

CULTURES IN COLLISION
AND CONVERSATION

Essays in the Intellectual History of the Jews

JUDAISM AND JEWISH LIFE

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Essays in the Intellectual History of the Jews

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For Pearl

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INTRODUCTION

The cultures that collide and converse in this book range temporally from antiquity to the present and geographically from Israel to Europe to the United States. As Jews embarked on a physical trajectory that they defined as exile, they simultaneously set forth on a rich and complex intellectual voyage that required them to confront the worldviews of their neighbors along with internal differences of doctrine and philosophical orientation that were themselves often born—at least in part—out of engagement with the external environment. Thus, the culture of a small and sometimes insular people took on an almost global character.

The first section of this volume addresses Jewish approaches to the proper parameters of interaction with the values, beliefs, and intellectual life of the larger society. The longest of the essays is an almost book-length endeavor to provide an analytical overview of the range of positions on this question in all the centers of Jewish life from the dawn of the Middle Ages to the eve of the Enlightenment. In its most intense form, the struggle over this issue erupted in a fierce controversy centered on the works of Maimonides. Despite the passions engendered by these debates, the orientations of the major protagonists were often far from one-dimensional, and two of the essays in this section attempt to capture the nuanced position of Nahmanides, one of the central figures of the Jewish Middle Ages, and to assess the impact of the philosophical milieu on one of his seminal doctrines. If the stance of an individual thinker can defy easy classification, characterizing entire subcommunities is all the more challenging. In the larger study, I set forth the evolving scholarly position that no longer sees medieval Ashkenazic Jewry as isolated from

its environment, but the essay on Ashkenazic modes of thought cautions against allowing the pendulum to swing too far.

With the rise of the Jewish Enlightenment or *haskalah*, resistance to significant acculturation came to be restricted to the segment of Jewry labeled “Orthodox”—perhaps even to the smaller subdivision assigned the particularly problematic label “ultra-Orthodox.” With some hesitation, I have incorporated a youthful essay published in a student journal assessing the complex position on *haskalah* and secular learning of a rabbi and biblical commentator of considerable influence who clearly belongs in the company of uncompromising traditionalists but was nonetheless sufficiently cognizant of contemporary intellectual currents that some adherents of the Enlightenment saw him as a model whom the traditionalist community should strive to emulate. While the classical Maimonidean controversy has long faded into the distant past, Maimonides himself remains acutely relevant to any discussion of Judaism’s embrace of “external” culture; in an essay based on an address to a non-academic audience, I attempt to limn and assess the multiple images of his persona proffered by contemporary Jews often seeking themselves in the great medieval legist and philosopher.

Academic Jewish Studies are a quintessentially modern development with an ambivalent relationship to movements of acculturation in the medieval and modern past. If I am not entirely comfortable in describing this field in its fullness as my ideological home, it is surely my professional home. The first section of the book begins and ends with ideologically charged essays with deeply personal elements addressing the challenges and significance of an enterprise that thoughtful Jews ignore at their intellectual and even spiritual peril.

The second, briefest section deals with the interpretation of the Bible, but it decidedly reflects the theme of cultural interaction. The understanding of the wisdom of Solomon among medieval commentators varied in intriguing ways that mirror the philosophical—or non-philosophical—orientation of the exegetes in question, and in the case of Isaac Abravanel may even reveal traces of his experience in the royal courts of Portugal and Spain. As to the charged question of the morality of biblical heroes, I argue that Jewish perceptions were profoundly affected by the nature of external challenges in both medieval and modern times.

And then there is the End of Days. While the beliefs and movements

analyzed in this section are almost bewildering in their thematic and chronological variety, they all reflect the impact or at least relevance of ideas and forces in the larger society: Rome as the paradigmatic enemy of Israel in late antiquity; the effect of medieval rationalism on portraits of the messianic scenario; the plausibility or implausibility of ascribing differences in messianic activism to rationalism and non-rationalism; the degree to which the modern redemptive movement called Zionism could color academic analysis of the distant past; and the factors—both sociological and religious—that have enabled a contemporary messianic movement espousing doctrines once excluded from authentic Judaism to achieve legitimation in the bosom of the Orthodox community.

The introduction to a collection of this sort would normally incorporate ruminations about the personal factors that triggered the author's interest in the field as well as the evolution of his or her work over a period of decades. In this case, however, I am excused from this task because I have already fulfilled it. A companion volume published by Academic Studies Press last year (*Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue: Essays in Jewish-Christian Relations*) begins with an introduction that—at least in part—engages precisely these questions. More important, the opening chapter of this book provides considerable detail about the unfolding of my scholarly work and its connection to my deepest commitments. Finally, the epilogue about my father reveals the wellsprings of my eventual career in a way that a routine introduction could never convey. At this point, I will only add that the atmosphere and ideology that suffuse Yeshiva University, where I was educated and currently teach, place many of the issues addressed in this book at the center of their universe of discourse, and I cannot fail to underscore the effect of this unique institution on my approach to scholarship, to religion, and to life.

This volume, like the earlier one, is not an exhaustive collection of what I have written about its theme. First of all, several articles in the volume on Jewish-Christian relations qualify as discussions of the intellectual history of the Jews, and they are naturally not included here. Many short pieces are not of a sufficiently scholarly nature even though they touch upon relevant themes.¹ A case could have been made

¹ "Missing Milton Himmelfarb," *Commentary* 123:4 (April, 2007): 54-58; "Introducing Michael Wyschogrod," *Modern Theology* 22 (2006): 673-675; "On Marriageability, Jewish

for the inclusion of three review essays and several fairly substantive reviews, but I decided to leave out material that does not stand on its own.² One full-fledged article whose genesis is described in the opening chapter does not appear here despite its decidedly scholarly content and direct relevance to the issues addressed in the first section of the book because it is predominantly religious rather than academic in character and motivation.³

For the same reason, I hesitated before deciding to include the article about Lubavitch messianism. During the last fifteen years, I have devoted much time and energy with what can generously be described as mixed results to a religiously motivated effort to deny religious authority within Orthodoxy to believers in the Messiahship of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Religious polemic of this sort does not belong in this volume. However, the article that I incorporated proffers a relatively irenic, primarily sociological analysis of the reasons for a phenomenon that at first glance appears difficult to understand. Including it in this volume provides the reader with a window into an important dimension

Identity, and the Unity of American Jewry,” in *Conflict or Cooperation? Papers on Jewish Unity* (New York, 1989), pp. 69-77; “Response” in J. Gutmann et al., *What Can Jewish History Learn From Jewish Art?* (New York, 1989), pp. 29-38 (a scholarly piece, but one that cannot really stand without the article to which it responds).

The following symposia: “What Do American Jews Believe?” *Commentary* (August, 1996): 19-21; “Reflections on the State of Religious Zionism,” *Jewish Action* 60:1 (Fall, 1999), pp. 12-15; “Reflections on the Six-Day War After a Quarter-Century,” *Tradition* 26:4 (1992): 7-10; “Divided and Distinguished Worlds,” *Tradition* 26:2 (1992): 6-10 (criticism and response, *Tradition* 27:2 [1993]: 91-94); “The State of Orthodoxy,” *Tradition* 20:1 (1982): 9-12.

² The full review essays are “The Study of the Early Ashkenazic Rabbinate” (in Hebrew) [a review of Avraham Grossman, *Hakhmei Ashkenaz ha-Rishonim*], *Tarbiz* 53 (1984): 479-487; “Modern Orthodoxy in the United States: A Review Essay” [of Samuel C. Heilman and Steven M. Cohen, *Cosmopolitans and Parochials: Modern Orthodox Jews in America*], *Modern Judaism* 11 (1991): 261-272; “Must a Jew Believe Anything? [by Menachem Kellner]: A Review Essay,” *Tradition* 33:4 (1999): 81-89. (I note for the record that Kellner’s response to my review in the afterword to the second edition of his book leaves me thoroughly unpersuaded.) I did publish one review essay in the earlier volume, but that was because it contains an argument for the general reliability of Nahmanides’ version of the Barcelona disputation that should in my view have a significant, even decisive, impact on this long-debated scholarly crux. I am of course not holding my breath in the expectation that this will actually happen.

³ “On Freedom of Inquiry in the Rambam—and Today” (with Lawrence Kaplan), *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 2 (1990): 37-50. I would have of course needed Prof. Kaplan’s permission to reprint the article in this volume, but I believe that he would have allowed me to do so.

of my recent work without, I hope, undue violation of the bounds of appropriate scholarly detachment.

I have thus far been careful not to repeat material that appeared in the introduction to the earlier volume, but there is no point in avoiding repetition when I need to express sentiments that I have already formulated to the best of my ability. Here then are the final paragraphs of that introduction with the joyful addition of a single word announcing Shira's arrival into the world and the family:

I am grateful to Simcha Fishbane for inviting me to publish this collection of essays and to Meira Mintz, whose preparation of the index served as a salutary reminder of the thoughtfulness and creativity demanded by a task that casual observers often misperceive as routine and mechanical. Menachem Butler was good enough to produce pdf files of the original articles that served as the basis for the production of the volume. I can only hope that the final product is not entirely unworthy of their efforts as well as those of the efficient, helpful leadership and staff of Academic Studies Press among whom I must single out Kira Nemirovsky for her diligent and meticulous care in overseeing the production of the final version.

I am also grateful to the original publishers of these essays for granting permission to reprint them in this volume.

Finally, when publishing a book that represents work done over the course of a lifetime, an author's expression of gratitude to wife and family embraces far more than the period needed to write a single volume. Without Pearl, whose human qualities and intellectual and practical talents beggar description, whatever I might have achieved would have been set in a life largely bereft of meaning. And then there are Miriam and Elie—and Shai, Aryeh and Sarah; Yitzhak and Ditzza—and Racheli, Sara, Tehilla, Baruch Meir, Breindy, Tova, and Batsheva; Gedalyah and Miriam—and Shoshana, Racheli, Sheindl, Baruch Meir, and Shira. Each of these names evokes emotions for which I am immeasurably grateful and which I cannot even begin to express.

THE CULTURAL
ENVIRONMENT:
CHALLENGE AND
RESPONSE

IDENTITY, IDEOLOGY AND FAITH:

Some Personal Reflections on the Social, Cultural and Spiritual Value of the Academic Study of Judaism

From: *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought*, ed. by Howard Kreisel (Beer Sheva, 2006), pp. 11-29. *Delivered as the English keynote address at a conference at Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Beer Sheva. (The Hebrew keynote was presented by Eliezer Schweid.) The topic and essential title ("Personal Reflections on the Social, Cultural and Spiritual Value of the Academic Study of Judaism") were chosen by the organizers of the conference.*

Academic Jewish Studies are a pivotal anchor of Jewish identity. It hardly needs to be said that most identifying Jews are not practitioners of Jewish studies, while many, if not most, are not active consumers either. But even in a democratic age, the sort of identity that we mean when we speak of Jewishness is molded in large measure by the minority who seriously engage the traditions and texts of an ancient and challenging culture.

It is commonly stated that Judaism is an unusual and perhaps unique amalgam of peoplehood and religion and, as I once wrote in a different context, one advantage of commonplaces is that they are usually true. While secular Jews might want to replace the religious component with culture or civilization, it remains clear, or it should, that reading novels with Jewish themes, playing klezmer music, and even living in the land of Israel and speaking Hebrew do not in themselves confer a sense of Jewishness that provides sufficient continuity with the historic Jewish people. Moreover, the national component of Jewish identity is rooted not only in the reality and centrality of a millennial tradition focused on religion, but also in the very fact that Jews lived without a land for so many generations

and had no choice but to define themselves through extraordinarily powerful cultural-religious norms. To shed those norms entirely or to understand them as altogether secondary is to denude Jewishness of the meaning that it has accumulated over all those generations. It follows, then, that even the most basic affirmation of Jewish identity requires some interaction with the historic culture of the Jewish people in its classical forms, though these forms might be transmuted to accord with the sensibilities of contemporary secular Jews.

That the connectedness to the Jewish cultural past has been severely attenuated or lost among massive sectors of Diaspora Jewry hardly needs to be said, but it is only slightly more necessary to note that the same is largely true of the Jews of Israel. After an unbalanced religious soldier sprayed gunfire in a church in Jaffa, he was asked why he had done this. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, he “said it was a shame that he had to explain in court his motive for the shooting, which, he said, was self explanatory and written in the Torah. His motive, he said, was to destroy all idols, and anything which represented ‘foreign labor’ and did not relate to Judaism.”¹ Thus, *avodah zarah*, literally “foreign worship,” one of the foundational conceptions in Judaism, evoked no resonance whatever for an Israeli journalist, who thoroughly misunderstood the soldier’s intent. Moving to somewhat more esoteric knowledge, a Hebrew reference to the classic work of R. Saadya Gaon made use of the standard abbreviation for the author’s name, so that the citation read “Rasag, *Emunot ve-De’ot*.” A scholar who studies medieval Jewish philosophy informs me that an Israeli translator understood the abbreviation as a number and rendered the reference into English as “263 Beliefs and Opinions.”

These anecdotes can be multiplied and, in the face of the depressing reality that they illustrate, questions of more than a straightforward educational sort arise. We must, of course, ask about what pedagogical reforms are needed to convey knowledge of Jewish culture and history, a question that lies outside the parameters of my assignment and of my competence. But we must also ask how the content of that history and that culture is to be preserved, recovered, and understood. The elementary reply is that one consults with experts and, in the modern world, expertise generally rests with people who have been trained, and

¹ “Soldier who shot up church sent for psychiatric evaluation. Suspect says he was destroying idols,” *Jerusalem Post*, May 25, 1995, p. 12.

who often remain, in an academic environment. Thus, academic experts in Jewish studies should, it would appear, serve as the highest authorities in determining the parameters of Jewish identity, the content of Jewish culture, perhaps even the policies of the Jewish State.

This last sentence followed ineluctably, or so it seemed, from a chain of premises and reasoning so simple that affirming them appeared superfluous to the point of embarrassment. Yet the real embarrassment is the sentence itself, which cannot but elicit smiles, or worse, at the self-importance of what the late Governor George Wallace of Alabama described as pointy-headed intellectuals. Popular attitudes toward the role of academics, whose disciplines cannot easily be separated from their persons, are in fact marked by deep ambivalence. People consult experts, but they embrace those whose views accord with their own, and often, sometimes with good reason, direct withering contempt toward those whose positions they reject.

We would do well, then, to approach the question before us with due humility. Academics often disagree regarding the most fundamental realities at the heart of their scholarly discourse. The questions of objective meaning, of the interaction between the observer and the evidence, of the elusiveness of truth, have become so pervasive that many important scholars have essentially thrown in the towel, despairing of achieving certain knowledge and embracing a multivalent reality dependant upon the perspective of the observer. In extreme form, ideology determines reactions to the point where respected figures inform us that in light of the distortions in all autobiographies, Rigoberta Menchu's wholesale fabrications and Edward Said's repeated misrepresentations of his childhood are of no moment, that they are examples of the seamless web entangling subjective and external reality.

This approach aside, even unchallenged scholarly conclusions can be applied in very different ways in the arena of public policy, culture, or the life of the spirit. There are lessons to be learned from history, but they are filtered through values that are themselves rarely generated by academic investigation. Thus, the Holocaust has been seen as evidence that Jews must distrust, even despise, Gentiles, relying only on their own strength and resolve, and at the same time as evidence that Jews must treat others all the more sensitively in light of the unspeakable suffering caused by mindless bigotry. These differing conclusions are based on the examination of an unassailable historical reality

recognized by both parties; it is other values that determine how that reality will be used.

Moreover, the broad range of the term “study of Judaism” complicates our discussion further, including as it does every discipline in the humanities and social sciences, every chronological period, every methodological approach. The social, cultural, and spiritual value of investigating the evolution of *halakhah* is not the same as that of studying the development of the Yiddish theater, though the latter is certainly understood by many Jews as a manifestation of Judaism; midrashic approaches to women and the nature of Israeli treatment of Arabs in 1948 both raise moral questions, but they can hardly be addressed within the same framework.

This consideration, too, does not exhaust the complexities of our inquiry, since the value of the academic study of Judaism demands assessment in contrast to alternatives that differ from one another profoundly. One is the abandonment of Jewish study, an option whose consequences we have already encountered. Another is the pursuit of such study in a traditional mode. Thus, animated debates swirl in the Modern Orthodox, or *dati-leumi*, community about studying Talmud with a critical approach that points to layers of composition and development. A distinguished rabbi who advocates a traditional approach once reported a remark regarding this matter in the name of Jacob Katz. The Talmud asserts that for every forbidden food, God has provided a kosher alternative with a similar taste (“*Kol mai de-asar lan rahamana shara lan ke-vateh*”). Katz, after emerging from a lecture by an Orthodox scholar that was suffused with the critical approach to Talmudic study, remarked, “*Kol mai de-asar lan rahamana shara lan ke-vateh. Asar lan biqqoret ha-Miqra: shara lan biqqoret ha-Talmud.*” (“Whatever God has forbidden to us, he has permitted to us something similar to it. He has forbidden to us biblical criticism; he has permitted to us talmudic criticism.”)

A final alternative is attachment to Judaism and its past neither through a critical study of the tradition nor through an intense examination of its texts in the manner of the yeshivot, but through instinct and memory. This last word looms especially large in contemporary discourse as the alternative to history; it is understood roughly as the construction of a past filtered through the accumulated experience of a people, its rituals, its beliefs, and its psychic needs, with little or no attention to the findings of critical historians.

In his seminal *Zakhor*, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi concluded with a pessimistic peroration about the near irrelevance of academic history to Jewish life even in a modern age in which tradition has lost much of its force.² But Yerushalmi's lament, for all its rhetorical power and large element of truth, underestimates the degree to which historical study in an academic mode, working in tense but symbiotic concert with mythopoeic memory, has influenced and even transformed the ideology of Jews in the course of the last century. Jewish nationalism rested on nostalgic memories, transmuted messianic longings, and driving social realities, but it drew upon historical scholarship to a degree that should not be dismissed. I have never forgotten a striking formulation that I heard long ago from Arnold Band, whose field is not Jewish history but Hebrew literature. The Hebrew translation of Graetz's *History*, he said, was the most influential novel in the annals of the Zionist movement. One can, of course, argue that this is the case precisely because that monumental study is suffused by ideology, but for all its manifold and evident biases, it is surely a work of critical scholarship. If Graetz's blatant ideological *Tendenz* excludes him from the ranks of genuine, even great, historians, no less is true of Gibbon.

As the Zionist movement unfolded, it defined itself through a selective, creative reading of history. Some of this was no doubt dubious, but precisely because Zionism saw itself as a secular movement, and most of its leaders were in fact skeptical of beliefs held on faith, it relied on academic historians to validate its claims. David Myers, himself a student of Yerushalmi, has written much about the interaction between Zionism and historiography,³ and a coterie of scholars have examined the interplay between academic history and nationalist myth in the Zionist understanding of the Maccabees, Massada, Bar Kokhba, and Tel Hai.⁴ The nationalist moment is most blatant in the works of Joseph Klausner, so blatant that some uncharitable observers would deny him the status of academic historian at all.⁵ However that may be, the

² Y. H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle, 1982), pp. 94-103.

³ D. N. Myers, *Reinventing the Jewish Past: European Jewish Intellectuals and the Zionist Return to History* (New York and Oxford, 1995).

⁴ See, for example, Y. Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago and London, 1994).

⁵ See my "Maccabees, Zealots, and Josephus: The Impact of Zionism on Joseph Klausner's *History of the Second Temple*," in the *Louis H. Feldman Jubilee Volume*. [Reprinted in this volume.]

role of the academic enterprise in the evolution of Zionist ideology is beyond question.

In recent years, the historians' debate about the behavior of Israelis in 1948 provides a contemporary window into the interplay between the pursuit of academic history and the ideological needs of a nation, or of its critics. As in the case of cold-war revisionism in the United States and the German controversy about the uniqueness of the Holocaust and its relationship to the Gulag, one does not have to be a professional historian to grasp the critical importance of the academy to the deepest interests and most fundamental self-image of a society. While one might argue that debates about the historical behavior of Jews are not the study of Judaism, the line in instances like this is indistinct to the point of irrelevance.

The relationship between academic study and the establishment of a Jewish state is not a one-way street. If the former affects perceptions of the latter, the latter can affect the practice of the former. The establishment of the state has allegedly provided some Israeli historians with a sense of freedom to examine what they see as problematic Jewish behavior with less concern for consequences than that of Diaspora scholars. Thus, we periodically hear that unapologetic history, such as Yisrael Yuval's famous and controversial article arguing for a connection between the killing of crusade-era Jewish children by their parents and the birth of the ritual murder accusation, could only have been written in the Jewish State.⁶ Whether this is true remains uncertain, and whether the era of possible consequences has ended is regrettably even less certain, but the perception itself testifies to the complexity and significance of the interaction, in a new sense, between town and gown.

The value of the academic study of Judaism is not limited to the national dimension. Since I was asked to provide personal reflections, let me turn now to another arena reflecting my deepest personal commitments and concerns: the intersection between the academic study of Judaism and the living religion itself. I did not go to graduate school in Jewish history because of an interest in history per se. I studied the economic history of the Jews *ke-illu kefa'anni shed* — as if the metaphorical demon was compelling me. The diplomatic moves of court Jews, the battles of Judah Maccabee, the vagaries of Jewish legal standing in the innumerable principalities of the Holy Roman Empire interested

⁶ See Y. Yuval, "Ha-Naqam ve-ha-Qelalah, ha-Dam ve-ha-'Alilah," *Zion* 58 (1992): 33-90.

me little if at all. Learning about them was an unfortunate price that needed to be paid to gain the necessary credential, although I have since learned to tolerate such study and sometimes even to experience more or less fleeting moments of mild interest. What I wanted to understand was my religion — its texts, its thinkers, its responses to challenge from within and without, and the parameters of its openness and resistance to change, although fascination with the relationship between Judaism and Christianity awakened an abiding interest in the interaction between the bearers of those faiths that extended beyond the realm of religion alone and into the often bloody streets of medieval Europe.

My own trajectory and motivations are surely not unique or even unusual. It is no accident that the greatest interest in the study of Judaism within the Israeli academy comes from the religious sector. One might assume that secular Israelis would want to pursue the academic study of their people and its culture no less than the religious; outside the area of Hebrew literature and some of the social sciences, however, this does not appear to be the case.

What, then, is the impact of academic Jewish studies on Judaism today? In the non-Orthodox religious movements on the contemporary Jewish landscape, the academic study of Judaism carries more weight and authority than in any other setting. I vividly recall a remark by Gerson Cohen at a public event held in the Jewish Theological Seminary when he was its chancellor. Jewish historiography in an academic mode, he said, is Torah as we understand it. Similarly, in response to initiatives within the Reform movement that advocated a turn toward traditionalism in a number of controversial respects, Robert Seltzer and Lance Sussman vigorously affirmed that a critical analysis of historical development stands at the core of Reform Judaism.⁷ Here again, we need to correct

⁷ “Just as our predecessors reconsidered their Judaism as a result of political emancipation, Reform Judaism should continue to acknowledge the implications of historical scholarship and the comparative study of religion, which have transformed our understanding of the nature of religion as such. Doing so is not measuring Judaism by an external and alien standard; it is a matter of courageous truthfulness in facing up to the intellectual breakthroughs of the modern world that have occurred since the Enlightenment. Modern historical consciousness requires that one always consider the setting and context of every classical work and phase of Judaism from the emergence of ancient Israel to the present.” (R. M. Seltzer and L. J. Sussman, “What are the Basic Principles of Reform Judaism?” in: J. S. Lewis ed., *Thinking Ahead: Toward the Next Generation of Judaism: Essays in Honor of Oskar Brecher* (Binghamton, New York, 2001),

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's poignant assertion that history, as distinct from memory, has little resonance in Judaism even today. At least for the intellectual leadership of Conservative and Reform Judaism, history takes center stage.

The social, even spiritual impact of this orientation became especially striking when the Conservative movement needed to decide whether or not to ordain women. Here was a decision of monumental religious significance, one that would presumably limn the contours of the movement for generations to come. Conservative Judaism's rabbinic arm has a Halakhah Committee presumably empowered to decide matters of Jewish law. Yet, despite a largely successful effort to inject an ad hoc, non-academic body at a preliminary stage, this issue was ultimately to be decided by a vote of the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary, a faculty chosen almost exclusively by academic criteria and containing individuals whose adherence to the Conservative movement was dubious at best. Thus, a far-reaching decision determining the trajectory and ideology of a religious movement was to be made by academics. Now, I do not deceive myself into thinking that Conservative Judaism would not now be ordaining women had the Seminary faculty voted against this step several decades ago. Larger forces would surely have reversed such a decision by now. Nonetheless, this process is illustrative of the authority that academic training can confer in a movement that places it near the center of its values.

The impact of the academic study of history on a core religious experience of Judaism exploded into public controversy a few years ago when a prominent Conservative rabbi in the United States, speaking and writing around the time of Passover, publicly questioned the historicity of the exodus. His assertion surely reflected the views of a majority of academicians in the field, but Conservative rabbis, even those who may have agreed with the substance of his position, felt acutely uncomfortable in the wake of such an open declaration. Generally speaking, the Conservative rabbinate is religiously more traditional than its flock — we recall Marshall Sklare's famous *bon mot* in an earlier time that the

p. 10). "Historical Consciousness has been a primary force in shaping Reform Judaism since the emergence of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*." (L. J. Sussman and R. M. Seltzer, "A Crisis of Confidence in the Reform Rabbinate?" *Issues and Dilemmas in Israeli and American Jewish Identities. Occasional Papers in Jewish History and Thought*, No. 18 [New York, 2002], p. 28).

movement has an Orthodox seminary, a Conservative rabbinate, and a Reform laity — but in this case many rabbis (though certainly not all) were *more* skeptical of tradition than a constituency unfamiliar with the iconoclasm of contemporary archaeologists. The struggle to navigate the tensions spawned by the interaction of academic history with religious faith, with a critically important ritual of great social significance, with a biblical story of the highest visibility that is evoked in innumerable ceremonial contexts, and with a resistant laity provided a case study of the complexity of such interaction in a movement deeply concerned with both history and memory.

In the community of Orthodox Jews that is my primary home, the role of academic Jewish Studies is uniquely problematic. In certain circles, the entire academic enterprise is prohibited or suspect, and in no realm more so than Jewish Studies, where spiritual dangers lurk in every nook and cranny. Even in circles that permit and even value higher academic learning, including Jewish learning, it is not professors but rabbis who, if I may quote the most problematic Jew of all, sit on the seat of Moses. Yet, it is precisely in such a community that the social, cultural, and spiritual dynamics of the interaction with academic Jewish studies are most intriguing and perhaps most fruitful.

In a recent talk at Yeshiva University, I observed that the most arcane fields of academic Jewish studies can pulse with life in the eyes of a committed Jew. *Inter alia*, I had in mind the distinguished Semitic linguist specializing in the history of Hebrew who told me that his field was “relevant” only at Yeshiva. Yeshiva University was, he said, a place where he was besieged with practical questions motivated by religious concerns, where the problem of whether a particular *sheva* was *na’* or *nah* could actually matter, could even, for a Torah reader about to begin his assignment, constitute an emergency. But, with all the genuine respect, and even awe, that I feel for the knowledge and insight of my linguist friend, his expertise is not my primary area of concern, nor do I suppose that it is yours.

Several of the most sensitive questions in contemporary Jewish life, questions about which the position of Orthodox Jewry matters well beyond the inner confines of the group itself, intersect with the academic study of Judaism and its history. These include attitudes toward secular learning, rabbinic authority, halakhic change, and more. While some of the ensuing discussion reflects an inner-Orthodox discourse, the briefest

reflection will remind us how different Israeli society would look if haredi Jews affirmed the permissibility of higher secular education, or if the authority of a few rabbis in matters of politics and government policy were not seen as absolutely determinative by large segments of the religious community.

From a non-Orthodox perspective, the question of the permissibility and value of pursuing secular learning appears bizarre, yet within the Orthodox community the stance affirming the desirability of that pursuit is almost beleaguered. It is certainly possible, even without recourse to an academic approach to classical sources, for a traditional rabbi to conclude that secular education is desirable; a combination of ideological propensities and a concentration on a limited array of sources is likely, however, at least in the current environment, to inspire a position hostile to such pursuits. An academic approach, which looks at a broader spectrum of texts, will often point in a different direction.

To illustrate, a rabbi at Yeshiva University wrote an article more than a decade ago arguing that a Maimonidean ruling in the section of the *Mishneh Torah* dealing with idolatry forbids the study of any area of knowledge that contains the potential of raising doubts regarding fundamentals of the faith. Of course, the rabbi was well aware that Maimonides was also the author of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, but he dismissed this point with a generic argument about a special exception that governed this work. In a response that I co-authored with Lawrence Kaplan, we incorporated the *content* of the *Guide*, not merely the fact of its existence, into a broader analysis of the issue, and noted a letter of Maimonides in which he exhorted others to study the works of philosophers whose heretical tendencies could not be denied.⁸

I must note immediately that the somewhat smug tone of these remarks requires qualification. If certain traditionalists approach the relevant texts with propensities to find a restrictive position, Orthodox academics approach them with the desire to confirm their own prior inclinations. Since the basic ethos of the academy requires openness to unwanted conclusions, such academics cannot be certain that these inclinations will always be confirmed. A case in point struck me quite

⁸ See Y. Parnes, "Torah u-Madda and Freedom of Inquiry," *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 1 (1989): 68-71; L. Kaplan and D. Berger, "On Freedom of Inquiry in the Rambam — and Today," *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 2 (1990): 37-50.

some time ago, when I was intrigued by the convergence of two analyses of Mendelssohn, one by Yehezkel Kaufmann in *Golah ve-Nekhar* and the other by a contemporary traditionalist rabbi.

The Jewish Observer, the journal of Agudath Israel of America, had published an article about Mendelssohn that was, at first glance, surprisingly positive. This positive assessment, however, was designed to serve an ideological purpose central to the Agudah: the affirmation of the supreme importance of relying on religious authority. How is it, the author asked, that this essentially good Jew spawned a movement of rebellion against the Torah? The answer, he argued, is that for all his adherence to the Torah, Mendelssohn did not submit to the judgment of the great rabbis of his day.⁹

Despite this “kosher” objective, the article’s favorable assessment of Mendelssohn aroused a storm of protest in a community where the purported founder of the Haskalah is seen as a quintessential villain. The journal consequently published a brief piece by the Novominsker Rebbe, Rabbi Yaakov Perlow, then the youngest member of the *Moezet Gedolei ha-Torah*, who argued that Mendelssohn’s world view was, in fact, a radical one.

Admittedly, [Mendelssohn] was an observant Jew, but culturally he was a thoroughbred German. He may have technically discharged his obligations to Jewish law; this, however, was but a circumscribed aspect of his being. His social and intellectual impact lay elsewhere — in the Enlightenment ... and in the cultural assimilation that he and his friends and family embraced with such fervor.¹⁰

I doubt that Rabbi Perlow has read *Golah ve-Nekhar*, but his argument was almost precisely that of Kaufmann, who made it at greater length and no less vigorously.

Mendelssohn observed all the commandments in practice and...was thus loyal in a dogmatic sense to the tradition of Judaism. And yet, in Mendelssohn’s views, life, and work, there exists a profound “transformation of values” ... The old ideal of Judaism — a culture which is all religion, all “Torah” — is no longer the ideal of Mendelssohn ... His cultural ideal is far

⁹ See A. Shafran, “The Enigma of Moses Mendelssohn,” *The Jewish Observer* 19:9 (December, 1986): 12-18.

¹⁰ *The Jewish Observer* 19:10 (January, 1987): 13.

broader ... In this cultural conception, “the Torah” could be assigned only a modest place.¹¹

Even if Rabbi Perlow did read *Golah ve-Nekhar*, the point about convergence remains the same. In sum, an academic orientation, which attempts to read the sources in all their variety and in their historical context, can yield conclusions congenial to traditionalists as well as modernists, though the very variety of its findings affords choices often precluded by practitioners of a prescriptive and more narrowly focused approach.

Elsewhere, addressing essentially the same issue, the Novominsker made an observation far more problematic for a historian. “The attempts that were made in past Jewish history, in medieval Spain and in nineteenth-century Germany, to accommodate Torah life with the culture of the times, were aimed at precisely that: accommodation, not sanctification. *Madda* and the pursuit of secular wisdom is never, in any Torah viewpoint, accorded the status of even a quasi-Torah obligation.”¹² When reading this, I thought immediately of the title of an article by Herbert Davidson addressing precisely the thinkers of medieval Spain published twenty years before Rabbi Perlow’s remark: “The Study of Philosophy as a Religious Obligation.”¹³ Several years later, when my own book-length essay on “Judaism and General Culture in Medieval and Early Modern Times” appeared,¹⁴ I sent it to Rabbi Perlow, without any reference to his earlier remarks, and received a gracious response defending his overall position on other grounds. Here, academic study led to conclusions antithetical to assertions made out of a non-academic, traditionalist orientation, and this raises an issue that had a brief run several years ago as a *cause célèbre*: traditionalist attitudes toward the non-ideological study of history itself.

To my mind, this controversy highlighted the inextricable link between academic study and the most basic values affirmed by anyone who feels a connectedness to tradition. Rabbi Simon Schwab, the late

¹¹ Y. Kaufmann, *Golah ve-Nekhar* (Tel Aviv, 1928), vol. 2, pp. 28-29.

¹² *The Jewish Observer* 27:3 (April, 1994): 13.

¹³ See S. D. Goitein ed., *Religion in a Religious Age* (Cambridge, MA, 1974), pp. 53-68.

¹⁴ See G. J. Blidstein, D. Berger, S. Z. Leiman, and A. Lichtenstein, *Judaism’s Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration?*, J. J. Schacter ed. (Northvale, N.J. and Jerusalem, 1997), pp. 57-141.

rabbinic leader of the German community in New York, published an essay arguing that objective historical research may be appropriate in studying non-Jews, but it is inadmissible to publish findings ascribing flaws to rabbinic figures.¹⁵ There may indeed have been such flaws, but writing about them will only undermine the image of such rabbis, who need to serve as models of proper behavior. Much can, and has, been written in response to this position, most notably a lengthy article by Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter,¹⁶ but to me the most interesting point is an irony, almost a paradox, that reveals the critical significance of the historical enterprise.

All arguments in traditional Judaism regarding normative positions are, in an important sense, historical. We are not accustomed to think of them in such terms; on the contrary, non-academic rabbinic decisors are thought to argue, at least in their own self-perception, on the basis of texts perceived to be divorced from history. To an important degree, this is correct. But intellectual history is also history, and every rabbinic decisor who cites precedent is affirming something about the views of earlier authorities. Those views are captured in written works, but they are also reflected in actions and in oral observations preserved in the works or memories of others. When those who endorse Rabbi Schwab's position say that one should suppress the flaws of rabbis, and when they actively do so, they refer not only to peccadilloes that all would consider improper but to behaviors and positions that the rabbi in question may have considered correct but contemporary traditionalists consider wrong. Thus, one should not report that a particular rabbi said positive things about *maskilim*, or that he admired Rav Kook, or that he read secular books and newspapers. In other words, the observer, who affirms untrammelled respect for the rabbinic figure, substitutes his own judgment for that of the rabbi, and then appeals to that rabbi's sanitized image as a model for the posture of which he approves.

In his article, Rabbi Schacter made this point in the wake of a conversation with me, and noted my citation in this context of a passage by Yehezkel Kaufmann in an essay on a biblical theme. Bible critics, wrote Kaufmann, create and compose verses with their own hands, and proceed

¹⁵ Rabbi Simon Schwab, *Collected Writings* (Lakewood, 1988), p. 234.

¹⁶ J. J. Schacter, "Facing the Truths of History," *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 9 (1998-1999): 200-273.

to discover in them everything that they have inserted into them.¹⁷ In our case, the objects of this tendentious intervention are people rather than texts, but the essential process is the same.¹⁸ The very impulse to distort history is testimony to its centrality.

Rabbinic authority itself, especially in its contemporary formulation as *da'at Torah*, evokes controversy in which historical inquiry plays a particularly salient role. There are, of course, normative texts in play from the Talmud to Maimonides to Nahmanides to the *Sefer ha-Hinnukh* to *Mikhtav me-Eliyyahu* of Rabbi Eliyyahu Dessler. But the essential claim being made, at least in its strongest form, requires the assertion that absolute rabbinic authority in all areas of life was always recognized in normative Judaism. In principle, at least, this assertion can be tested. This is, of course, not the forum to perform that test, but I will say that my overall impression is that the evidence militates against the most extreme version of *da'at Torah* in vogue in certain haredi circles, but it also points in the direction of a greater degree of deference to rabbinic authority than some of the more liberal elements of Modern Orthodoxy are prepared to acknowledge.

A similar assessment seems appropriate with respect to the closely related issue of change in Jewish law. While the most traditionalist circles maintain that change is, and has always been, out of the question, non-Orthodox figures, and even some in the most liberal sectors of Orthodoxy, assert that rabbis have always succeeded in finding ways to permit what they feel must be permitted. Blu Greenberg's *bon*, or *mal*, *mot*, "Where there is a rabbinic will, there is a halakhic way," was provided with a telling Hebrew translation by my distinguished brother-in-law David Shatz: "*Im tirzu, ein zo halakhah*." This question has been subjected to scholarly scrutiny by Jacob Katz, Haym Soloveitchik, Yisrael Ta-Shma, and Daniel Sperber among others, and my sense, guided no doubt by my own predilections, is that social, humanitarian, and ideological factors — what I call competing religious values — have surely affected the willingness to rethink the plain meaning of texts, but in the final analysis the texts still matter. Here, again, the academic enterprise can impinge, for those who allow it, on the understanding of crucial areas of

¹⁷ Y. Kaufmann, *Mi-Kivshonah shel ha-Yezirah ha-Miqra'it* (Tel Aviv, 1966), p. 253.

¹⁸ See "Facing the Truths of History," p. 232, and the note there. (I am responsible for the fundamental point, though the acknowledgment in the note, which mentions my providing the citation from Kaufmann, can be construed in a more limited fashion.)

halakhah, but its application depends very much on the original values of the rabbinic consumer of scholarly research.

In the realm of concrete decision-making in specific instances, it is once again the case that the impact of academic scholarship does not always point in a liberal direction. In other words, the instincts and values usually held by academics are not necessarily upheld by the results of their scholarly inquiry, and if they are religiously committed, they must sometimes struggle with conclusions that they wish they had not reached. Thus, the decision that the members of the Ethiopian Beta Israel are Jewish was issued precisely by rabbis with the least connection with academic scholars. The latter, however much they may applaud the consequences of this decision, cannot honestly affirm that the origins of the Beta Israel are to be found in the tribe of Dan; here, liberally oriented scholars silently, and sometimes audibly, applaud the fact that traditionalist rabbis have completely ignored the findings of contemporary scholarship. Some academics do not hesitate to criticize and even mock such rabbis for their insularity and their affirmation of propositions inconsistent with scholarly findings, but on occasions like this the very same people are capable of deriding other rabbis for their intolerant refusal to *ignore* modern scholarship. One wonders, for example, what position will be taken by such academics with respect to the lawsuit filed by an Ethiopian cook who was fired from a Sephardi restaurant because what she cooks would not qualify as food cooked by a Jew (*bishul Yisrael*) by the standards of Sephardic *pesaq* even if a Jew were to kindle the oven.

In my own case, awareness of the relevance of the academic study of Judaism to the social, cultural and spiritual issues confronting contemporary Jewry emerged out of largely unanticipated developments. I am essentially a medievalist who wrote a dissertation consisting of a critical edition with introduction, translation, and analysis of an obscure thirteenth-century Hebrew polemic against Christianity. The number of people worldwide who had ever heard of the *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan* when I was in graduate school probably fell short of triple digits. My Master's thesis, on Nahmanides' attitude toward secular learning and his stance during the Maimonidean controversy, did deal with a central figure, but it hardly seemed like the harbinger of a career that would address urgent issues dividing contemporary Jews.

And yet, that Master's thesis reflected and honed interests that turned

me into an advocate of the Modern Orthodox position favoring a broad curriculum, expressed not only in the aforementioned article defending the permissibility of reading heretical works but implicit in a book-length study of Jewish attitudes toward general culture in medieval and modern times to which I have also already alluded. While this was essentially a work of scholarship, it appeared in a book commissioned by Yeshiva University that ended with a frankly religious essay by Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein. In current terminology, this was “engaged scholarship” whose larger objective was not disguised.

Perhaps more surprisingly, my work on medieval Jewish-Christian polemic as well as the history of what is usually called anti-Semitism propelled me into a series of contemporary controversies. The first was deeply medieval in character, although it concerned a new movement. The Jewish Community Relations Council of New York asked me to write a booklet with Michael Wyschogrod, a philosopher deeply interested in Christianity, to persuade Jews to resist the blandishments of Jews for Jesus. What emerged was one of the most polite Jewish polemics against Christianity ever composed, one which I know had its desired effect in at least a few instances, including the return to Judaism of a man who is now an important figure in Jews for Judaism, a major anti-missionary organization. In short, academic expertise was mobilized for spiritual self-defense.¹⁹

More broadly, I was gradually drawn into the growing and delicate arena of Jewish-Christian dialogue, where academic expertise in earlier encounters turns out to be critically important. Serious Christians do not want to hold discussions solely with dilettantes whose primary qualifications emerge out of their communal positions. Once involved, I found myself dealing not only with directly religious questions but with the role of the Church in historic anti-Semitism, the status of recent efforts to shed that past, and the very practical and highly contentious issue of the position of Christian groups regarding the State of Israel and its confrontation with terror.²⁰ Most recently, *qafaz alai rogzo shel Mel*

¹⁹ See *Jews and 'Jewish Christianity'*, (New York, 1978) [reprinted by Jews for Judaism, (Toronto 2002)].

²⁰ “Jewish-Christian Relations: A Jewish Perspective,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 20 (1983): 5-32 [reprinted in: N. W. Cohen ed., *Essential Papers on Jewish-Christian Relations in the United States* (New York, 1990), pp. 328-361]; “Dominus Iesus and the Jews,” *America* 185:7 (September 17, 2001):7-12 [reprinted in S. J. Pope and C.

Gibson — the controversy over Mel Gibson's film overtook me. Academic expertise in the New Testament, Christianity, Jewish-Christian polemic, anti-Semitism, and contemporary dialogue turned out to be a particularly relevant matrix of interests, and my effort to assess the debates over "The Passion" in the May 2004 issue of *Commentary* reflects but one of a multitude of requests and communal obligations thrust upon me by this unfortunate affair.

Finally, I turn to the strangest and most unexpected development of all. At a *sheva berakhot* celebration in Jerusalem, the father of the groom introduced me to an acquaintance as follows: "This is a person who specialized in Jewish-Christian polemics in the Middle Ages and suddenly discovered that most of the major Jewish arguments against Christianity now apply to Lubavitch hasidim." We have witnessed in the last decade a phenomenon that no Jew, academic or otherwise, could have imagined a generation ago. A belief in classic, posthumous messianism evoking the most obvious echoes of Christianity and Sabbatianism was born and has become entrenched in a movement seen by virtually all Jews as standing well within the confines of Orthodox Judaism. Its practitioners remain accepted not merely as Orthodox Jews but as qualified Orthodox rabbis in every respect. In this case, my academic interest in Jewish-Christian polemic and the related field of Jewish messianism interacted with my Orthodox beliefs to inspire an idiosyncratic campaign for the de-legitimization of those believers, a campaign that stands in tension with the openness and tolerance usually seen as the hallmark of the academic personality. "I have spent much of my professional life," I wrote, "with the martyrs of the crusade of 1096. It is not surprising that I react strongly when Orthodox Jewry effectively declares that on a point of fundamental importance our martyred ancestors were wrong and their Christian murderers were right."²¹

I cannot, of course, discuss the merits of the debate on this occasion,

C. Hefling eds., *Sic Et Non: Encountering Dominus Iesus* (New York, 2002)]; "Dabru Emet: Some Reservations about a Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity," www.bc.edu/cjlearning; "The Holocaust, the State of Israel, and the Catholic Church: Reflections on Jewish-Catholic Relations at the Outset of the Twenty-First Century" (in Hebrew), *Hadoar* 82:2 (January, 2003): 51-55; "Revisiting 'Confrontation' After Forty Years: A Response to Rabbi Eugene Korn," www.bc.edu/cjlearning.

²¹ *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (London and Portland, Oregon 2001), p. 74. An updated Hebrew version, *Ha-Rebbe Melekh ha-Mashiah, Sha'aruriyyat ha-Adishut, ve-ha-Iyyum 'al Emunat Yisrael* (Jerusalem 2005), recently appeared.

but I will say that one of the most gratifying reactions to my book was that of Leon Wieseltier, who wrote that rarely has the academic study of Judaism so interacted with living Judaism. I must caution you that the book has also been described in print as *Mein Kampf* and its author as Osama bin Laden.²² For our purposes, the point is not who is right and who is wrong, but the degree to which scholarly pursuits, and of the Middle Ages no less, can transform themselves into matters of burning relevance to the core of the Jewish religion.

For Jews living in Israel, this assertion is by no means surprising. A biblical scholar like Uriel Simon and an expert in medieval Jewish philosophy like Aviezer Ravitzky, not to speak of academically based philosophers like Yeshayahu Leibowitz and, *yibbadel le-hayyim tovim va-arukim*, Eliezer Schweid have long played important roles in the social, cultural, and spiritual discourse of the Jewish State. As we have seen, however superficially, this role is essential, but it is also complex and problematic. To construct the cultural and religious profile of a Jewish society in blithe disregard of the academy is an intellectual and spiritual failure of the first order; at the same time, the academic study of Judaism should, in most cases, serve as the handmaiden, rather than the mistress, of the deepest values that it helps to mold and inform.

²² See Y. Dubrowski, "Chutzpah without a Limit" (in Yiddish), *Algemeiner Journal*, Jan. 18, 2002. The author proudly declares that he has not read the book; he has, however, heard about it, and this is "more than enough."

JUDAISM AND GENERAL CULTURE IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN TIMES

From: Gerald J. Blidstein, David Berger, Sid Z. Leiman, and Aharon Lichtenstein, *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration?*, edited by Jacob J. Schacter (Jason Aronson: New York, 1997), pp. 57-141.

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PREFATORY NOTE

The attempt to provide an analytical overview of Jewish attitudes toward the pursuit of general culture in the millennium from the Geonic Middle East to the eve of the European Jewish Enlightenment is more than a daunting task: it flirts with the sin of hubris. The limitations of both space and the author required a narrowing and sharpening of the focus; consequently, this essay will concentrate on high culture, on disciplines which many medieval and early modern Jews regarded as central to their intellectual profile and which they often saw as crucial or problematic (and sometimes both) for

the understanding of Judaism itself. Such disciplines usually included philosophy and the sciences, sometimes extended to poetry, and on at least one occasion embraced history as well. The net remains very widely cast, but it does not take all of culture as its province.

Not only does this approach limit the scope of the pursuits to be examined; it also excludes large segments of the medieval and early modern Jewish populace from consideration. Thus, I have not addressed the difficult and very important question of the cultural profile of women, who very rarely received the education needed for full participation in elite culture, nor have I dealt with the authors of popular literature or the bearers of folk beliefs.

Paradoxically, however, the narrower focus also has the effect of enlarging the scope of the analysis. The issue before us is not merely whether or not a particular individual or community affirmed the value of a broad curriculum. The profounder question is how the pursuit of philosophy and other disciplines affected the understanding of Judaism and its sacred texts. Few questions cut deeper in the intellectual history of medieval and early modern Jewry, and while our central focus must remain the affirmation or rejection of an inclusive cultural agenda, the critical implications of that choice will inevitably permeate every facet of the discussion.

THE DYNAMICS OF A DILEMMA

The medieval Jewish pursuit of philosophy and the sciences was marked by a creative tension strikingly illustrated in a revealing paradox. The justifications, even the genuine motivations, for this pursuit invoked considerations of piety that lie at the heart of Judaism, and yet Jews engaged in such study only in the presence of the external stimulus of a vibrant non-Jewish culture. Although major sectors of medieval Jewry believed that a divine imperative required the cultivation of learning in the broadest sense, an enterprise shared with humanity at large could not be perceived as quintessentially Jewish. Thus, even Jews profoundly committed to a comprehensive intellectual agenda confronted the unshakable instinct that it was the Torah that constituted Torah, while they simultaneously affirmed their conviction, often confidently, sometimes stridently, occasionally with acknowledged ambivalence,

that Jewish learning can be enriched by wider pursuits and that in the final analysis these pursuits are themselves Torah. On the other side of the divide stood those who saw “external wisdom” as a diversion from Torah study at best and a road to heresy at worst, and yet the religious arguments that such wisdom is not at all external often made their mark even among advocates of the insular approach. The dynamic interplay of these forces across a broad spectrum of Jewish communities makes the conflict over the issue of general culture a central and intriguing leitmotif of Jewish history in medieval and early modern times.

THE ISLAMIC MIDDLE EAST AND THE GEONIM

The first cultural centers of the Jewish Middle Ages were those of Middle Eastern Jewry under Islam, and the Islamic experience was crucial in molding the Jewish response to the challenge of philosophical study. In the seventh century, nascent Islam erupted out of the Arabian peninsula into a world of highly developed cultures. Had this been the typical conquest of an advanced society by a relatively backward people, we might have expected the usual result of *victi victoribus leges dederunt*: as in the case of the barbarian conquerors of the Roman Empire or the ninth- and tenth-century invaders of Christian Europe, the vanquished would have ultimately imposed their cultural patterns, in however attenuated a form, upon the victors. The Islamic invasion, however, was fundamentally different. The Muslim armies fought in the name of an idea, and a supine adoption of advanced cultures would have robbed the conquest of its very meaning. At the same time, a blithe disregard of those cultures bordered on the impossible. Consequently, Islam, which was still in an inchoate state in the early stages of its contact with the Persian, Byzantine, and Jewish worlds, and whose founder had already absorbed a variety of influences, embarked upon a creative confrontation that helped to mold its distinctive religious culture.

The legacy of classical antiquity was transmitted to the Muslims by a Christian society that had grappled for centuries with the tensions between the values and doctrines of biblical revelation and those of Greek philosophy and culture. For the Fathers of the Church, there was no avoiding this difficult and stimulating challenge. As intellectuals living in the heart of Greco-Roman civilization, they were by definition

immersed in its culture. The very tools with which patristic thinkers approached the understanding of their faith were forged in the crucible of the classical tradition, so that the men who molded and defined the central doctrines of Christianity were driven by that tradition even as they strove to transcend it. This was true even of those Fathers who maintained a theoretical attitude of unrelieved hostility toward the legacy of Athens, and it was surely the case for patristic figures who accepted and sometimes even encouraged the cultivation of philosophy and the literary arts provided that those pursuits knew their place.¹

As Muslims began to struggle with this cultural challenge, a broad spectrum of opinion developed regarding the desirability of philosophical speculation. To suspicious conservatives, “reason” was a seductress; to traditionalist theologians, she was a dependable handmaiden, loyally demonstrating the validity of the faith; to the more radical philosophers, she was the mistress and queen whose critical scrutiny was the final determinant of all truth and falsehood.² Jews in the Islamic world confronted a similar

¹ Despite—or precisely because of—its excessively enthusiastic description of patristic humanism, the rather old discussion in E. K. Rand, *Founders of the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1941), provides the most stimulating reminder of the importance of this issue to the Fathers of the Church.

² For an account of the Muslim absorption of “the legacy of Greece, Alexandria, and the Orient,” which began with the sciences and turned toward philosophy by the third quarter of the eighth century, see Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York and London, 1983), pp. 1-36. Note especially p. xix, where Fakhry observes that “the most radical division caused by the introduction of Greek thought was between the progressive element, which sought earnestly to subject the data of revelation to the scrutiny of philosophical thought, and the conservative element, which disassociated itself altogether from philosophy on the ground that it was either impious or suspiciously foreign. This division continued to reappear throughout Islamic history as a kind of geological fault, sundering the whole of Islam.”

In describing the manifestations of this rough division in a Jewish context, I have succumbed to the widespread convention of utilizing the admittedly imperfect term *rationalist* to describe one of these groups. As my good friend Professor Mark Steiner has pointed out, philosophers use this term in a far more precise, technical sense in an altogether different context. Intellectual historians, he argues, have not only misappropriated it but often use it in a way that casts implicit aspersions on traditionalists who are presumably resistant to reason. Let me indicate, then, that by *rationalist* I mean someone who values the philosophical works of non-Jews or of Jews influenced by them, who is relatively open to the prospect of modifying the straightforward understanding (and in rare cases rejecting the authority) of accepted Jewish texts and doctrines in light of such works, and who gravitates toward naturalistic rather than miraculous explanation. As the remainder of this essay will make abundantly clear, I do not regard this as a rigid, impermeable classification.