, Solomon, in the mid-tenth century of a Holy Temple, home to worship of the God of Israel and the Ten Commandments, and presided over by a priestly
class known as the kohanim who oversaw the preeminent ritual act of animal sacrifice. What is less clear—and serves to divide “maximalist” archaeologists from “minimalists”—is whether Jerusalem was the capacious capital of a powerful united kingdom created by David and Solomon or a provincial town of a small principality hovering nervously in the shadow of the stronger Philistines.

Regardless, the Holy Temple became the major religious institution in Israelite and later Jewish life—and a central focus of religious identity; even today, the aspiration to rebuild the Temple remains a feature of Jewish messianic speculation and planning. And yet, the presence of the Temple did not guarantee unity among the tribes. Not long after its erection, the northern tribes rebelled against the rule of Solomon’s son Rehoboam leading to division into two entities, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, with Jerusalem at its center. The tensions between the two kingdoms, drawing in part on old tribal rivalries, created openings for regional powers intent on gaining power over the land of Canaan. The Assyrians attacked and laid waste to the northern kingdom in the late eighth century, followed in the sixth century by the assault of the upstart Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar on Judah. In the midst of that later attack in 587-586 BCE, Jerusalem and the Holy Temple were destroyed.

People of the Book

The assault on Jerusalem upended Israelite life in the city, with thousands of residents being sent into exile in Babylonia. Indeed, the very idea of “exile,” indicating a state of physical and theological displacement (from God), received early and clear expression here. The prophet Jeremiah was particularly sharp in suggesting that the misfortune of the Jews, as they would come to be known in the sixth century BCE, was the result of their own sin in not heeding God’s word.
An important question arises: with their capital city captured and their central religious institution destroyed, how did the exiles manage to survive? What held them together in this moment of crisis? Were it not for the mechanism of cultural adaptation that the exiles developed in Babylonia, they would have been long forgotten to history. This mechanism enabled them to absorb key features of Babylonian—and soon thereafter, Persian—culture such as language, names, dress styles, and culinary habits, as well as mythological and legal influences.

Significantly, their “assimilation” did not prevent the exiles from maintaining a deep connection to their ritual and theological roots. But it did mandate that they reimagine their religious experience beyond the institution of the Holy Temple, which no longer existed. Facing this new challenge, the exiles learned to balance between the degree of integration necessary to survive and adherence to Jewish cultic practices and beliefs. Out of this balancing act came innovation, including, some suggest, regular meetings to read and hear sacred texts on the Sabbath.

In 538 BCE, Cyrus the Persian conquered Babylonia and liberated the exiles. He also permitted the rebuilding of the Temple in 520, a date that inaugurates the Second Temple period in Jewish history. From this point forward, the group once known as Israelites may have been designated as “Jews,” a term drawn from the Greek term “Hebrews” whose origins are in the Hebrew “yehudi.” For those in Jerusalem and its environs, the rebuilt Temple became again an important site of sacrifice overseen by priests. And yet, it was by no means the only such site in Palestine and abroad. As had been the case with the previous Temple, Jews who were unable or even unwilling to come from distant parts to Jerusalem practiced sacrifice in their own locales. Several hundred years later, in the third century, the first evidence emerges of institutions in which a new form of devotion—prayer—appears. These sites where prayer was practiced were called “synagogues” (Greek for assembly).

The Second Temple period abounded with religious innovation of many kinds, including the site and nature of devotion, as well as the evolution of the oral and written traditions that came to be known as the Torah, or the Hebrew Bible. Regarding its origins, a stark divergence exists in perspectives today between traditionalists who believe an incontrovertible fact that the Torah was the product of Moses’s receiving the word of God at Mount Sinai and those who believe it was the result of multiple human authors writing at different junctures in history. The latter view, held by most modern scholars, dates an early version known as the “Torat Moshe” (the Torah of Moses) to the Persian period (6th–5th centuries BCE). The fuller text, it is suggested, was likely not completed until the second century BCE.

At the core of Jewish biblical scripture are the Five Books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy); these books are complemented by nineteen books of prophetic and other writings to round out the Hebrew Bible. The centuries-long process of redaction of the various strands of the various books required extensive study, commentary, and reverence. Only gradually did it gain coherence and the veil of sanctity that envelopes the Bible as sacred scripture. Once it achieved that state, the Hebrew Bible became a, if not the, central pillar of identity for Jews both within and outside the homeland.

At the same time, study of the holy text became a central preoccupation of Jewish culture, confined not only to experts, but also open to and expected of all Jewish men—and, in more recent times, available to women as well. The sacred text became, as one modern observer noted, a “portable fatherland” for the Jews, especially when there was no Temple standing or when Jews lived far away from the Temple. The primacy placed on scriptural study fueled, in turn, a powerful drive toward literacy, chiefly but not exclusively in Jewish languages. This literacy offered Jews a competitive advantage over less literate non-Jews in assuming skilled occupations in urban settings. It also inculcated in them a
certain obsession with textual interpretation that generated many thousands of books—and more broadly, a rich culture of bookishness that would later lend to Jews the moniker "People of the Book." (The term actually was a translation of the Arabic “Ahl al-Kitāb” a name that medieval Muslims used for followers of monotheism who were devoted followers of the “Book,” that is, the Bible.)

The bookishness of the Jews became a sore point for later Zionists, the Jewish nationalists who sought to leave behind the diaspora and return to the Promised Land. They aimed to replace what they saw as the excessively cerebral and passive diaspora Jew with a strong and brave “New Hebrew” rooted in the soil of the homeland. Notwithstanding their effort, the association between Jews and books has been virtually unbreakable. It has not only yielded a high rate of literacy among Jews, but also given rise to a wide range of achievements in the sciences, arts, and literature that has few precedents for a group the size of the Jews. One telling indicator of that range is the fact that Jews, while representing 0.2 percent of the world’s population, have been awarded 22 percent of the Nobel Prizes in the world.

**Diaspora people**

From the time of the Babylonian conquest, Jews increasingly found themselves under the control of rulers beyond their homeland. The arrival of the Greeks in the Middle East, when Alexander the Great conquered the region beginning in 334 BCE, not only introduced a new major culture to the region; it also gave Jews a language to describe their existence outside of Palestine. Instead of “exile,” with all its severe theological connotations, Jews outside the land of Israel dwelt now in the “diaspora,” a less frightened Greek word connoting a scattered population. In the Greek diaspora, Jews became adept at balancing between their religious practices and the culture of their hosts. An illuminating case in point was Philo of Alexandria (25 BCE–50 CE), who mixed his vocation as a philosopher with a deep commitment to Jewish faith and practice. Drawing on both legacies, though writing in Greek, Philo set out to transform Jewish religion from a primal cult with a decidedly human-like God into a sophisticated belief system anchored by the notion of a vastly transcendent divine force. Although recognized today for his skillful integration of Jewish and Hellenistic values, Philo was ignored by the rabbis who emerged after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by Roman forces in 70 CE.

That monumental event is often seen as the decisive beginning of Jewish dispersion lasting until the advent of the modern State of Israel in 1948. In fact, Jews had lived outside the land of Israel for centuries; and contrary to common assumption, they were not summarily dispatched from it in the year 70. By that point, they had developed mechanisms of adaptation that allowed them to shift from society to society, absorbing language, culture, and social habits necessary for survival while preserving their loyalty to Jewish religious law which would come to be known as halakha (the way or path). Of course, not all desired or were able to maintain perfect equipoise; many Jews, over the course of centuries, found it easier to surrender the heavy demands of halakha and embrace the surrounding culture and religion completely.

If the destruction of the Second Temple did not lead to the immediate or massive displacement of Jews, its effect over time was to decentr Jewish life away from the land of Israel even further. Jews mourned the loss of their Temple and articulated the desire to return to the homeland in their daily liturgy. At the same time, they found themselves at an ever greater physical and emotional remove from their homeland. They had been settled in Babylonia and Egypt for centuries. Under the arc of the Roman Empire, which succeeded the Greeks as the overlord of Palestine in the second century BCE, Jews fanned out from the Middle East to Europe, settling in Greece (Macedonia), Spain (Hispania), France (Gaul), and Italy as early as the first century BCE.
There were, of course, exceptions to this rule. Examples included Deborah the Judge, who was reputed to be a courageous political and military leader in the 12th–11th centuries BCE, and the legendary Hannah, who was said to have refused to submit to her Greek persecutors in the second century BCE, choosing the path of martyrdom over apostasy and encouraging her seven sons to do the same. Later in the Middle Ages, women broke into the public domain in various limited ways. In Muslim lands, while largely confined to the home, women nonetheless appeared in court to represent their interests, in some settings, as frequently as men; and they did so in both Muslim and Jewish jurisdictions. Meanwhile, in Christian Europe, women, buoyed by a new ban on polygamy and related matters around 1000 CE, began to assert their rights more forthrightly in the region of northern France and Germany known as Ashkenaz. Not only were they protected against indiscriminate divorce proceedings from their husbands; sources also attest to the fact that they played an active role in various businesses, including money-lending.

These innovations were forged in the midst of the kehilah, the autonomous Jewish communal body, which assumed a particularly developed state in Ashkenaz. Communal life there revolved around scrupulous observance and study of Jewish law; leading scholars such as Rabbenu Gershom, known as “The Light of the Diaspora” and author of the ban on polygamy, endeavored to erect ordinances to assure piety and fairness within the community. The kehilah also had a set of lay leaders known as “the good men of the city” (tze'a ha-‘ir) who regulated the economic life of the community, with a particular desire to safeguard the interests of locals at the expense of out-of-towners.

A key challenge in this setting was how to navigate between the benefits of economic and, to an extent, social interaction with the larger Gentile community and the desire to preserve a measure of separation from it. On one hand, Jews had active commercial ties with Christians, often lived on the same streets, served as physicians to Christian clergy and rulers, and even

2. The Arch of Titus was built on the Via Sacra near the Roman Forum by the Emperor Domitian in honor of his brother, Titus, the general who led the Romans to victory over the Jews in Palestine in 70 CE. This portion of the arch depicts the plundering of the spoils of the Holy Temple. The destruction of the Temple, here celebrated by the Romans, has been a source of bitter sorrow for Jews over the centuries.

It was in the Roman period that an important new criterion of Jewishness emerged. Previously, it had been the father who determined the identity of his children as Jews. From this point forward, it was the mother, whose connection to her progeny could be readily verified via childbirth. For thousands of years until quite recently, Jewish mothers served as the sole validators of the Jewish identity of their children. More widely, women have played an important role as transmitters of Jewish identity throughout history by passing on ritual and social habits to their children in the confines of their homes. That said, women have often been placed in a subordinate status by virtue of the fact that Jewish law exempts them from performing all the ritual commandments incumbent on men. As a result of that distinction, it was men who dominated in the public sphere, whether in the Temple, synagogue, or marketplace.
taught Bible, Hebrew, and other subjects to Christians. On the other hand, a deep undercurrent of hostility between Jews and Christians stemmed back to the late Second Temple period and succeeding centuries. In the Middle Ages, this hostility persisted, but it prevented neither regular contact between the two groups nor the outbreak of periodic acts of violence by Christians against Jews.

One of the chief limiting factors on more persistent and lethal forms of violence was the protection afforded by local rulers through legal charters to the Jews, in which they were guaranteed physical security in exchange for providing important economic functions to the realm (e.g., as tax collectors, money lenders, or liquor purveyors). This arrangement harked back to the ancient doctrine of dina di-malkhuta dina ("the law of the kingdom is the law"), which was attributed to the third century ce. Babylonia sage Mar Samuel; it justified submission to Gentile rule in exchange for autonomy over communal religious affairs. This principle became the foundation of a strategy of accommodation—we might even call it a political theory—that undergirded Jewish life in the diaspora.

This principle was operative not just in Ashkenazic lands, but also in the Jewish communities that came under the rule of the new Muslim faithful as of the seventh century. It was there, under the Islamic crescent, that the largest number of Jews would dwell in the Middle Ages. The scope of Muslim control quickly extended well beyond the Middle East into Europe, initially reaching Spain in 711 ce, where a vibrant interreligious culture took rise—and then later into the Balkans and east central Europe. As a general matter, Muslim hosts bore much less of a theological guilde than their Christian contemporaries. In fact, the status of Jews as "people of the book," meant that they merited protection, although they were to be clearly marked as subordinate to Muslims.

Just how harshly this subordinate status was implemented varied by regime. Take, for example, the case of Maimonides, the great twelfth-century philosopher and jurist from Córdoba, Spain. His home community was overrun by the extremist Almohade invaders, who exiled him and his family to North Africa. There he lived under conditions of severe pressure; it has even been claimed that he was compelled to convert to Islam while under Almohade rule. After moving to North Africa as a teenager, he eventually made his way to Egypt, where his fortunes reversed dramatically. He became a physician to the sultan, as well as a widely respected leader in his community of Fustat, and the most celebrated scholar of his day throughout the Jewish world. To be sure, Maimonides was exceptional, with few peers as an intellectual. But his life reflects a broader trend. Although Muslim rule was not uniformly favorable toward Jews, it was under the reign of Islam that Jewish culture reached some of its grandest attainments—in philosophy, science, and poetry, as well as in the more traditional Jewish pursuit of rabbinic commentary.

Despite these successes, other Jews in the Muslim world were acutely aware of the fact that they remained in exile. Maimonides's near contemporary from Spain, Judah Ha-Levi, who lived in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, was renowned for a series of Hebrew poems that expressed his deep yearning to leave Spain and "return" to the ancient homeland. One of the most poignant of his "Odes to Zion" opens: "My heart is in the east (land of Israel), and I am at the end of the west." While many medieval Jews may have shared this sentiment, at least as a dreamy and far-off end-of-days goal, they had neither the means nor, ultimately, the desire to make the arduous journey to the land of Israel. Ha-Levi was different. He left Spain for Palestine in the final year of his life, dying shortly after arriving from Egypt in the Promised Land. He would become a source of inspiration for Zionists nearly a millennium later, who shared his impulse to abandon what they saw as the indignities of exile.
Nation

From the first to the twentieth centuries, the typical condition of Jews was to live outside of the homeland in diaspora communities of diverse sizes and locations around the world. But how, in a world before instantaneous communication, did Jews in these communities manage to be in touch with one another? What, if anything, held them together? It would be far too simple to say that Jews had a coherent and fixed sense of themselves as a unified nation throughout their history.

At the same time, it is important to note that Jews internalized the idea that they had been chosen by God to become, as the Bible declared, a "great" or "holy nation"; ironically, the biblical word for "nation" is the same as the later term for a non-Jew, "goy." By the end of the Second Temple era and especially after the year 70, the distinction between Jews and Gentiles became sharp. The Jews' sense of difference from Gentiles was animated by the belief that they had a unique relationship to God, as well as a strong shared fate with their co-religionists. The canonical text of rabbinic Judaism, the Talmud, institutionalized this principle by declaring that "all Israel are responsible for one another:"

This sense of collective responsibility existed within individual communities of Jews, particularly when they faced hostility or violence from their non-Jewish hosts. But it also had a life beyond the local community in the feeling of empathy and concern that Jews had for the well-being of other Jews near and far. Prior to modern times, it was common for Jews from a given community to welcome Jewish visitors for the Sabbath, providing them with lodging, kosher food, and a prayer quorum.

That said, due to limitations of both transportation and communication, it was uncommon for Jews to have frequent contact with other Jews from distant sites until the twentieth century. In lieu of direct physical contact, there was a vibrant epistolary world in medieval times in which Jews corresponded with other Jews about business or other matters, frequently using Hebrew, which was their written, though not spoken, common language. Within that world of letters, both individuals and communities often turned to rabbinic luminaries beyond their region for elucidation of questions of Jewish law. For example, the Geonim, leaders of the prestigious Talmudic academies in Babylonia from the seventh to the eleventh centuries, received written queries from Jews in neighboring countries and answered in the form of responsa that re-posed the questions and provided detailed answers. In this way, the Geonim reached beyond Babylonia to create a wider transnational community united by a shared commitment to Jewish law and values. Reflecting his status as the most prominent Jewish figure of his day, Maimonides played a similar role, entertaining questions from around the Middle East and Europe through which he provided guidance on important legal issues. He also provided emotional support to communities in times of distress, as he did in his Epistle to Yemen (1172) in which he expressed deep concern over the threat of forced apostasy in that country. Abandoning his usual reserve, Maimonides consoled the Jews of Yemen by suggesting that this threat was an indication of imminent messianic redemption.

Concern for fellow Jews in need was a pillar of the collective identity of Jews throughout much of their history, along with a steadfast commitment to halakhic observance, belief in their unique relationship with God, and hope for messianic redemption in the land of Israel. With the advent of the modern period, Jews demonstrated a new capacity to interact with and offer assistance to fellow Jews beyond their own communities. For example, in 1744, European Jews worked to overcome the expulsion order of Jews from Prague issued by Habsburg empress Maria Theresa. In 1840, European and American Jews led by Englishman Moses Montefiore intervened to prevent further assaults against Jews falsely accused of ritual murder in Damascus. This latter episode paved the way for the creation in 1860 of the Paris-based Alliance
Israelite Universelle (AIU), one of the most important international Jewish aid organizations to emerge in this period.

The Hebrew name for the AIU was "Kol Yisrael Haverim"—all of Israel are comrades; it reminds us that throughout much of their history, Jews referred to themselves as "Israel," denoting not the territory but a widely dispersed though singular people. It was in the nineteenth century that Jews came to identify themselves quite explicitly as a nation, akin to the many groups in Europe who asserted their own distinct historical paths and claims to national sovereignty at that time. An early proponent was the nineteenth-century Galician thinker Naehman Krochmal, who emphasized that the Jewish nation was pulled above the normal cycles of history by a "new and revitalizing spirit."

By the end of the nineteenth century, references to the Jews as a nation were common, and Jewish nationalism had developed many ideological variants. A major line of distinction was between the Zionists, for whom the Jewish nation must realize its right to dwell in its homeland (the land of Israel, or Palestine), and the Diasporists, for whom the Jewish nation must receive the right to cultural autonomy in the diaspora. Each group had its own political objectives: whereas Zionist Theodor Herzl expounded the ideal of a Jewish nation-state, the Autonomist Simon Dubnow agitated for the protection of the Jewish nation under the framework of a sovereign state. The common denominator to both camps was the belief that Jews had a unique national culture and history of which to be proud. Indeed, Jewish nationalists, and particularly Zionists, sought to instill a strong sense of group honor in the face of the menacing modern forces of antisemitism and assimilation. In response, Zionists grew increasingly committed in the 1930s to their plan to establish a Jewish state in Palestine as a haven of refuge.

In this same period, ill-disposed Gentiles began to amplify the claim they had been making for decades that Jews were an alien group incapable of maintaining loyalty to their host countries. They included Adolf Hitler, the decommissioned Austrian-born German soldier who began to propagate his toxic Nazi ideology focused on the desire to rid the world of Jews.

Race

At the heart of Hitler's anti-Jewish ideology was the criterion of race. In his worldview, Germans belonged to the superior Aryans whose purity was endangered by the Jews, a subhuman race. Nazis did not make distinctions; Jews of every imaginable place of origin, religious affiliation, and political ideology were cast as inescapably inferior.

This racial project drew upon decades of demeaning imagery and quasi-scientific claims associated with the modern phenomenon of antisemitism. Although hatred of Jews had existed in many forms prior to the modern age, the term antisemitism was coined by journalist Wilhelm Marr in the 1870s in Germany, a milieu marked by serious economic, social, and political instability. The new self-designated antisemites saw the Jews as a lurking danger, but not because of their religious beliefs or their peculiar dress, linguistic, or dietary practices. On the contrary, Jews had assimilated into Germany society, shedding visible signs of difference and even choosing to convert to Christianity in sizeable numbers. At that point, they could enter undetected into any corner of German national life, contaminating all that they touched with their racial inferiority.

Previous forms of anti-Jewish expression focused on the radical external differences of the Jew. From the twelfth century, Christian culture in Europe developed a large corpus of visual images of Jews, often attributing to them negative physical characteristics (devil-like, foul-smelling, unhygienic, possessing horns and tails, menstruating males) that issued from their status as alleged killers of Jesus Christ.
Somewhat later, in early modern Spain, former Jews who had converted to Christianity in the waves of mass conversion over the course of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries faced “purity of blood” statutes introduced in the city of Toledo in 1449. The intent of these statutes was to separate “Old Christians” from “New Christians” (i.e., converted Jews), who were rendered ineligible for public office.

This impulse to distinguish people based on blood anticipated a key tenet of modern racialist discourse. Blood came to be seen as a determinant of racial purity in nineteenth-century debates about the evolution of humans. Alongside Charles Darwin’s iconic *On the Origin of Species* (1859), this debate included those who were intent on establishing fixed racial hierarchies, such as the German composer Richard Wagner in *Judaism in Music* (1850) and the French diplomat Arthur de Gobineau in *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853–1855).

While Jews were often targeted in this new discourse, they also acquired fluency in the idiom of racialism, which was an ironic reflection of the extent of their integration into European society. Jewish scholars in the early twentieth century, such as Elias Auerbach, Maurice Fishberg, Arthur Ruppin, and Ignaz Zollschen, engaged in the study of anthropology, statistics, physiognomy, and phrenology (measurements of the skull) much as their non-Jewish contemporaries did. They had twin goals: to bring glory to the Jewish race and to elevate the study of race to the rank of a legitimate scientific discipline.

Beyond these narrow circles, Jews in Europe and North America frequently invoked the language of race and blood when describing themselves. Their invocation, even though intended to honor Jews, strikes an unsettling note. After all, it was race—and more particularly, the assertion that Jews were an inferior race—that drove the Nazi campaign to annihilate them. Hitler formalized the racial distinctions between Aryans and Jews at a Nazi Party meeting in Nuremberg in 1935, which produced a highly detailed scheme of racial classification that became a platform for mass murder.

In light of this history, one approaches claims of racial or biological characteristics of a given group with trepidation. And yet, the dramatic advances in understanding the human genome over the past half century have prompted scientists, often Jewish themselves, to aver that Jews possess deeply rooted genetic affinities that distinguish them from other groups. These unique properties lead, they claim, to a Jewish proclivity not only toward certain kinds of mental and physical ailments, but also toward a higher-than-average IQ. One of the most prominent researchers of Jewish genetics today, Harry Ostrer, builds on the work of the early-twentieth-century Jewish racial scientists in his book *Legacy: A Genetic History of the Jewish People*, especially in concluding that the “evidence for biological Jewishness has become incontrovertible.” Expanding on this claim, some scholars have argued that Jewish genes can be found among various unlikely groups around the globe, including the Luba tribe in southern Africa. Not surprisingly, the work of Ostrer and like-minded colleagues has generated stiff criticism that disputes the notion of a shared Jewish genetic origin.

Most Jews in the world, mindful of the Holocaust, would probably eschew use of race or biology in defining themselves. They would likely acknowledge an enduring, though often unarticulated, sense of connection to fellow Jews, triggered by past memories, particularly of trying events. They might even speak colloquially and unscientifically of a Jewish “gene,” for example, when expressing a measure of pride at the high percentage of Jewish Nobel laureates.

That said, variations abound among Jews in defining themselves. Jews in Israel, the largest body in the world, tend to identify themselves with the state of which they are citizens.
United States, the second largest group in the world, tend to identify on a different basis. Whereas earlier generations saw themselves as Jews by religion, a study by the Pew Research Center in 2013 reveals that more than 60 percent of American Jews today identify principally with their shared "ancestry or culture."

These most recent attempts at self-identification recall for us two related points. First, Jewish identity, like Jewish history itself, has never been a static proposition; from their humble desert origins, Jews have continually reimagined and renamed themselves—and been renamed by others—in response to shifting historical circumstances. And second, despite the constant change in their modes and names of self-identification, Jews have managed to hold on to a shared sense of history and fate that finds few parallels in history.

Chapter 2
Numbers

If measured in chronological terms, Jews are the Methuselah of peoples, like the biblical figure who was said to have lived to the age of 969. If measured in demographic terms, however, they are a minuscule group that barely registers. As of 2015, it was estimated that there were some 14 million Jews, amounting to .2 percent of the world's population. Although Jews have been around for thousands of years, they have the same number of members as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), which was founded in the nineteenth century. Their survival may well be impressive, but the fact that they have so few members calls out for explanation. Why didn't they accumulate a much larger population?

The twin factors that help explain the Jews' survival—antisemitism and assimilation—have also served as constraints on their growth. Over the course of millennia, Jews married into, converted to, and joined other groups, sometimes through coercion and sometimes not, to the point of disappearance. At the same time, they have been subjected to persecution, expulsion, and violence, at times murderous, that diminished their numbers. Indeed, shortly after reaching their greatest demographic heights, in 1939, their numbers were tragically
reduced by the genocidal Nazi assault from approximately 17 million to 11 million.

Today's world Jewish population overwhelmingly resides in two centers: Israel, with more than 6 million Jews, and the United States, with a figure that is usually estimated at around 5.5 million, but has been extended by some demographers to more than 9 million people. The wide disparity in calculating the American Jewish population centers on the differing ways that scholars answer the question of "who is a Jew?" For some, the traditional rabbinic criterion of matrilineal descent (that is, coming from the mother) is used, whereas for others, all those in a household with at least one self-identifying Jew are considered Jewish. Thus, the latter figure includes children of a non-Jewish mother and a Jewish father. An important shift in the definition of Jewish identity occurred in 1983, when the Reform branch of North American Judaism, the most rurally liberal of the three main denominations (along with Orthodox and Conservative), accepted patrilineal descent as a criterion of Jewishness. This opened up new fissures with the state-sponsored Chief Rabbinate in Israel, which held fiercely to the standard of matrilineality. It also opened up broader divisions between American Jews and the State of Israel over whether those converted to Judaism by Reform—or, for that matter, Conservative—rabbi should be considered Jews under Israel's "Law of Return," which grants an expedited path to citizenship to Jews. Within Israel itself, debates have been vigorous about the status of hundreds of thousands of new immigrants over the past three decades or so—Ethiopians and Russians who moved to Israel but were not considered Jews according to the Chief Rabbinate. These debates recall once again the dynamic nature of Jewish identity, so variable because of the constant movement of Jews from locale to locale. In the modern era, movement across national borders has become ever easier and more frequent, leading to new forms of Jewish identity, shifting centers of demographic concentration, and recurrent questions about "who is a Jew?"

How many Israelites were there?

The challenge of determining how many Jews there were in antiquity is a familiar one. For certain formative periods, the only explicit references come from the Bible. Most famously, the Book of Exodus speaks of "about six hundred thousand (Israelite) men on foot, besides women and children," who fled Egypt and wandered in the Sinai Desert. Assuming a minimal family size of four at that time, that would put the number of Israelites in the fourteenth century BCE at close to 2.5 million. Modern scholars who were engaged in historical demography cast grave doubt on such a high figure, pointing out, among other problems, that it was highly improbable that that number of people could have crossed the Red Sea in the manner described in the Bible.

The Bible actually abounds with censuses, often of soldiers. The Book of Samuel (II Samuel 24:9) identifies 1.3 million Israelite and Judean soldiers in the tenth century BCE, which would yield a Jewish population of more than 5 million (out of a world population estimated at between 50 and 100 million). This too seems far beyond the realm of the possible. A more modest estimate suggests that about 600,000 residents lived in the kingdoms of Judah and Israel in 722 BCE, in the midst of the Assyrian invasion that depopulated most of the northern kingdom and a fair bit of the southern. At the time of the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the First Temple in 586, Judah may have counted 150,000 residents. Accounts of how many residents were sent into exile in Babylonia diverge. The Book of Jeremiah (53: 28–30) writes of 4,500 men, making for an estimated total of 18,000; meanwhile, the Second Book of Kings refers to 8,000 to 10,000 men, for a total population of 40,000.

Such variations render the counting of heads in the Bible a highly imprecise proposition. Nonetheless, some number of thousands, and likely tens of thousands, of residents of Judah were settled in Babylonia in 586, where they developed new rituals that allowed
them to survive the absence of the Temple. In fact, because of their rapid absorption of Babylonian culture, only a minority of the exiles opted to return to Jerusalem when afforded the opportunity by Cyrus the Great in 538 BCE.

The reconstituted Jewish community in the land of Israel grew at a relatively slow pace, at least until the Hasmonean—or Maccabean—Revolt began in 167 BCE. This rebellion of Jewish pietists against Greek rule led to the formation of a Jewish state in 140 BCE that was distinguished by its appetite for territorial expansion, pushing the country's boundaries to those in the days of Solomon's united kingdom. In the course of their expansion, the Hasmoneans encountered native populations whom they forcibly converted to Judaism, especially the southern Idumean tribe. Ironically, out of the Idumean world came the Jewish king Herod, who allied himself with the new Roman overlords of Palestine in 37 BCE and acted with brutality toward his fellow Jewish subjects.

This last stage of Second Temple history was unique in the annals of the Jews, especially the Hasmonean practice of forced conversion. Thereafter, however, the rabbis, in response to the rise of Christianity, adopted a skeptical view of conversion; they now insisted on ascertaining the sincerity of the prospects' desires to join Judaism, as well as on warning them against the risks of belonging to a small and often persecuted people. In related and characteristic fashion, they rewrote the history of the Hasmonean revolt through the holiday of Hanukkah, transforming it from a glorious example of military triumph into a celebration of a religious miracle.

Jews and cities

The Hasmonean practice of conversion expanded the Jewish population of the kingdom significantly during an eighty-year reign that ended with the Roman conquest of Palestine in 63 BCE. The capital, Jerusalem, grew rapidly as the city gained new stature as a bustling urban environment.

Because of the location of the Holy Temple, Jerusalem held a special place in Jewish historical memory. But it was hardly the only urban setting in which Jews chose to live. Already in antiquity, Jews had developed a romance with cities, whose size offered them a range of religious, economic, and social opportunities that smaller rural locales did not. In the Middle Ages, Jews played an important role as agents sent by host rulers to establish new urban centers in regions that came under their control. The romance continued well into the modern age, during which Jews have exhibited a hyper-urban tendency, making their way to major cities both to escape from and to affirm their connection to fellow Jews. The proclivity of Jews for cities was grounded in a mix of factors: the presence of diverse commercial opportunities, the sense of cultural dynamism, the possibility for fleet movement, and the ability to maintain a measure of anonymity in the midst of the masses. Some of these same qualities raised the ire of antisemites in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, who claimed that Jews were rootless urban cosmopolitans unmoored from a real connection to the land.

It was in the city that Jews achieved their greatest cultural attainments, as individuals and as a group. In 331 BCE, Alexander the Great established the Egyptian city of Alexandria, which became the world center of Hellenistic culture. It was also the site of the largest Jewish urban concentration in the world in antiquity; estimates range from 500,000 to 1 million Jewish residents in the first century CE. Alexandria was not only significant in demographic terms. It was also a site in which currents of cultural influence flowed in multiple directions. Jews were deeply drawn to Greek culture of the day, from philosophy to modes of recreation. At the same time, Greek citizens of the city were drawn to elements of Judaism, with some going so far as to observe the Sabbath and keep kosher; they were known in their day as "God-fearers." Out of this exchange emerged an amalgam of Hellenistic and Jewish cultures that left a deep imprint on members of both groups.
Meanwhile, at the behest of the Roman Empire, Jews commenced a migratory movement westward from the Middle East to Europe that continued over the first millennium of the Common Era. A particularly notable community of Jews arose in the imperial capital of Rome. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus writes of a delegation of 8,000 Roman Jews—out of a likely total Jewish population of 40,000—who received an audience with the Emperor Augustus in 4 CE.

Josephus also offered highly detailed accounts of Jewish history and demography in Palestine during the first century when Jews rose up against Roman rule and were crushed in the Great Revolt (66–70 CE). Jerusalem, as the site of the Second Holy Temple, had grown dramatically since Hasmonean times, boasting a Jewish population of perhaps a half million out of an overall population in Palestine that ranged between 1 and 2.5 million. Josephus reported that the Great Revolt generated 1.1 million fatalities (mainly Jewish), an unrealistically high figure that nonetheless captures the sense of devastation in human terms that accompanied the destruction of the Second Temple. The denouement of the revolt against Roman rule brought to an end the period of demographic growth that began with another rebellion, the Hasmonean. Estimates suggest that the global Jewish population at this time was between 4 and 8 million (with the Roman Empire estimated at 50 million people), a range that indicates both the scale of the Jewish population and the imprecision of the methods of reconstruction.

Still, a recurrent question attends the destruction of the Holy Temple and the fall of Jerusalem. What were the immediate effects? The year 70 is often seen, and with good reasons, as an epochal turning point in Jewish history, signaling the passage from a sovereign, Temple-bound Judaism to a diasporic, rabbinic Judaism. And yet, demographic change did not occur overnight. Jerusalem invariably declined as a religious and political center. But this did not portend the end of a Jewish presence in Palestine or a massive dispersion of the Jewish population. The coastal city of Yavneh became the new center of power, where the new rabbinic leaders of post-Temple Jewish life took center stage. Scholars debate whether an exalted high court and legislative body known as the Sanhedrin also arose in Yavneh or was more of an aspirational dream of rabbis.

Just as the Temple’s destruction did not end a Jewish presence in Palestine, neither did it create the Jewish diaspora. Communities had been developing outside of the land of Israel for centuries, especially in the Middle East. New communities now took rise in Asia Minor, Greece, and North Africa, as well as in Europe. To be sure, the demise of the Temple constituted an extraordinary challenge to Jews of this period, inducing mourning and a sense of entering exile once again. But Jews had already developed the capacity to adapt to new conditions in ways that permitted their survival after 70.

Jews under Islam and Christianity in the Middle Ages

There is no clear boundary separating antiquity from the medieval period of Jewish history. One noteworthy source of distinction is that the Jewish population declined precipitously from around 1 CE to 1500 CE; the decline, which may have reduced the Jewish population from 4.5 million to 1 million people, was due to a mix of factors: disease, war, mass persecution, and forced conversion.

Even with that decline, two key events in world history left a profound imprint on the evolution of Jewish history in late antiquity into the Middle Ages. First was the rise of Christianity, a direct outgrowth of the fractious world of Second Temple Judaism in the first century CE. The close family relationship between Judaism and Christianity led initially to porous boundaries between followers of the two in Palestine and neighboring countries, but later to sharply drawn lines of
demarcation. Another key development in the relationship was the decision by the Roman emperor Constantine to convert to Christianity and declare it a tolerated religion in 312–313 CE. At that point, the growing theological animosity with Judaism became official imperial policy. What followed were centuries of tense relationships among Jews, Christian rulers, priests, and the general populace, with real consequences for Jewish life and demographics.

The second key event was the rise, in the first third of the seventh century CE, of Islam. Similar to the case of Constantine, the fledgling Islamic movement both married religious and political interests and sought new adherents with great zeal. As part of its extraordinarily rapid expansion, the new empire conquered Palestine and Jerusalem in the late 630s CE, building in that city two of Islam’s holiest sites: the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. From this point forward, Jews became—as they would remain throughout the Middle Ages—a small minority subject to the rule of competing monotheistic regimes, Christianity in the West and Islam in the East.

From the seventh century, the overwhelming majority of the Jewish world, some estimates are as high as 90 percent, resided in Muslim lands. An important early center of Jewish life under Islam was Spain, where Muslim rulers liberated Jews in the early eighth century from the oppressive reign of the prior Visigothic rulers and encouraged them to participate in a wide range of cultural and scientific pursuits alongside their non-Jewish contemporaries. Spain was known in Hebrew as Sepharad, a place name drawn from the biblical Book of Obadiah (1:20); Jews of Spanish origin came to be known as Sephardim, a group that served as a cultural foil to Ashkenazim in the medieval period. In the High Middle Ages, the Jews of Spain evolved into the most affluent, culturally developed, and populous community in the world, even after Christians claimed control of the Iberian Peninsula in the centuries-long reconquista that reached its culmination in 1492. In that fateful year, when the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella issued their infamous Edict of Expulsion, anywhere between 80,000 to 300,000 Jews resided in the country, alongside a converso population likely in the tens of thousands that had converted from Judaism, often forcibly, after a wave of violence broke out in 1391.

Even as their numbers declined and they constituted a smaller percentage of the total population, Jews continued their romance with the city throughout medieval times. In both Islamic and Christian settings, cities were key centers of business and trade, and Jews played an important role in settling and developing cities from Europe to the Middle East, and even extending to China, where Jews established a large community in the Silk Route entrepôt of Kaifeng.

One especially notable urban setting was Baghdad, the city created anew in 762 CE by the Abbasid Empire, newly victorious over the Umayyads. With the Abbasids intent on creating a new capital, the city developed at a blazing pace, growing into perhaps the largest city in the world with between 1 and 2 million residents by 900. Jews, for their part, had a long history in the home country, Babylonia (today’s Iraq), dating back to the destruction of the First Temple. Over the course of centuries, they had developed major academies of Jewish learning, most famously, in Sura and Pumbedita, presided over by the religious authorities known as Geonim. And they joined in the vibrant cultural and economic life of the new capital of Baghdad. The intrepid Jewish traveler, Benjamin of Tudela wrote in 1168 that “there were 40,000 Jews (in Baghdad) and they dwell in security, prosperity, and honor under the Caliph.”

Benjamin’s travelogue, the product of his decade-long journey throughout Europe and the Middle East, yielded detailed accounts not only of Baghdad, but also of Jewish urban centers in Spain, France, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Palestine, Egypt, and Babylonia.
Jews were found in other parts of the world where Benjamin may not have gone, though about which he wrote: India and China as well as Persia, Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula, and North Africa.

Benjamin concluded his travelogue with an idealized portrait of Jews in northern France and Rhineland Germany that may or may not have reflected an actual encounter. In any event, it was in this part of Europe that, according to most scholars, Ashkenazic Jewry originated. It is somewhat mysterious why the term "Ashkenaz," which is found in a number of places in the Bible (Genesis 10: 3, 1 Chronicles 1: 6), came to refer to this region. So too is the precise path of Jews to this region of Europe. In all likelihood, the forebears of medieval Ashkenazim began their path in the ancient Middle East, most likely Palestine (but perhaps also Babylonia), journeying over the course of a millennium through North Africa and Italy before ascending to Germany.

A number of recent scholarly theories about the origins of Ashkenazic Jewry challenge or complicate this account. One of them argues controversially that eastern European Ashkenazic Jews did not have their origins in the Rhineland region, but rather emigrated from the Khazars, a Turkic people from the northern Caucasus area. This iconoclastic view has not gained widespread support among scholars. But the traditional understanding of Ashkenazi origins has been altered by recent genetic research, whose main aim is to identify diseases common to Ashkenazi Jews. On the basis of their analysis, genetic researchers have formulated the rather startling thesis that while Ashkenazic males likely derived from the Middle East, Ashkenazi women came from Europe. This suggests that Jewish men migrated to Europe where they married local women who were not born Jewish but converted and became absorbed into Judaism over time. It was the resulting unions, one may surmise, that created small communities of Jews who lived in close proximity to Christian neighbors throughout the Rhineland region. Often they lived in relative stability with the non-Jewish population, coming to know the language of the land and sharing with Christians a knowledge of each other's customs. These communities encouraged a robust commercial life in which Jews traded with fellow Jews and non-Jews alike; they also placed a great deal of emphasis on supporting outstanding religious institutions and scholars in their midst.

The high reputation of Ashkenazic rabbinic culture stood in telling contrast to the low population numbers of the community. Some estimate that at the beginning of the fourteenth century, 450,000 Jews lived in western, central, and eastern Europe out of a total European population of 44 million. A more recent estimate is dramatically lower, suggesting a northern European Jewish population of 25,000. Notwithstanding this sharp divergence, there is no doubt that Jews experienced a significant decline in population in the passage from the ancient to medieval periods.

The relative stability of daily life for Jews in Ashkenaz was undone on three notable occasions in the Middle Ages. First, in the year 1096, European Christians heeded the call of Pope Urban II to liberate Palestine from the hands of the Muslim infidels. On their way to the Holy Land, the Crusaders encountered Rhineland Jewish communities and, without Church warrant, set about to destroy those whom they held responsible for the crime oficide (the murder of Jesus). A number of Jewish communities (Speyer, Worms, and Mainz) were destroyed, and perhaps as many as thousands of Jews lost their lives. And yet owing to their resilience and the support of local officials, Jews were able to reconstitute their communities relatively quickly.

Second, in 1290, the first act of mass expulsion against the Jews of medieval Europe was executed by King Edward I of England, to be followed by expulsions from France in the fourteenth century and culminating in the sweeping expulsion of the Jews from Spain.
in 1492. This attempt to rid European countries of their Jews took place against a backdrop of intensified anti-Jewish expression and imagery in popular Christianity, even though the wave of expulsions did not succeed in putting an end to Jewish life in Europe.

Related to the trend of expulsion was a third event, the “Black Plague” of the 1340s, the devastating contagion that killed tens of millions of people, diminishing Europe’s population by as much as 50 percent. Jews were not only among the victims of the plague. They were also falsely accused of spreading the plague by various means, including by poisoning wells.

To be sure, not all Christians desired to remove Jews from their midst. And yet, these three developments took their toll on European Jews, forcing them to hone their ability to rebound from crisis. At times, they returned to their erstwhile homes; at other times, they moved from danger zones to safer environs. In the wake of the Black Death, Ashkenazic Jews pushed eastward into Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine. It is this large region that would become the heartland of a pious, Yiddish-speaking population, growing from thousands of Jews in the fourteenth century to more than 6 million in 1900 and making it by that point the largest Jewish community in the world several times over. This trajectory is the reverse of the path followed by Jews under Islam, who were a vast majority of the total Jewish population in the Middle Ages but a small minority by the twentieth century.

The Spanish Expulsion and its ripples

One of the great disruptions experienced by Jews prior to the modern age occurred in Spain with the Edict of Expulsion in 1492. Since the capture of Spain by the Umayyad regime in 711, Christians sought to regain control over the Iberian Peninsula in a sustained effort called the reconquista (reconquest). The culmination of this effort came nearly eight centuries later in 1492, when the last Muslim forces were vanquished at Granada and the Jews were forced to leave. The edict of expulsion tore asunder the established Spanish-Jewish community, severing the groups of conversos from the unconverted Jews with whom they had been living in a tense equilibrium for a hundred years.

A substantial number of Jews opted not to leave their native country and chose to convert to Catholicism. For those who did choose to leave, it was an act akin to the destruction of the Second Temple, as if they had entered a second exodus. And yet, the sense of despair did not prevent a large number of Jews from taking leave and creating a new Sephardic diaspora. Initially, the largest group of exiles, perhaps 25,000, made their way to neighboring Portugal, where they stayed until the Portuguese king, son-in-law of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, converted the Jews in 1497. Propelled to search for pockets of religious freedom, the Spanish exiles made their way to various corners of the Muslim Ottoman Empire, including Constantinople, Salonika, and Sarajevo. By the mid-sixteenth century, Constantinople had 50,000 Jews, a mix of Spanish exiles, native Jews known as Romanic, Italians, and Ashkenazim who were organized into scores of religious communities according to their cities of origin. Spanish exiles also made their way to the northern Palestinian city of Safed, which they transformed into the most populous city in Palestine (with some 7,000 Jews). It was in Safed that they played a leading role in developing a powerful new form of Jewish mysticism known as Lurianic Kabbalah, which was then exported westward to Europe by emissaries.

If Ottoman lands became the center of a new eastern Sephardi diaspora, Christian Europe became the home of a western dispersion. Spanish exiles, as well as conversos who wanted to end the duplicity of their existence as outward Christians, made their way in the fifteenth century to Italy, France, England, Germany, and the Low Countries. Insofar as some of these
countries had previously expelled their Jews, the new arrivals set
about gingerly, revealing very gradually their Jewish origins and
customs in cities from Venice to London. Some of these settings
proved more tolerant than others, especially those that had fallen
under the arc of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation,
whose guiding motto of Sola Scriptura indicated a renewed
appreciation for the Bible, the Hebrew language, and, in some
cases, Jews themselves.

One such Protestant setting was the Dutch capital of
Amsterdam. It was there that Spanish exiles made their way in
the sixteenth century, creating a rich cultural and commercial
center. In fact, it was from Amsterdam that Jewish
representatives of the Dutch West Indies Company ventured
forth to the Americas, landing in Recife, Brazil, in the 1630s
and creating there a community of several thousand souls.

Sephardic Jews of Dutch origin would go on to establish
communities over the course of the seventeenth century in
Dutch Guiana (present-day Suriname) and Curaçao, as well as
in Charleston, South Carolina, New Amsterdam (New York),
and Newport, Rhode Island.

The long reach of the Sephardi diaspora enabled wide-ranging
trade in goods, ideas, and even religious aberrations. In the last
third of the seventeenth century, a young Jew born in the eastern
Sephardi city of Izmir, Turkey, galvanized the Jewish world with
claims that he was the messiah. Hundreds of thousands of Jews
joined together in the fervent hope that this messianic figure,
Shabtai Zevi, would transport them from their homes in exile to
the homeland in the Land of Israel. When the Ottoman Sultan
arrested him in 1666 and gave him the choice between conversion
dead, Shabtai Zevi converted to Islam. For a small number
of his followers, his conversion did not mean the end of the
messianic dream; rather, it required following the leader into
Islam, where they developed a curious amalgam of Muslim and
Jewish practices. (Traces of this group, the Dönmez, can be found
even today in the Republic of Turkey.) For the majority of
Shabtai Zevi’s excited followers, his conversion to Islam meant
the crushing end of their hopes of overcoming the indignity
of exile.

Some scholars have suggested a link between the anti-
establishment nature of Shabtai Zevi’s movement and the
replacement and murder of tens of thousands of eastern
European Jews in Ukraine less than twenty years earlier, during
the Chmielnicki massacres (1648–1649). Jews had been sent by
Polish Catholic authorities to settle and establish commercial
outposts in Ukraine. They were received with hostility by local
Ukrainian Orthodox tribesmen, who resented both their presence
as Jews and the intrusion of Catholic Poland onto their lands. The
Cossack leader, Bogdan Chmielnicki, led an uprising directed
against Poland that unleashed massive violence against nearby
Jews, as powerfully described by a contemporaneous Jew, Nathan
Hanover, in Yevev mutsulah (Abyss of despair). Estimates are that
between 20,000 to 100,000 Jews were murdered, a stunning loss
that concluded the centuries-long period of growth and tranquility
for Jews in eastern Europe.

While the connection between the Chmielnicki massacres and
Shabtai Zevi cannot be proved, it is clear that these two events not
only left behind tattered hopes for redemption, but also paved the
way for novel forms of spiritual and cultural expression that defied
the old order of the rabbis. Chief among these new forms was the
popular pietist movement known as Hasidism that surfaced in the
eighteenth century and drew hundreds of thousands of adherents
in the nineteenth. Rooted in the principles of Lurianic Kabbalah
and opposed to the elitism of the traditional rabbinic culture of
eastern Europe, Hasidism had a powerful vitalizing impact that
continues to this day.

By the time of Hasidism’s first appearance, even with the losses
from the Chmielnicki massacres, the pendulum of demographic
balance had swung from the Islamic East to Christian eastern Europe. In 1700, the largest number of Jews in the world, more than a half million out of 1.1 million, lived in eastern Europe. From this point forward, the Jewish population in eastern Europe would grow exponentially over the next two and a third centuries until the Holocaust.

The modern age: growth and loss

From the time of the Enlightenment, the standard way of dividing Jewish—and other—history was according to the conventional three-part scheme of ancient, medieval, and modern periods. More recently, scholars have excavated an “early modern” period of history, roughly between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, in which a number of the most characteristic features of modernity already appear in play. Among the qualities that define the age are accelerated mobility, a heightened sense of communal cohesiveness, an explosion of new forms of knowledge, a crisis of rabbinic authority, and the blurring of religious identities. To these we may add two important demographic trends: the reversal of the precipitous population declines of the Middle Ages and the emergence of Europe as the demographic center of the Jewish world.

All of these currents continued to flow into the modern age, especially demographic growth. The world Jewish population more than doubled from 1700 to 1800, reaching 2.7 million. The next one hundred years witnessed a more than threefold increase, as the world Jewish population reached 8.7 million in 1900—and then doubled again by 1939.

What can explain this staggering growth? Dramatically improved health patterns and behavior in the modern age contributed a great deal. It is important to note that Jews had a long association with health and hygiene prior to this era. Jews were overly represented in the medical profession already in the Middle Ages; they were often favored as court physicians, and they had access to university medical schools well before they were permitted entry to other faculties. This strong association carried forward to the modern age as well, as reflected in the disproportionate numbers of Jewish medical students in European universities. In the mid-1880s, Jewish students constituted more than 40 percent of the population at the University of Vienna Medical School, though only 10 percent of the city’s population; in Berlin, they were nearly 35 percent of the medical students, but 5 percent of the overall population.

Of course, the mere presence of Jewish doctors cannot explain Jewish population growth in the modern era. First and most significantly, Jews were part of a massive demographic expansion globally, with the world population rising from an estimated 800 million in 1800 to 1.5 billion in 1900—and Europe’s from 150 to 290 million during the same period. Second, Jews exhibited better rates of key health indicators than the general public: smaller, but healthier families; lower rates of disease, infant mortality, and overall death; and higher rates of breast-feeding mothers, among others. Third, even more than before, Jews became urban dwellers par excellence, one consequence of which was that they had better access to high-quality health care than rural dwellers. The modern city was also a setting in which Jews could build on their considerable economic experience with fewer formal restrictions and thereby achieve a high degree of economic stability. As a result, by the early twentieth century, large Jewish concentrations could be found in cities across the globe, including Baghdad (one-third of the population), Salonika (50 percent), Warsaw, Łódź, Budapest, Vienna, Berlin, Paris, London, New York, and Buenos Aires. Indeed, 25 percent of the world’s Jewish population lived in a mere fourteen cities in 1925.

The concurrent rise in markers of good health and population numbers suggests to us that the modern period of Jewish history was wholly good for the Jews. A common starting point for this
era is the eighteenth-century Enlightenment movement, which elevated the criterion of human reason to a position of preeminence. According to key Enlightenment thinkers, if all human beings were endowed with the capacity for reason, then the same logic must apply to Jews.

In some cases, this principle was implemented in ways that opened new doors for Jews. The Enlightenment gave birth to political emancipation, which granted new rights of citizenship to Jews, albeit in fits and starts. It also paved pathways for Jews to engage with non-Jewish neighbors and colleagues as well as to craft new forms of cultural and religious expression compatible with the enlightened spirit of the time. But in other cases, the Enlightenment encouraged and even pressured Jews to take the ultimate rational step and remove lingering vestiges of Jewishness through intermarriage and conversion. In the very urban settings in which Jews were so prominently represented, rates of intermarriage rose throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reaching 30 percent or more in Berlin, Hamburg, Copenhagen, and Trieste. By comparison, in the United States, which has been as hospitable a setting for Jews as any in their history, intermarriage rates among Jews were very low throughout the twentieth century—7 percent in 1957—but have since grown many times over, reaching 58 percent in 2013.

In similar fashion, the pace of conversion from Judaism to Christianity picked up in Europe during the nineteenth century. The German poet Heinrich Heine, himself a Jew who converted to Christianity, declared that baptism was the Jew’s “ticket of admission” to European society. More than 200,000 Jews followed Heine’s path, principally in central and western Europe, over the course of the nineteenth century; they were a small, but clearly identifiable, stream within the overall Jewish population. In many instances, the primary impetus for conversion was not the allure of the Christian faith, but the fact that conversion could help overcome the formal and informal obstacles blocking Jews’

path toward full integration into Gentile society. Indeed, during the nineteenth century, Jews often had to convert to assume university professorships and civil service jobs in European countries.

A different kind of uprooting took place in eastern Europe, where enlightenment and emancipation advanced more slowly. There, in the sprawling Russian Empire, the significant movement at hand was not from one religion to another, but rather physical movement in the form of mass Exodus. The conventionally assumed trigger point was the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, in the wake of which a wave of violent pogroms directed against Jews broke out in Russia. It was at this time that the first of the huge waves of Jewish emigration from eastern Europe occurred, laying the groundwork for yet another rebalancing of the global Jewish population. It is estimated that almost 4 million Jews left Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Romania between 1880 and 1929, nearly two-thirds of whom came to the United States, which was now transformed into a major Jewish demographic center. Other notable areas of resettlement included Great Britain, Canada, Argentina, South Africa, Australia, and pre-state Palestine.

In the 1930s, when antisemitism became state policy in Germany, the millions of Jews who remained in eastern and central Europe sought to escape the noose of Nazism. Hitler’s expansion of the German Reich through annexation and war brought more and more of them under his control. Tragically, the gates of safe passage had largely been shut by the 1930s, both by Hitler’s forces and by prospective hosts fatigued by the previous decades of immigration to their countries (e.g., the United States) or fearful of upsetting the political balance (e.g., the British in Palestine). Trapped on the European continent, more than 8 million European Jews faced the direct fury of the Nazi genocidal regime. Initially placed in centralized ghettos and camps that pockmarked the map of Europe, they began to be murdered on a mass scale commencing with Operation Barbarossa in the Soviet Union in
the summer of 1941. In January 1942, German government and Nazi party officials gathered at the Wannsee Conference to decide on a master plan for a “final solution” to the Jewish Question. From that point, the pace of the extermination campaign accelerated. By the end of World War II in 1945, with Europe in smoldering disarray, the balance sheet of Nazism’s destruction defied imagination: between 5 and 6 million Jews, representing a third or so of the world Jewish population, had been murdered.

Among the millions of refugees roaming homeless in postwar Europe were Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, 250,000 of whom made their way to “displaced persons” camps in Allied-controlled Germany, Austria, and Italy. In the coming years, several hundred thousand of them emigrated, often illegally, to Palestine— or, after 1948, to the State of Israel, which welcomed them. (In 2015, there were an estimated 189,000 Holocaust survivors living in Israel.)

Meanwhile, the new State of Israel, whose population at its inception in 1948 was just over 800,000, absorbed more than a quarter million Jewish immigrants from Arab lands in its first four years—and hundreds of thousands more in the later 1950s. These Jews, whose ancestors had often lived peaceably with their neighbors in Middle Eastern countries in the past, faced increasing hostility during the 1940s from both government authorities and the populace. In one notorious episode known as the “farhud,” a pogrom fueled by pro-Nazi rhetoric was unleashed against the Jews of Baghdad in June 1941, resulting in nearly 200 Jewish deaths and large-scale property destruction. Four years later, the newly established Arab League responded to the growing strength of the Zionist movement by calling for a boycott of Jewish goods and services produced in Palestine.

After the founding of Israel in 1948, Jews from Middle Eastern countries faced additional discrimination, threats, and expropriation. Many of them made their way to the new state, joining hundreds of thousands of survivors from Europe. The presence of Jews from around the world has been a source of remarkable human vitality for the Jewish state. But it has also been an obstacle to a cohesive society. Since its establishment, Israel has continually encouraged waves of immigrants to “make aliyah” (that is, immigrate), including most recently Ethiopians and Russians, who have been integrated to varying degrees of success. In the complex social mix of Israel today, a more pressing demographic and political challenge exists: how to make fuller stakeholders of two key groups in society—the Palestinian Arab population, which represents 20 percent of the population at present, and the haredim, or ultra-Orthodox, who constitute about 10 percent. Neither group sees itself as part of the Israeli Jewish mainstream, although both will likely carve out an ever-larger share of the Israeli population in the next half century. That next phase of history will be decisive in shaping the face of Israel as it addresses its own demographic diversity in the midst of a hostile and troubled region.

With Israel as one axis, the United States is the other major demographic center of world Jewry. The two countries have, according to most analysts, comparable numbers of Jews—between 5 to 6 million each. Akin to Israel, the United States evinces both positive and less positive sociological signs. On the one hand, Jews are among the most educated and affluent members of American society, and they have achieved a degree of economic and political security that is without precedent in Jewish history. On the other hand, their successful integration in the United States has led to unmistakable signs of disaffiliation and alienation, one of which is the high intermarriage rate. American Jewish leaders from an older generation express anxiety over retaining younger members who do not share their vision of a holistic community, but rather relate to their Jewishness in a more individualized and often “virtual” way, aided by new forms of social media.

This reliance on social media marks yet another kind of movement, a twenty-first-century successor to the waves of
migration that have continually reoriented Jewish communal life over the ages. Jews have proved exceptionally adept at moving, a fact of life necessary both to explore new opportunity and to evade persecution. They have also demonstrated a strong ability to adapt to the new circumstances in which they find themselves.

All of these accrued skills of adaptation have been called into play in the modern age, which has posed new and daily challenges to Jews. In demographic terms alone, tremendous population growth has been followed by massive decline, which has then been followed again by replenishment. What the future holds remains an open question. The coming decades will witness a contest between demographic growth, especially in Israel, and decline, largely in the diaspora. That said, it is reasonable to assume that over the next quarter century, the Jewish people will equal or surpass the peak set before World War II of 17 million souls.

Chapter 3
Cultures

In making their way through history, Jews frequently lived out a form of God’s self-description in the Book of Zechariah (4:6). “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the Lord Almighty. For only a small portion of their history did they possess an army of their own to defend themselves; neither military force nor political power, in the form of a state, was a prominent feature of their existence or a key to their survival.

The traditional Jewish explanation was that God’s “spirit” protected the people Israel as part of an inviolate covenant between them. But it was a more mundane factor that allowed Jews to survive as a small and often powerless minority. And herein lies one of the most curious and ironic features of Jewish history. Even in the face of Gentile hostility, Jews engaged in a constant process of cultural interaction with the societies in which they lived. They drew from and reshaped the habits and values of the surrounding world. And they did so by balancing this engagement with preservation of the distinctive traditions of their group.

The result of this balancing effort was an evolving series of Jewish cultures (plural) rather than a single unified culture. Together these cultures constitute a richly marbled admixture of local customs and shared global practices. It is important to emphasize