

DAVID BIALE, ed. *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*. New York: Schocken Books, 2002. Pp. xxxiii + 1196.

Part One: Just Like Everyone Else, Only More So

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Hard science deals with facts: it explains and successfully manipulates the physical universe. Its empirical successes attest to the validity of its truth-claims, and to the proximity (or identity) of its laws to and with Reality.

Hard science is to facts as philosophy is to truth. Like its empirically oriented sister, philosophy identifies what things really *are* (their essence) and how we truly know them (our epistemological foundations). Together, science and philosophy reveal the truths of the physical and the metaphysical universe.

WRITING THE TWO preceding paragraphs just gave me the same guilty pleasure that I get when listening to classic soft-rock. Indeed, they are its intellectual equivalent. I had gotten through high school and even through college operating with these assumptions. Graduate school, in the mid-70s, hit hard. I read Kuhn. I read Wittgenstein. I watched friends in departments of English and in comparative literature spinning around as they encountered Derrida, de Man, Foucault, Lacan, Barthes. We all read cultural anthropology. The old definitions dissolved. The view from nowhere, whether scientific or philosophical, vanished. Only a welter of perspectives remained.

Thirty years later, intellectually swamped as we are by the late twentieth century's fervid overproduction of interpretive theories, a 1970s deconstructionist almost looks like a Litvak rabbi. No question of meaning can appear without its *de rigueur* enclitic: "to whom?" Those disciplines that stand in what used to be the territory overlapped by both "hard" sciences and philosophy—medicine, say, or history—find themselves in a

period of extreme improvisation. Ivy League faculties and even so-called health care providers, for example, have acknowledged acupuncture and chiropraxis. If as seemingly empirical a discipline as medicine is so affected by postmodernism, a hybrid discipline like history, at once empirical and literary, can be no less so. And indeed, forswearing the aesthetic satisfactions of the *grand récit*, more and more historians, their way paved by sixty years of *Annales*, have turned from the great men/great ideas genre of history writing to recover, in much more exiguous evidence, the humbler details of the quotidian. Our scope seems smaller, our conclusions more tentative, our self-consciousness acute. We speak of the past while thinking with terms like “hybridity,” “indeterminacy,” “construct.” Things aren’t what they used to be.

And yet, in a way, they are. What historian does not still use the concept “fact,” the adjective “true”? Who does not routinely decide between good history and bad, between honest and dishonest descriptions of the past? Who thinks that sequence does not matter for causality, or chronology for explanation? Who has abandoned the distinction between primary and secondary sources? Between primary and secondary languages? Between description and analysis? What may be one historian’s guilty secret, true, may be another’s common sense: it depends on the company you keep. Yet we can still speak with each other. We can still identify what we do as “historical thinking.” And we still do the best we can to train graduate students to carry the discipline into the future. Given the prevailing cultural climate, perhaps the coherence of the field must remain deeply closeted for now. In the meantime, our intellectual confusions—foregrounded, disorienting, multivocal—are also extremely fruitful.

Whatever its vices, then, our particular historical moment also has its virtues. And these virtues are on rich display in David Biale’s sprawling, exciting survey, *Cultures of the Jews*. Ringelblum Professor of Jewish History at the University of California, Davis, Biale has gathered a stellar international group of scholars around the grand theme of Jewish cultural history, from its biblical birth to its twentieth-century avatars. The topics of the individual essays are as multiple as the methods employed by their various authors—given the ambitious scope of this volume, it could hardly be otherwise. Some readers will savor the more social-historical chapters, others the more literary ones, others the more biographical ones: no single style prevails. The tastes of many different intellectual palates will find various satisfactions here.

The book is diverse without being diffuse, and for that virtue two things can be credited: its theme and its architecture. Its theme is Jewish identity, and I will say more on this below. Its architecture is the editor’s

accomplishment, in happy collaboration with the broad and deep erudition of his colleagues. Biale has divided his project into thirds. Part One, "Mediterranean Origins," spans the period from the Bronze Age to the seventh century of the Common Era. Part Two, "Diversities of Diaspora," ranges from the golden age of Islam to the early modern period, from high culture to folk practices, from the Middle East to the Mediterranean to Ashkenaz. Part Three, "Modern Encounters," expands the book's territory both chronologically and geographically, leading the reader from Europe through the Ottoman Empire to Ethiopia, Bukhara, Afghanistan, Israel, and, finally, to twentieth-century America. Biale prefaces each section with a discussion that orients the reader in the issues and eras upcoming, and coordinates the whole. And he exercises his editor's prerogative by pronouncing, in a brief and graceful conclusion, the last word.

The two first chapters, taken together, present a stereoscopic view of the birth of the nation. Ilana Pardes surveys its myths of origin ("Imagining the Birth of Israel: National Metaphors in the Bible"), Ronald S. Hendel, the historical and social context of these myths ("Israel among the Nations: Biblical Culture in the Ancient Near East"). Pardes' chapter is lyrically literary. She reads key passages from Genesis through Joshua as if they were developmental stages in the personal life of a unified character, "Israel." This overtly modern, psychoanalytic approach is obliged by the ancient narratives, which themselves persistently personify the nation. The rich language of human erotic and social relations—"son," "servant," "bride," "lover," "foundling"—defines and describes the relationship of God and Israel, and the family dynamics are complex. Sensitized by her own expertise in gender theory and feminist criticism, Pardes illumines the surprising reversals of gender and the subtle undercurrent of "counter-traditions" that shape the national saga. "Egypt" becomes a trope for Israel's refusal to individuate, its terror of freedom. "The Land," Egypt's opposite, holds the ambiguous promise of independence and the lurking seductions of idolatry. Israel embraces the daughters of Moab just before crossing the Jordan; just after, Rahab's household joins the Israelite camp. The biblical story of origins, Pardes concludes, voices ambivalence and self-criticism as often as it does exhilaration and certainty. National identity is at once conflicted and complex yet, for all that, undeniably clear.

Hendel likewise contemplates these dynamics of complexity and clarity, merging and individuation. Archaeology, anthropology, and comparative Semitic historiography provide his perspectives on ancient literature. Cult, food, speech, blood: these are the building blocks of ethnic identity,

and Israel works within the quarry of Canaan. “Self” and “other,” twin poles of current theories on the construction of identity, are also practically, socially linked in the historical record even as they are reflected on ambivalently in biblical narrative. Sweeping through the Prophets and Writings, touching on twinned texts from Deuteronomy and from Jonah, Hendel closes with reflections on good neighbors and good fences, and the obligation of interpretation—hence revision—that is mandated by the tradition itself.

With chapter 3, Erich S. Gruen’s contribution, we enter into the world of Hellenistic Judaism. It seems at once both strangely familiar and utterly new. Familiar, because Hellenism was the West’s first great experiment with globalization: much of what Gruen describes resonates with what we experience now. New, because Hellenistic Judaism has come into its own as an area within Jewish history only within the last century. It presents a vigorously self-confident and self-consciously Jewish culture that, at the same time, was deeply Greek. As such, Hellenistic Judaism survived, variously transmuted, in two later and much longer-lived communities, Rabbinic Judaism and Gentile Christianity.

“Hellenistic” culture, Gruen explains, was every bit as diverse as “Jewish” culture: the term “signifies a complex amalgam in the Near East in which the Greek ingredient was a conspicuous presence.” Western Jews lived in Hellenistic cities, where *no* fences made good neighbors. The pleasures of the postclassical curriculum; achievement in athletics, city government, or the military: all these possibilities lay open to Jews as to others whose social status, financial means, and individual aptitude enabled them. Biblical texts made their momentous transition from (mostly) Hebrew into Greek, the new vernacular of Western Diaspora populations. Jews thrived in this environment, and claimed as their own those parts of Greek culture that they most admired—literally. Homer and Plato learned their wisdom from the Torah, then available in a now-lost, pre-Septuagintal Greek translation; Moses had taught music to Orpheus. Gruen gives a wonderful tour through this community’s high-cultural products and through its pulp fiction: this is great fun. He closes by observing that, though they lived outside their ancestral homeland, these Jews did not feel themselves in exile. Centuries before Titus’s destruction of Jerusalem, these Jews lived elsewhere because they had wanted to, with no evident anguish or ambivalence. Jerusalem was their *metropolis*, the mother city; but the cities of their habitation were their *patris*, their home.

In that ancestral homeland as abroad, globalized Hellenism affected how Jews lived. In chapter 4 Eric M. Meyers explores how this was so

by taking us, with Gamaliel, to Aphrodite's baths (mAZ 3.4). "Jewish Culture in Greco-Roman Palestine" reviews the realia of material culture (coins, trade routes, pottery, urban planning, architecture) as well as a wide sampling of Jewish literatures. Meyers situates the emergence of Rabbinic Judaism within the politically tumultuous, fractiously sectarian period of the late Second Temple. He points out how the rabbis, like their contemporaries in pagan philosophical schools and in similarly emergent Gentile forms of Christianity, legitimated their necessarily innovative interpretations of tradition by locating the origins of those interpretations with the tradition itself, with the charismatic founding figure. (Moses was to rabbinic Jews what Plato was to pagan philosophers and what the apostles and, behind them, Jesus of Nazareth were to later Christians.) Finally, despite the retrospective consistency that later, modern scholars would impose on them, the rabbinic pillars of the Mishnah and later Jewish communities in the homeland seem quite as comfortable living with Greco-Roman culture as were their cousins abroad. Rabbinic tombs in Bet She'arim sport pagan sculptural reliefs; Jewish diners in the Galilee feasted their eyes on Dionysian mosaics; pagan deities, their names transcribed or translated into Hebrew, adorned the mosaic zodiacs of synagogue floors. Interpenetration? Syncretism? Assimilation? The old terms lack utility in the face of the vibrant and various creolization of cultures in ancient Palestine, and in the larger Mediterranean world.

The Jews of the later Byzantine period, as Oded Irshai illumines for us, lived in a more anxious age. Chapter 5, "Confronting a Christian Empire," explores the momentous political and religious changes of the late Roman world, and the impact that these changes had on Jews living in Palestine. Irshai is the master of a huge array of evidence: Greek and Latin patristic writing, homiletic, historical, and theological; rabbinic literature, aggadic as well as halakhic; apocalypses both Christian and Jewish; Roman history; archaeology. Constantine's revolution in Roman state religion eventuated in a real estate revolution in Palestine, as the emperor's church literally developed the Holy Land. The loud rhetoric of separation that characterizes both Christian and Jewish communities obscures much of the evidence of their continuous and positive interaction. But with the decline of civic stability and the rise of urban violence that marks the empire's trajectory from the fourth to the seventh century, Roman Jews, both victims and agents of this violence, lived with constraints unimaginable in earlier centuries. The seventh-century conquests of Jerusalem, first by the Persians (614 C.E.), then by the Arabs (638 C.E.), seemed to Jews living there like a long-awaited redemption from Edom/Rome.

Irshai's is a transitional chapter to the final two essays in this first section of the book. Isaiah Gafni in chapter 6 ("Babylonian Rabbinic Culture") and Reuven Firestone in chapter 7 ("Jewish Culture in the Formative Period of Islam") each present a study in contrast. Roman Christianity had laid claims to foundational Jewish texts (Tanakh, via the Septuagint, had become orthodox Christianity's Old Testament). And the Christian idea of the Jew served as the archetypal Other for the new majority culture. Babylonian Jews, by contrast, lived within a culture independent of, and for the most part indifferent to, the Jewish presence in its midst. This greater freedom led to greater ease of access across community lines. And, Gafni's fascinating exploration of folk medicine and practical magic makes clear, Jews were active participants in Babylonian society and culture too.

Jews imagined their own presence in Babylon less as an exile than as a kind of return, a point Gafni deftly makes by citing a passage from *bPeaḥim*. God exiled Israel to Babylon (after the destruction of the First Temple) "as an angry man sends his wife back to her mother's house" (bPes 87b). Given Abraham's Chaldean origins, claim these Babylonian Jews, going "out" for the Judeans, a millennium earlier, had actually been a sort of "going home." In one stroke, these later Jews both established the prestigious antiquity of their own community and revealed how comfortable they felt to be where they were. In the age of the Byzantine emperors, life outside Israel was far less alienating than life within Israel. In the East far more than in the West, Jews were at home.

Early Islam's relation to Judaism, like that of Christianity, combined acknowledged sameness with insisted-upon distinction. Yet in the case of Islam, as Reuven Firestone shows in chapter 7, this situation permitted latitude and fluidity between the communities in ways difficult to imagine further West. Islam's first and most formative city was not Mecca but Medina, where the region's major monotheist community, the Jews, predominated. (In pagan Mecca, meanwhile, the pre-Islamic Ka'ba contained figurines of Abraham, Ishmael, and Mary the mother of Jesus.) Mohammed's monotheistic revelations were much influenced by Arabian Jews, and in later centuries Islam, its literary legacy consolidated, in turn influenced medieval Judaism. Arabian Jews, like their Hellenistic predecessors and like their Christian Arab contemporaries, adopted Arabic as their language. Some Jews—Firestone introduces them briefly—adopted Islam as well, but this did not mean leaving their Judaism at the door. The convert and scholar Ka'b al-Ahbar, for example, expounded Islam in the mosque from a *sefer torah*. Indeed, the building of al Aqsa in Jerusalem after 638 C.E. is in some sense the measure of the Judaization of Islam.

So many centuries, so many languages, so many cultures! The impression accumulated after such an expansive and exhaustive tour is undeniable: Ancient Israelites thought and acted much like ancient Canaanites; Greek Jews much like other Greeks; Babylonian Jews like their neighbors, Arabian Jews like theirs. In what, then—to themselves and to outsiders—lay Jewish difference? How would these Jews have regarded each other diachronically? From all sorts of directions, for many different reasons, we are driven back upon a fundamental question, the one that thematically unites this huge volume. What makes a Jew a Jew? Indeed, who is a Jew?

Specialists invariably see crucial questions as posed especially sharply within the period of their own expertise. I ask to be excused, then, for attempting an answer to this particular question by turning to that culture and period that I know best, the Mediterranean between Alexander the Great and the rise of Islam. For the issues of religious and ethnic identity emerge in this period as alternative designations for the same datum. They begin to shift with the claims made and presupposed by Hellenistic and Roman thinkers. And they are wrenched into a new configuration once Gentile Christianity, after Constantine, begins its extremely improvised mutation of earlier Mediterranean culture. In many ways, our own ideas about religious identity are the legacy of this last phase from imperial, Christian Rome.

Modern sociologists of religion have commented on the peculiarity of Jewish identity, since “Jew” designates both an ethnicity and a set of religious beliefs and practices while allowing for their separation. (A Jew can be a member of another religious community or of none, and still be a “Jew,” while a convert is a “Jew”—albeit a Jew of a special sort—who by definition has a different ethnicity.) In antiquity, the (modern) bivalence of the term “Jew” would have been the least peculiar aspect of it. For all ancient peoples, not just for Jews, cult *was* a type of ethnic designation, something that identified one’s people or kinship group, the *genos*. Hence, for example, Herodotus’ definition of “Greekness” in chapter 8 of his *Histories*: common blood, common language, common customs, common cult. This family connection between peoples or their rulers and their gods was sometimes expressed in terms of descent. Alexander the Great traced his ancestry back to Heracles; in 2 Samuel, the king of Israel is described by Israel’s god as that god’s “son.”

We derive several important points from this observation. First, in antiquity, different peoples had different gods, and people within the same *genos* or kin-group were therefore obligated, by birth and by blood, to

worship the gods whose cults they had been born into. (Hence, for most groups in antiquity, the index of piety was worship tendered “according to ancestral custom.”) Second, different gods also attached to particular physical locations as well as to particular peoples. Gods lived around their altars, and in their temples; they might also attach, whether fleetingly or permanently, to various natural sites as well (a mountain, a grotto, a spring). Taken together, these two observations entail a third: conquest meant encountering, at close quarters, not only other peoples but also other gods. Different cultures, including Israel’s, dealt with such encounters variously.

The embeddedness of divinity in antiquity, its geographically and ethnically local quality, means that, in an age of empire, gods bumped up against each other with some frequency, even as their humans did. The larger the political unit, the greater the plurality of gods. The question to outsiders, those of different *genê* who now resided amid each other, was not whether to believe or to disbelieve in each other’s gods: the “gods of the nations” were “real.” The question was how to deal with these gods, even while dealing with their humans. In general, a sensible display of courtesy, showing and (perhaps even more important) being seen to show respect, went a long way toward establishing concord both with other gods (who, if angered, could be dangerous) and with their humans (ditto).

This simple background has occasioned all sorts of mistakes, misinterpretations, and errors of anachronism for historians of Judaism. The disenchanted universe—produced by the Renaissance; ensconced by the Scientific Revolution—has swept away the numinous clutter of antiquity, forcing modern constructions of monotheism into a much more austere mode than its ancient avatars ever functioned in. True, ancient Jews were ancient monotheists, but we need to put our interpretative accent on the adjective. By our measure, all ancient monotheists were polytheists. Ancient Jewish monotheists, like their pagan¹ and (eventually) Christian² counterparts, knew that gods other than their own existed, too: other peoples and cultures were obvious evidence of their existence.

Different Jews accommodated this fact differently. When foreign gods

1. On which, see the essays collected in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, ed. P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede (Oxford, 1999).

2. For a quick orientation in the ways that the congested cosmos of antiquity complicated Christian monotheism, see P. Fredriksen, “What Does Jesus Have to Do with Christ? What Does Knowledge Have to Do with Faith? What Does History Have to Do with Theology?” *Christology: Memory, Inquiry, Practice*, ed. A. M. Clifford and A. J. Godzieba (Maryknoll, N.Y., 2003), 3–17.

made a direct demand in a dream—something that involved no contra-vention of Jewish practice—Moschos son of Moschon *ho ioudaios*, in the third century B.C.E., very sensibly obeyed, and manumitted his slave. Seven centuries later, synagogue manumission inscriptions that open with an invocation to the god of Israel (“To the Most High God, Almighty, Blessed . . .”), close by calling as witness divinities closer to hand: Zeus (sky), Gê (earth), Helios (sun; cf. Isaiah 1.2 LXX).³ Privilege brought obligations, and international politics entailed international benefactions: hence Herod the Great, who made the temple in Jerusalem one of the marvels of the age, also erected temples to the imperial cult (but only in his Greek cities, never in his Jewish ones), and sponsored the Olympic games, which were dedicated to Zeus.

To pronounce these Jews assimilated or syncretistic or insincere or perhaps just plain not orthodox is to state, anachronistically and judgmentally, what we knew to begin with: they are ancient, not modern. Non-Jews mixed and mingled in Jewish organizations and activities while maintaining their status as outsiders, just as Jews mixed and mingled with the non-Jewish majority in baths, gymnasias, city councils, and various cultural events, all of which touched in some degree on traditional (that is, pagan) piety. Did the relatively secure and articulate attachments of blood so affirm identity that such interreligious intimacy did not confuse it? At a practical level, perhaps.⁴ What we do know is that such interactions occurred and continued, well on through the end of the Empire in the West, as attested by ecclesiastical legislation enacted against them.⁵

What of all the hostile, insulting, or angry statements about ancient Jews, available in Menachem Stern’s great work, that run counter to the easy ecumenism sketched above? Here we begin to encounter pressures exerted by claims to universalism. Hellenists saw in their own culture the fundamental measure of civilization; in its Roman versions, such universalism was expressed “religiously” and politically particularly through the imperial cult. The Jewish insistence on participation in outsider cults only up to a point—public sacrifice offered to foreign gods, including the emperor, seems to have marked the limit—occasioned pagan impatience,

3. L. I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue* (New Haven, Conn., 2000), 114.

4. For a less rushed tour of this historical terrain, see P. Fredriksen, “What ‘Parting of the Ways?’ Jews, Gentiles, and the Ancient Mediterranean City,” *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. A. H. Becker and A. Yoshiko Reed (Tübingen, 2003), 35–63.

5. A. Linder, *The Jews in the Legal Sources of the Early Middle Ages* (Detroit and Jerusalem, 1997).

and a sense of injury. Jewish difference could shade into perceived discourtesy or even (given that the gods supervened the common weal) dangerous disloyalty.

But here the experience of that other Mediterranean scriptural community, Gentile Christianity, gives us the measure of pagan accommodation to Jewish difference. Jews were excused from the worship of pagan gods, be they civic or imperial, precisely out of respect for their *patria nomima*, “ancestral custom.” Gentile Christians were extended no such courtesy or legal protection, precisely because, as Gentiles, they were obligated by birth and blood to show respect to traditional pantheons: flagrant lack of respect could disrupt the *pax deorum* and curtail heaven’s beneficence. “Persecuting” Roman magistrates, whether at local or (after 250 C.E.) imperial initiative, did not seek to have Gentile Christians stop “being” Christian; they sought, rather, to have these Christians, *qua* Gentiles, also offer to their native deities. Christian Jews were not so importuned during anti-Christian persecutions because, as Jews, they were not so obligated. And after 312 C.E., when the emperor’s allegiance became Christian, so did his *numen*; yet Jews were still excused from imperial cult. Blood sacrifices gone, Gentile Christians were still obligated to worship the emperor, and the rest of the imperial cult—incense, images, processions, priests, even the festive gladiatorial combats—all continued.⁶

Fourth-century Roman Christianity was a curious hybrid of Hellenistic-Roman universalism and Jewish (or, perhaps better, “scriptural”) exclusivism. On the one hand, Constantine and his successors (with the conspicuous exception of Julian) readily embraced the politically binding benefits of catholic rites and institutions. On the other hand, the new imperial church ignored the Hellenistic Jewish model of syncopated accommodation to paganism and drew instead on the Old Testament paradigm of extirpating Canaanite cults. (When, in 399 C.E., imperial troops shut down public temples, Augustine commented that the action conformed to *prophetica veritas*.) Diversity within the church was greeted with similar sternness, and perhaps even greater anxiety. Improper ritual directed toward the empire’s celestial patron could anger heaven, blight harvests, disjoin the seasons, bring on invading armies—all time-honored consequences of *impietas*. Heretics, therefore, put the empire at special risk.⁷

6. On which see especially G. W. Bowersock’s excellent essay “Polytheism and Monotheism in Arabia and the Three Palestines,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 51 (1997): 1–10.

7. J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (Oxford, 1979), 277–308.

Alone of the late empire's religious minorities, Jews continued to be protected, that is, to have a legal guarantee of a "right" to practice. Augustine even devised a Catholic theological apology for this unique Jewish privilege. Was the synagogue "grandfathered" into the new definition of *religiones licitae*, sheltered by the accident of the church's own dependence on the Old Testament? Was Jewish religious difference simply so ensconced thanks to long legal precedent that reversal was hard to imagine or effect?⁸ The evidence permits various interpretations. But one thing seems sure: Christianity as a religion of conversion loosened the ancient bond between ethnic and cultic identity that, for the most part, continued (uniquely?) intact for Jews and Judaism.

Legally, the way had been paved already in the early second century, when pagan emperors mandated that Jews restrict circumcision to their own sons. Majority culture in general viewed circumcision with abhorrence, often confusing it with castration, so that we have difficulty discerning the intent behind this law. Was it originally meant to curtail Jewish circumcision of Gentile slaves, or to hinder conversion (conceived in pagan sources as disloyalty to one's own *patria*) more generally? Or is it evidence of a generalized anxiety, occasioned whether by Christian or Jewish conversions, about maintaining the *pax deorum*? In its post-Constantinian iterations, this law certainly expressed the desire to restrict Judaism to Jews. And Christian ideas about Jews and Judaism—generated in part by the newer community's theological efforts to keep the Bible as Old Testament but to understand it in ways that supported its own non- and even anti-Jewish understandings—gave added impetus to the fourth century's new majority culture to keep its scriptural sibling, in this singular way, intact.

The phenomenon of conversion both *to* Judaism and *from* Judaism thus raises the issue of ethnic and religious identity in particularly interesting ways. When and how is a Gentile an ex-Gentile? When and how does he or she count as a Jew? Even rabbinic halakhah, an expression of a relatively homogenous Jewish subculture, yields varying answers. So too from the other side: Can a Jew, by becoming (say) a Christian, become an ex-Jew? Yes and no. From the Christian side, in periods of relative stability, the answer seems to be yes. Jewish converts have been absorbed into their new society and culture and the volitional dimension of religious identity predominates. In periods of instability and insecurity,

8. P. Fredriksen and O. Irshai, "Christian Anti-Judaism: Polemics and Policies, from the Second to the Seventh Century," pt. 3: "Pax Romana Christiana," *Cambridge History of Judaism* 4, ed. S. T. Katz (forthcoming).

no. Visigothic Spain, the Iberian Peninsula to either side of the Reconquista, Nazi Germany: as evinced by the laws and the behaviors of those societies, notions of ethnicity or blood or race trumped choice. From the Jewish side, medieval responsa and, more recently, issues surrounding Jewish identity with the reestablishment of the State of Israel have put the question forward in all its perennial messiness. The answer invariably, inevitably seems to depend on what's at stake for the questioner. As Moshe Halbertal concluded after a long and rich meditation, "When discussing, 'Who is a Jew?' all that is left for me is to respond: 'A Jew for what purpose?'"⁹

We end, then, by answering our question ("Who is a Jew?") with another question ("Who wants to know?"). If those who put the question are historians, they will understand that the visibility of Jews in the evidence to be interrogated depends in part on the historical period under review, in part on the definition of "Jew" orienting the search. If that definition now sits loose of "essences" or "foundational identities," a rich variety of identifiable types of Jewishness nonetheless still greets us.

What accounts for this? Biale in his graceful finale put it well:

The Bible . . . is the foundational text on which all later Jewish culture . . . was built. Jewish culture today is less closely tied to the biblical text as its source, but in one sense it is not entirely divorced from its predecessors. If the Bible is read not as one voice speaking but as many, so, too, all the cultures of the Jews described in these volumes represent many voices, responding, in myriad ways, to both text and context, each seeking to integrate a historical tradition with a specific cultural environment. Perhaps all these disparate voices from three millennia, assembled together under this literary roof, constitute the collective biography of Israel.

Sameness and difference, continuity and change. Biale and his authors offer a thousand-page-plus tour of this territory, at once foreign and familiar. *Tolle, lege*.

9. "Between Conversion and Identity," *Internet Jerusalem Post*, June 5, 2003, <http://jpost.com>.