

I



A WEALTH OF CULTURES

Continuity and break – a historical approach

It is with awe and astonishment that we contemplate the wonder of Israel's unbroken existence of three millennia. Rarely did Israel know the taste of political liberty; most often it suffered oppression, persecution, and catastrophes, the likes of which no nation had ever endured. And yet, it has survived in extraordinary dynamism and creativity. An existence at once so brilliant and dark has often appeared to observers as if it were exalted beyond the transmutations of time, beyond the reach of the laws of nature, as though the "eternality of Israel" could persist throughout the ages immune to destruction. Indeed, traditional religious historiography saw in Israel's history a continuity of sacrosanct values, transmitted in an unbroken chain of legators and inheritors. No controversy, if it was deemed to be "in the name of Heaven," could undermine these hallowed values; one could say about adversaries like the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel that "both are the words of the living God" (*Erub.* 13b). But if a controversy was thought *not* to be "in the name of Heaven," it was pronounced a deviation, a "heresy." Those who would break the bounds, be they individuals or entire sects, were ejected from the fold of Israel, their writings buried, their names forgotten. In this view of history, Israel's past is enveloped in a hallowed cloak of divine providence, impervious to conflict or change.

But not only traditional historians have glided over contradictions and conflicts in Jewish history. Secular Jewish historiography has also neglected the study of the dynamism of change and innovation. It has adopted the modern structural-functional approach that prizes the permanent over the transitory. For this school of historiography, Israel's greatest accomplishment in its history is the sheer triumph of national survival in the midst of an environment that relentlessly exacted from an exiled community both resistance and adjustment. In this view, beliefs, institutions, customs, and ordinances were necessary for the preservation of the nation, even if some of their functions may no longer be clear to us today.

Appealing as these two historic views may at first appear, both suffer from a very major flaw: they largely disregard change. The fact that in the course of its history Israel underwent prodigious changes, both internal and external, changes that were nothing less than revolutionary, is hardly accounted for. It is my contention that the history of Israel has been a dramatic arena of conflicts and accommodations, of controversies partly settled, often left unresolved, of fundamental contradictions in beliefs, valuations, and opinions, all of which brought about change that eventually forged entire cultures which were distinct from one another in substance as in style.

Furthermore, in neither of these two prevailing conceptions do we catch even an echo of the colossal events which have molded the experience of the past generation. Our contemporaries have had the shattering experience of a history that is not a continuity of slow, organic evolution, but a series of ruptures and upheavals, breaches, and surprises. Historical time, unlike the "even flow" of physical time ("tempus quod equabiliter fluit," in Newton's phrase), no longer appears to us as a continuous flow of events and acts, but as an outburst of things that had never before been considered, or even imagined. In contemporary eyes, the nature of history looms as catastrophic in its very essence, irrational temporariness descends without warning, cataclysmically, disasters abound, and the chain of reasonable causality is snapped. This has been the fundamental experience of our generation, and of Jews especially; it impels us to re-examine our attitude to Jewish history. Whoever has experienced a catastrophic outburst which so utterly disconnects all lines in the adventures of experienced time and is so astounding in its manifestations, cannot but contemplate the past through a prism of disruptions and shocks. Whoever has experienced the Holocaust of European Jewry, the rise of the Jewish center in the United States, and especially the rebirth of the State of Israel, whoever has personally witnessed the hitherto unimaginable, can no longer cling to an image of an uninterrupted historic structure. He need not necessarily believe in miracles, but he clearly needs to rethink the image of our world and of our history.

The establishment of the State of Israel was a revolutionary act of liberation, one which imprinted not only the future face of the Jewish people, but its past image as well. In the light of this revolutionary transformation we try to grasp the events transpiring within us, and around us, to comprehend the marvel of our dark existence in this remarkable form of a past that is shouldered and carried on. What is the meaning and the purpose of our years of freedom in ancient times and of our 2,000 years of exile? We ponder our past in perplexity, in admiration, also in shame, and we seek to mend the faults that were inflicted upon us during our long exile by the nations of the world, and by our own shortcomings of thought and deed.

The new era now begun in the history of the Jewish people does not diminish, but rather intensifies our wonderment over the nature of Jewish identity today and over all those countless generations of heroes and saints, sufferers of exile, expectant of salvation, over all that eternity of Israel for which Jews were slaughtered, then and now. I believe it is possible for us now, at an early stage of this era, to attain a new historical understanding, one which will fully meet the rigors of scientific inquiry and yet will also express our own spiritual values, the life-experiences of our own times, so fraught with change and horror.

Seven Jewish cultures

I distinguish in the history of the Jewish people seven units of acts and events, each charged with its own weight of meanings and symbols, and each a recognizable culture unto itself, unique in its characteristics. Every culture is a set of meanings articulated in the language of its own experiences and concepts, painting a picture of the world based on the specific experiences of the generations it encompasses. A culture in this study refers mainly to a unit of organized meanings that grasp and organize the multifarious manifestations of reality in three ways: through the practical sciences, via theoretical knowledge, and by offering a plan for personal and collective salvation. Each culture witnesses struggles between the originators of the new meanings and those who subsequently interpret them, but in each period a dominant trend emerges, which eventually determines the character of the entire cultural unit. Expressed in contradictory ideas and acts, in controversies and wars, overtly and in secret, these tensions-struggles resolve themselves in different ways, depending on the times, on the strength of the creators, and on the nature of the entire culture.

These are the seven cultures in the history of the Jewish people:

- 1 Biblical
- 2 Talmudic
- 3 Poetic-Philosophic
- 4 Mystical, and its later offshoot, the Ḥassidic movement
- 5 Rabbinic
- 6 The culture of the Emancipation
- 7 The National-Israeli culture

Naturally, each culture dominated at a particular period in history, but neither the periodization that we find in the history books during the ages of tradition faith, nor the periodizations prevalent in modern historiography (First Temple, Second Temple, Israel in its Land, Israel in Exile, etc.) correspond to this division into cultures. The theory of cultures requires a new periodization.

Periodization basically does two things: it organizes meanings into complete units, and it ascribes particular importance to certain events. Regarding its first function, one can say that periodization divides time into segments on the basis of certain differences it distinguishes between these segments, thereby defining the character of each period – by no means an easy task. But at the same time that it distinguishes periods based on the differences between them, it also determines how common meanings of the historical subject are carried forward, and how divisions and differences in these same periods occur. When the boundaries of meanings are delimited by a clear differentiation between those that belong to an earlier period and those belonging to a subsequent period (on the background of a physical sequence, but from the viewpoint of continuity and consecutiveness), distinguishable units are created, each of which is characterized by a certain integration, as we explain in chapter 5 in our discussion of tensions and their equilibrations.

The second step in periodization is the determination of the event or events which delimit the boundary between two units of meanings. This task, which at first glance appears the easier of the two, is in fact very difficult, and many historians and philosophers have wrestled with it, as witnessed, for example, by the endless debates on when the modern era, both in world and in Jewish history, can be said to have actually begun. One should be able to designate an event, or a series of events, purporting to delimit periods, as revolutionary in their salience and importance, and as roadsigns pointing to incontestably great changes. But, since the concept of period is essentially a heuristic aid, a diagnostic method, i.e. a methodological tool for the study and understanding of history, occasionally the roadsigns designating a period may be dislodged from their former positions, when a new method of research is introduced and a new understanding of the units of meanings is gained. A scholar's periodization scheme unmistakably reveals his historical conception. The roadsigns designate the importance he attributes to the units of meanings – where they begin and where they end.

The basic and central unit in our study is not a period but a culture. It is even more difficult to set time-limits for cultures than for periods, for cultures constantly invade each others' domain, as vanguards, rearguards, or as rivals. That this is frequently the case in Israel's cultures is due to a number of reasons inherent in the history of a nation dispersed in many lands, and lacking a single organizing political center sufficiently powerful to impose one culture on all its diasporas.

One can say that the Biblical culture and its various sub-cultures continued to the time of Simeon the Just (c. 300 BCE) and Joshua Ben Sirah (known in the Apocrypha as Ecclesiasticus, the author of *The Wisdom of Sirah*; c. 190 BCE), perhaps even extending down to the early Hasmoneans (c. 165 BCE). This was followed by the vigorous growth of the Talmudic culture,

which expanded and spread until its first consolidation at the time of Yoḥanan ben Zakkai (70 CE) and his disciples. This culture remained dominant until the eruption in the seventh century of anti-Talmudic social-religious ferment, some of which culminated in the Karaite movement. The Arab conquest (c. 640 CE) is perhaps the dividing line between these periods. The Poetic-Philosophic culture reached its zenith in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, in no small measure as a function of the spread of Arab influence. The Mystical culture consolidated during the thirteenth century and reached its peak in the sixteenth century, attaining its maximal spread in the Sabbatean movement (mid-seventeenth century). The Rabbinic culture reigned for a few hundred years. It achieved almost exclusive dominance in the sixteenth century, successfully rivaling the Mystical culture and completely supplanting the Poetic-Philosophic culture. In the Ḥassidic movement a blending of the Rabbinic and the Mystical cultures was eventually achieved. In the nineteenth century the Rabbinic culture still ruled in eastern Europe and in Muslim lands. The Emancipation culture, which next displaced preceding cultures, first germinated in seventeenth-century Holland, unfolded in the eighteenth century, and reached its first apex in the nineteenth century. The granting of equal rights in France as a result of the French Revolution is one of its outstanding landmarks. It reached eastern Europe in the form of the Haskalah, but its days there were short-lived. Its main thrust was felt in western and central Europe, and today it has reached a peak in the United States, France, England, and some other smaller Jewish communities. The National-Israeli culture arose in the late nineteenth century in eastern Europe and was subsequently carried forward by the Zionist movement in Israel.

The distinctions between these cultures do not lie in valuations of minor or trifling points; they are fundamental. Each culture carved out its own path into the very heart of the Jewish faith, into the superordinating concepts that govern Judaism – God, Torah, Israel – and into the nation's archetypal collective experiences: the exodus, the making of the covenant, the kingdoms of Judaea and Ephraim, exile and destruction, personalities of saintly or wicked men, expectation of the Messiah, and so forth. The cultures diverged over the most decisive and momentous issues, over life-styles and articles of faith. Each culture perceived itself as a new revelation of God's truth, bestowing a new comprehension of divine providence and of human and societal conduct (an insight its members denied, of course, to the antecedent cultures). Each such revelation, each new culture at its inception, was accompanied by an exuberant outburst of creativity and enthusiasm, a marveling at the miracle of innovation and an intense zeal. The Jewish soul could indeed rejoice in the bounty of distinct, seminal literary creations, each of which clearly embodied a new culture: the Bible, the Talmud, the *Guide for the Perplexed*, the *Zohar*, *Shulḥan ʿaruch*, the

writings of Moses Mendelssohn, Herzl's *Jewish State*. Those who experienced the vigor of these great works felt as though their authors had shed a new light over the world and over Israel.

Let us briefly list ten points, out of many more that we must ignore for the sake of brevity, upon which Jewish cultures disagreed:

- 1 The nature of human happiness: the description of the garden of Eden and of the first man prior to sin; sin-free man in the Messianic age.
- 2 The nature of sin and its cause: the evil inclination; the entire issue of the presence of evil in the world; crime and punishment.
- 3 Death: the uncleanness of the dead; the survival of the soul and the world to come; Judaism's attitude toward the dead and toward dying.
- 4 The giving of the Torah at Sinai, so central an event yet one barely mentioned in the Prophetic literature. What happened to the giving of the Torah in the Mystical literature? How did Maimonides view this event?
- 5 Signs and miracles: the power of divine will to alter nature's course and the abidingness of nature's elements; the meaning of belief in miracles; opinions on faith and the attitude toward the heretic.
- 6 The Jewish people: its character, mission, and fate among the nations; the nature of Israel's chosenness; the significance of the exile.
- 7 *Ta'amei ha-mitzvot*: the reasons, or rationale, for the Bible's commandments.
- 8 The freedom of man's will: free choice and the decrees of providence; attitude toward the individual, tensions between individual and collective.
- 9 Images of the patriarchs and of the nation's leaders: we find very diverse evaluations of Moses, King David, the Prophet Elijah.
- 10 The idea of redemption: the image of the Messiah and the Messianic age. Is redemption a natural process, or a radical upheaval that entirely cancels history?

In subsequent chapters some of these points will be examined in a systematic fashion as we analyze how each culture diversely interpreted the Bible, understood the *mitzvot*, and legitimated its authority. It will become clear that in each of these weighty issues the differences distinguishing each culture are far from trivial. Although each culture rests on the same superordinating concepts – God, Torah, Israel – and on the same archetypal collective experiences – the exodus, the covenant, etc. – each is bold in its innovations. How bold depends, of course, on the vigor of its creators, the breadth of their creation, and the depth of its penetration.

Culture and ontology

Three dimensions of ontology

Our study rests on the assumption that each one of Israel's cultures is anchored in its own sense of reality, i.e. that each culture is nurtured by its unique ontology. Ontology is defined, briefly, as the concept of the reality of beings, events, and acts, the sense of what is important or inconsequential, true or vain, permanent or transitory in these beings, events, and acts.¹

In keeping with its unique ontology, each culture makes a determination of what it considers real and what, within the real, is significant. Reality encompasses all beings, events, and acts that are revealed to consciousness, be they sensory or merely imaginary (as in the case of myths, idle fears, or phantoms of faith; phantoms, too, are a reality if they are taken seriously). But reality also directs consciousness outwardly at that which it yet lacks, at the dimensions of objectivity. In each ontology a tension is evident between subjective valuation and the desire to grasp reality "as it is." Ontology's sum of meanings can be classified in three main categories:

1 The significance of all the tools and methods with which society succeeds in maintaining itself, providing for its daily needs, ordering, and organizing its environment. The latter meanings include a society's relation to its land and to the nations that surround and influence it, as well as the ways in which both individual and group view and conduct themselves, i.e. the entire organized system of roles and statuses that endows a society with relative stability. This dimension of the sense of reality may be termed pragmatic ontology, or utilitarian knowledge, or the practical wisdom responsible for shaping men's acts and life-styles, their work and tools, their interpersonal relations, and their governing institutions.

2 In addition to developing practical wisdom for daily life, a culture must have a framework of meanings with which to render intelligible the nature of the world and the universe. This knowledge does not necessarily have a utilitarian purpose and is not apprehended through varieties of technology (magic being one variety of technology). This set of meanings includes opinions and beliefs about the nature of the universe – the heavens and the earth, the sun and the moon, oceans and storms – and about life's major phenomena that lie beyond man's control – birth and death, disasters, and horrors. This cosmological dimension of the sense of reality is theoretical knowledge. It is the source of philosophy and the sciences.

3 But in most cultures ontology has yet another, transcendent dimension. This encompasses that portion of culture-building meanings which offers salvation, relieves individuals and nations from distress, redeems from oppression, and "mends the world." This is the soteriological (redeeming)

dimension of ontology, also known in Jewish history as the "Messianic" dimension.

All three dimensions of the sense of reality are interrelated. Practical knowledge – the skill of the craftsman, the wisdom of the laborer – is aided by theoretical knowledge, and theory, in turn, is eager to enter the realm of action and public utility. Knowledge of the world combines with soteriological beliefs; for example, the belief that the Creator of the world is also its Redeemer. The Prophet Jeremiah already associated the knowledge of natural phenomena with the knowledge of a redeeming God: "God made the earth by his power, fixed the world in place by his wisdom, unfurled the skies by his understanding" (Jer. 10.12). "Israel is the people He claims as his own" (Jer. 10. 16); He is the Creator, He leads the world, and He redeems. Thus life, knowledge, and faith are inseparably fused. Together they penetrate progressively into a culture's subconscious until they become self-evident and understood as the "way of the world."

Each culture embodies in the daily acts of individual and society specific interpersonal meanings which direct, organize, and explain life. It sketches for its members a map of their natural and social environment, explains existing reality, and marks the limits of possibility. A culture also provides the means for attaining desired goals: tools and methods of work, principles and laws of behavior, as, for example, the uses of property and possessions. Every culture creates a framework of priorities deeply anchored in emotions and desires; these are known as values. It also furnishes the criteria necessary for judging these values.

The obligations imposed by an ontology are accepted by the individual and the group as if they carried the force of an objective reality, capable of inflicting injury or bestowing benefit, a force to be reckoned with in every decision. The sense of reality spreads over all acts and opinions; any attempt to assail its foundations is akin to stabbing the natural intelligibility of common sense; it is the arbitrary act of a lost soul, a heretic perhaps, warranting banishment, expulsion, or yet a worse fate. Since beliefs and principles of knowledge also draw upon feelings and imagination, one may say that all valuations and determinations are nurtured by the prevailing ontology, or, at the very least, are strongly influenced by it (for in each culture there are also remnants of the prior ontology and intimations of the ontology to come). Whether an individual is enriched by his culture's ontology, which is so much subsumed in all his reactions, or whether he is impoverished as a result of a shrinking ontology, is indeed a complex problem. This problem is perhaps best illustrated by the dual power of language.

It is not surprising that the Talmudic Rabbis thought of "nation and language" as one unit. They defined "nation" as a community of people that

hold in common language, origin, and territorial sovereignty. They understood that when the Assyrian King Sennacherib "long ago went up and mixed up all the nations" (*Ber.* 28a), he abolished both their kingdoms and their languages. Yet it is precisely through language that man can articulate much more than he alone, with his limited knowledge and life experiences, could ever come to know by himself. The language he employs automatically bestows upon him the knowledge gained by countless predecessors; thus, his understanding is expanded and enhanced with borrowed riches. Of course, the opposite can also be said: that language is limited and that man knows more than he is capable of articulating. He perceives countless impressions that cannot all be expressed in his limited daily vocabulary. The same is true of his skills and everything we call practical wisdom, all of which do not readily lend themselves to scientific formulation. We may say, therefore, that the prevailing culture and its formats both expand and contract the individual's capacity for expression.²

What is true of language holds also for all other forms of individual self-realization. Intellectually and emotionally the individual leans on this relatively safe and stable entity we call culture, which, in turn, both aids and encumbers him. Man acquires a measure of confidence by virtue of a relatively uniform and generally accepted tradition of meanings, i.e. a complete ontology comprising all three dimensions we have described.

Ontology, then, imparts the daily practical wisdom a community needs in order to deal with its physical-biological and social environment. This practical wisdom provides technological means for cultivating the world. But an ontology also ponders the central problems of life: birth and death, body and soul, creation and its creatures. And finally, it endeavors to answer the anguished cry: "Where shall I find help?!" (*Ps.* 121.1). This kind of overall ontology pulls together all the individual characteristics of a culture into one relatively stable entity. Like any other organized framework, a culture operates according to the dictates of its own logic: it permits and prohibits, selects and rejects. Those customs, traditions, deeds, and beliefs that ensue from its premises are allowed to prevail; contradictory premises are forbidden and rejected. Permanent modalities to which individual and community may attach themselves thus crystallize, thereby allowing the individual to join thousands of unknown members of his culture in a kind of ontological communion that imparts the comfort of a secure sense of belonging.

The sense of reality, or comprehensive ontology, or theory of reality, is not an unknown phenomenon in the study of cultures. Giambattista Vico spoke of "a common nature of nations." Oswald Spengler described the soul of nations and the "fateful ideas" that are at the foundation of each culture: the idea of order and harmony guided the Apollinian Man and shaped the destiny of the Graeco-Roman civilization. Ambition, struggle, and a

yearning for the infinite created the Faustian Man and determined the cast of European culture. Ruth Benedict gave examples of how primitive cultures were based on various orientations: one tribe's culture was geared to a life of sharing, while another tribe inclined toward competitiveness and hostility. In contrast to the theories of Vico, Spengler, Benedict, and others, our theory of cultures does not postulate a permanent, fixed sense of reality, a sort of immortal soul animating a community's mortal body. Consequently, we avoid any anticipation of future events as though these were but the preordained outcome of the past.³

The soteriological (redeeming) dimension of ontology

On the day of judgment a Jew is asked: "Did you hope for salvation?" (*Sab.* 31a). That dimension of the sense of reality which offers a plan for the redemption of man and nation, i.e. the soteriological part of every public ontology, seeks to relieve human anguish in a number of ways. Many and varied are the troubles that afflict mortal humanity, their boundaries stretch anywhere from ills that afflict with the force of impending catastrophe to lacunae and absences of perfect goodness. Let us list here four main categories of human afflictions.

The first category is anchored in the very finitude of human life. It includes the withering of the body, old age, diseases, and final extinction. Man is but a creature of flesh and blood, an object made of clay who, from time to time, is reminded of his own inescapable mortality: "Man was not joined but to be parted," lamented Moses Ibn Ezra. The partings and ruptures owed to the impermanence and the decay of human relationships are acutely painful. In ages past and down to the formulation of the second law of thermodynamics, this fate loomed in the imagination of nations in dramatic and terrifying imagery. The evil spirits were headed, of course, by the Angel of Death. How to escape the torments of finitude and unpredictable chance? How to flee that woeful day of our passing and final extinction? How to gain eternal life? To these anguished questions the soteriological dimension of ontology applies itself, providing answers that reflect the entire public sense of reality.

A second category of human afflictions arises from the wearying stress of human conflict. Individuals and nations are forever in a state of strife of one kind or another, from the private squabbles and disputes of individuals, all the way to global war. This category includes the entire public and personal pathology of discord and discontent. Jealousy and animosity fuel quarrels and disputes, the world is shredded and torn. Man yearns for a respite, for a remembrance of eternal peace and a dream of a serene future: "Seek peace and pursue it" (*Ps.* 34.14).

A third category of woes comes from sin and the sense of guilt. The sinner

knows that he has acted wrongfully, that he does not merit the position he holds among men, that he has failed to achieve the goals his own elevated self-image had dictated. The discrepancy between actual behavior and desirable conduct prompts a yearning for improvement and amendment, for the innocence and perfection of a lost paradise in a blissful future, free of the demands and obligations that so often give rise to feelings of remorse and guilt. Individual and society sense that they have failed to reach the state of perfection commensurate with their status, with their self-image or with a self-imposed hallowed code. They scrutinize their doings, find fault, bring various ailments upon themselves and upon others, and look for scapegoats to atone for imaginary or real sins. The soul's distress is not, therefore, limited to the private distress of the lone individual; it quickly spills over into the public domain, there to subvert and distort with mutual recrimination and strife. The fear of sin in bourgeois society gives rise to no lesser feelings of guilt than did the fiery invocations of hell during the ages of faith.

The fourth category of afflictions arises from the fear of a world devoid of meaning. The absence of meaning, the vanity of all things, is experienced as a tear in the fabric of meanings to the point of chaotic disintegration and dissipation. Man fears the hollowness of the soul that magnifies the emptiness of the world. He fears disorder in the surrounding phenomena and bewilderment in his own heart, so irrevocably immersed in the transitory. Without some kind of anchor in the permanent, he cannot even grasp the transitoriness of these disorders. This category of troubles was, of course, the potent subject-matter of modern existentialist writers. Doubt, boredom, and emptiness are the symptoms of the non-being hidden in being. From this dualism of our existence we wish to be redeemed to a life of fulness, a life of meaning, purpose, dignity, and pleasure, a life free of absurdity and nausea.⁴

Modern man has tried to escape these doubts by embracing the facile peremptoriness of a catechism; better to have a jumble of narrow, circumscribed meanings than an absence of any coherent meaning at all. By surrounding himself with myriad shreds of meanings, man escapes from the terrifying silence of the void into the ear-splitting din of proliferated meanings, thus blocking out the torments of boredom and hollowness.

During the periods of religious faith, Israel's God was described in its cultures as a Redeemer from all four of the above categories of afflictions. He Himself is conceived and depicted as the complete substitute and opposite of these troubles: He lives forever, He makes peace, He is utter perfection, His name is certain, His seal is true, He showers plenty upon the world, including the plenty of purpose, which fills all lacunae. But the Messianic dimension in Jewish ontology is distinct in each culture. As we shall see, the soteriological methods of the Biblical, Talmudic, or Mystical cultures are by no means identical. The Messianic dimension is clearly the choice element

in every framework of culture-building meanings; however, since it entails a fundamental transformation of an earlier ontology, it cannot be identical in each culture, except in a very superficial way. Only the emotional force that accompanies it is consistently sustained in all generations.

Not without reason, therefore, has it been observed that the secret of Israel's endurance as a nation lies in its high level of expectancy, in its faith in redemption, and its belief that history is not haplessly abandoned to the powers of evil. The symbols of hope in Israel's cultures are multifaceted, and all express the faith that there is a Master to the City, a watchful, though not always intrusive, Ruler over men and nations, who will, by virtue of performed *mitzvot* and good deeds, fulfill His promise according to the faith of His people.

Typical development of cultures

Polemics and birth pangs

Clearly discernible, if not always immediately apparent to the eye, an identifiably distinct visage characterizes each Jewish culture. Each culture embodies a defiance of those trials and tribulations (the four categories of afflictions, or Israel's exile, or specific catastrophes) from which it hopes, by virtue of its own new creations, to deliver. Every culture wages war against some "idolatry," not only the idolatry of Gentile cultures, but also against mask and graven image within Judaism's own fold. The cultures rage against "heresy," or "atheism," against any who would liken themselves to God in the manner of the Gentiles, by glorifying strength and courage, wealth and fortune. They would like to take these notions of preceding cultures, now become intolerable, and simply pound them to dust. Thus, in addition to the battles waged against idolatrous foreign cultures, disputes abounded within Judaism itself; for no culture simply accepted unchanged and unchallenged the legacy of its predecessors.⁵

The complex problem of how a Jewish culture arises, maintains itself, and finally disintegrates is compounded by the fact that many of the political, social, and economic forces that shaped cultures originated outside the nation itself and were often, in fact, quite beyond its control. On the other hand, each new cultural system wished to brand upon the age the mark of its own special political, social, and economic program. Thus it simultaneously reflected and directed, expressed and sustained, commanded and elevated, in order to magnify Israel's selfhood as it saw it. In each culture battle was waged over power: who rules? Who determines the nature and importance of the meanings that bestow power and honor? The political and intellectual leadership was charged with combatting the competing meanings propounded by hostile sects (*minim*, i.e. atheists, and heretics), and unorthodox definitions of its own meanings; it had to counteract

harmful beliefs. This struggle was also waged by way of omission and suppression. Jesus, for example, is seldom mentioned in the Talmud, an omission that antedates the Christian censorship, hence a conscious Jewish intention. Similarly, the Bible makes no effort to throw any light on the tenets of idolatrous religions. Hebrew sources do not enlighten us on the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the Gnostic sects. The Talmudic Rabbis excluded from the Bible the extensive body of apocryphal literature, that sequel to the Prophetic style. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Rabbinic literature concealed the character and strength of the Sabbatean movement. Moreover, it takes many years for a new culture to prevail. The adherents of the Talmudic culture, for example, did not gain widespread influence until long after the early generations of *zugot* ("pairs" of pre-Tanna'itic scholars and leaders), and not without heavy battles, especially during the reign of Alexander Jannaeus, the last strong Sadducee to occupy the Judaeian throne.⁶

The champions of each culture invest a tremendous amount of mental and emotional labor in the culture-building endeavor, in order to confer upon all its members the knowledge and conduct that befit a Jew in God's world. They also realize that the Torah does not pass in automatic inheritance from generation to generation; rather, it is acquired in anguish, it has "seventy faces," it is a spirit in man, a live spirit, through which he yearns to individuate and express himself. The cultures of religious faith dressed this spirit in the guise of *mitzvot*, those stringent norms of hallowed and accepted conduct, and cemented it in permanent molds. But they also infused it with fervor and enthusiasm, carrying it beyond the narrow possession of an exclusive, scholarly élite to become an inspiration for the individual to take upon himself willingly and lovingly the "yoke of Torah," the "yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven." Both of these aspirations, however, created tension, and each generation produced not only its innovators and ground-breakers, but also its own version of "perplexed," "heretics," and "atheists."

The charge of heresy accompanied all the great controversies in Jewish history: between the Pharisees and Sadducees; in the polemics surrounding the Karaites; in the disagreements between Maimonides and his opponents; in the polemics over the false messiahs; in the arguments between Haredim and Maskilim; between Hassidim and Mitnagdim; and today between Orthodoxy and modern secularism. Politics did not cease in Israel with the destruction of the commonwealth in 70 CE. Indeed, if no effective disciplinary power could be wielded from within Judaism, the "guardians of the walls" would activate forces from without, as happened during the controversy over the *Guide for the Perplexed*, when the Jews themselves asked the Dominican inquisitors in southern France: "Why go to such lengths to

ferret out heretics? They are right in your midst – the adherents of this very book of heresy."⁷

Creativity and the urge to renew the original

From dawn to decline each one of Israel's cultures passes through certain identifiable stages. The study of this development, however, has not yet yielded conclusions that can be considered certain and valid for each culture; for the time being, therefore, we limit ourselves to some general comments on how a culture evolves.

Generally, each culture embarks on its course with all the boldness of creative innovation, eager to do battle with the old, trumpeting triumphantly its own novelty as elevating, exalting, and redeeming. Witness the creators of the Talmudic culture who unabashedly crow: "A Prophet may henceforth [i.e. after Moses] make no innovations!" (*Sab. 104a*). And elsewhere: "A Sage is better than a Prophet" (*Bab. B. 12a*). Whence do the wellsprings of spiritual creativity arise, and what causes them eventually to dry up and vanish? The mystery of our creative power is never completely revealed to us. Two well-known attempts to explain the nature of creativity can be cited here.

Freud believed that spiritual creativity resulted from the sublimation of certain instincts, primarily the sexual instinct, when their avenue to immediate gratification is blocked. When emotions and sexual desires ("erotic" in the larger sense of the word) are suppressed and inhibited, they seek an outlet through channels of creativity. Hermits, saints, and ascetic mystics, for example, transformed the fire of carnal desire into a passion for God, which they expressed in sublime creations. In essence, then, this theory hypothesizes that deprivation spurs creativity. Sublimation of the instincts is the ennoblement enjoined upon us by the ever-present danger of our unbridled libido intruding into the public domain. Creativity, therefore, is a compensation for gainsaid pleasures.

A second theory – let us call it an idealistic-religious theory – makes quite the contrary assumption: powers beyond human understanding and control radiate and descend upon a base world from above, in order to elevate it and confer upon it a spark of the divine spirit. This ennoblement is an inspiration from above – not, as it was with Freud, from below – a reward, not a compensation. Creativity, according to this theory, originates from an abundance of internal powers that seek active outlets, an excess of that plenitude and generosity which God alone can bestow.

It is difficult to decide between these two opinions; no doubt there is an element of truth in each. For on the one hand, the creative power depends, so it would seem, on arduous efforts to free oneself from negativities, from

private and collective distress; yet there is also a need for the positive, for elevation, for the creative spark which works its way from distress to relief. It seems to me that both these sources of creativity, the negative and the positive, if we may thus call them, are quite evident in the development of Jewish cultures.

Be that as it may, the beginning of a culture is to be found in the creative power itself. Whenever creativity is intensely experienced, as in the first unfolding of a new culture, one can be sure to find important changes taking place; it is the unmistakable sign that great events and acts require new elucidation and interpretation, that decisive breakthroughs can no longer be ignored or left unchallenged. In these instances a joyful awakening makes itself felt. Bergson's words are appropriate here:

Partout où il y a joie, il y a création: Plus riche est la création, plus profonde est la joie . . . La vie humaine a sa raison d'être dans une création . . . la création de soi par soi, l'agrandissement de la personnalité par un effort qui tire beaucoup de peu, quelque chose de rien, et ajoute sans cesse à ce qu'il y avait de richesse dans le monde.⁸

How deeply felt was the joy of anyone who had the good fortune to cleave wholeheartedly to the creations or to the creators of a new culture! The soul was inspired, the new work and its originators were exalted above all preceding works. New vistas seemed to open up, a kind of foggy veil was lifted from reality to reveal holiness in all its glorious brilliance; darkness rolled away before light. Witness how the Rabbis spoke of the Oral Law, the Poet-Philosophers about the *Guide for the Perplexed*, the Kabbalists about the *Zohar*, and the members of the Rabbinic culture about the *Shulhan 'aruch*. Our literature abounds in testimonials to the euphoria evoked by a cultural creation, especially at the beginning of its development, or at the zenith of its achievement.

Every culture rises and endures in the joy of creativity; indeed the justification for its existence is this very creativity, especially the ability to create dramatic symbols that not only delight the heart and the mind, but also contribute to a soteriology. The startling Talmudic metaphor picturing God engaged in the study of Torah is an example of just such a symbol. In the famous *aggadah* about Moses in heaven, we hear that God not only sits and studies the Written Law of Moses, but also all its subsequent exegeses, refinements, and innovations, the authority of which has now become as compelling as that of the original Written Law. The notion that the Torah had pre-existed Creation, that it had always contained that unique Talmudic brainchild, the Oral Law, was a bold claim indeed. It was staked by the champions of the new Talmudic culture as part of their struggle to justify and legitimize their own creation.

Another word yet on creativity: the individual creator often does not know from what source his work emanates, for he frequently absorbs

influences, the nature and limits of which he is unaware; even when the source of influence becomes known to him, he stamps his own imprint on whatever he has absorbed to the point of obliterating the external source of influence. So, too, does a culture *vis-à-vis* the sources that bear upon it. The hallmark of each culture is the forcefulness with which it can shape and formulate, so that even when external influences are absorbed, its own unique stamp obliterates those externals. There are numerous examples of this phenomenon in our cultures.

Influence indeed is not the essence of creativity. At most, it is a stimulus and an incentive. One should not, therefore, judge a culture by the influences that worked upon it, but by the uniqueness of its experiences, opinions, and beliefs. In this uniqueness is its ontology crystallized. The wonder of ontological renewal in all three dimensions we have described certainly merits serious attention. Even when the surrounding circumstances and influences have been studied and made known, the renewal itself remains an astonishing and exhilarating phenomenon.

However, before we arrive at a culture's consolidation, we should first take a look at an important phenomenon in the unfolding of each new culture: innovation, so we see, is not brought about by a complete break with the past; it results rather from the infusion of new blood and spirit into an already existing creation. Each of the post-Biblical cultures was borne on the crest of a revitalization movement in an attempt to renew and refurbish that which had lost its vigor and prestige. We venture to say that Israel owes its survival to this ability to both eradicate and revitalize its past. Each of the redemption-seeking, post-Biblical cultures attempted to acquire its knowledge of reality by reopening the wellsprings of creativity which had dried up in the previous cultures, always returning to that primary source of blessing: God's word revealed in the Bible. Not unlike the Renaissance movement in its day, the cultures of Israel sought to cleave again to the original source, to take new possession of the original intent of the nation's fathers. This they did, however, in the spirit of their own experiences and concepts. We shall elaborate on the revitalization of Scriptures later on. Here we merely note that every culture yearns to recapture that blissful moment of Judaism's peak creativity. Its creations attempt to breathe new life into Scriptures, to partake again of that first sweetness of creativity, and to have the good fortune of seeing their own new ideas being savored as much as the prefigurations of these ideas, originally given at Sinai, had been.⁹

The creators of each culture believe that there exists a permanent inexhaustible fund upon which one may continue to draw, even though its principal has been largely consumed and much depleted, or, to echo a *midrashic* metaphor, as if glass vessels that have been shattered could still be restored.

In cultures that venerate the old and mistrust the new, a movement of new awakenings is forced to assume the guise of venerable antiquity. The Romans, too, preferred the old to the new (unlike the Greeks, who relished novelty), as Cicero reminds us: "Nihil mihi antiquius est" ("Nothing is as dear to me as the ancient"). Our Sages voiced a number of stringent prohibitions against new ideas, whether innovations in Torah itself, or merely in life-styles. Generally, they drew no distinction between mundane matters and matters pertaining to faith and doctrine. Only in the seventeenth century did a new avenue open for the study of writings dealing with worldly matters, for example, with *midrashic* legends and anecdotes, where the Rabbis addressed non-*halachic* issues. That such a distinction could and should be made was the argument put forth by Azariah dei Rossi in *Me'or 'eynaim* (Ferrara, 1574), and this was, in fact, the focal point of the dispute engendered by that controversial book. The generations of faith clung to the notion that whoever was pure in conduct and thought, would keep and cherish the Torah; a true believer would not presume to adulterate in any way the sterling coin minted by the ancients. We know, of course, that in violation to this pious intention, every one of our cultures brought forth men who propagated startling new ideas. This, however, was done cautiously, by ascribing new insights to venerated old names, to early codifiers (Poskim), to the fathers of the nation, and directly to Scriptures, by way of "creative interpretation." In this manner they swept out their own inhibitions and the strict rules against innovation; they threw out the old, because they had discovered something newer and better.

The revitalization of Scriptures took various forms, but its purpose was always the same: if the previous culture no longer satisfied, if it failed to ensure redemption, its dying flame had to be salvaged from the embers, a new altar would be erected, and the eternal light rekindled. Every culture thus linked itself to the chain of tradition, preserving and destroying the antecedent in keeping with its own needs, and with a care not to let the burden of the past hamper its own forward march.

The period of consolidation; legitimation via exegesis

The second period in the development of each culture is its consolidation and institutionalization. This is the time for more precise formulations of its authority and the proper organization of its functionaries. In the Talmudic culture, academies (*yeshivot*) are established and rulings are promulgated. The Mishnah preens with the might of an authority scarcely inferior to that of the Bible itself. A new class of scholars is created which sets itself apart from the *'amei ha'aratzot* (the unschooled, the ignoramuses). Learning Torah is deemed an obligation incumbent upon every Jew, and the merit of erudition now sweeps aside the authority of the traditional ruling classes, for it bestows equal rights (and more) upon the lowliest, even upon the

bastard, provided he be a scholar. This consolidation of a culture depends to a large extent on the historic conditions surrounding its development. The spread of the Talmudic culture, for example, would surely have been impeded if Jewish communities had not been drawn together within the fold of the great Islamic empire, whose political center, Babylonia, was the metropolitan home of the Talmud's disseminators. As long as this entity remained unified, the Ge'onim's word was heard in the far-flung confines of the empire. On the other hand, the same political cohesion which bulwarked the authority of the Exilarchs and the Ge'onim also favored the spread of skepticism and heresy within the Talmudic culture and gave birth to the Karaite movement. Similarly, the violent expulsions from Spain and Portugal, more than any internal decline, forcibly ended the spread of the Poetic-Philosophic culture. The very nature of this culture required for its flowering a climate of rationalism and tolerance, an adherence to humanistic-universal wisdom. These were not the qualities nurtured by the political conditions prevailing in Spain and Portugal at the time, and they inevitably withered and died, thus expediting the demise of the entire Poetic-Philosophic culture.

Many dangers imperil a culture from within and from without; it must be cultivated with devotion, wisdom, and purpose. The study of its meanings and the preoccupation with their preservation and development are therefore an integral part of a culture's creation, making whoever labors on cultivating its meanings an important partner in its creation. The Talmudic Sages frequently expressed this idea when they spoke in praise of Torah-study, placing it even above prayer. They liked to emphasize the verse: "If a man turns a deaf ear to the law, even his prayers are an abomination" (Sab. 10a, commentary on Prov. 28.9). Similarly, Maimonides in *Mishneh Torah* expressed this idea with the zeal of a true believer: "Of all precepts, none is equal in importance to the study of the Torah. Nay, study of the Torah is equal to them all, for study leads to practice. Hence, study always takes precedence of practice."¹⁰ In the same spirit, Sa'adiah Ga'on, Bachya Ibn Paquda, and other creators of the Poetic-Philosophic culture, recommended the study of philosophy and the sciences. In the following example, we encounter an exhortation to study something which would undoubtedly have been unthinkable in the previous culture: Rabbi Bachya prefaces his book *Duties of the Heart* with these words:

I once questioned a man counted among the learned in the law, concerning some of the topics I have mentioned to you as appertaining to the Science of Inward Duties; and he replied that on this and like subjects, tradition takes the place of independent thought. "This," I rejoined, "can only apply to those who, on account of their small powers of perception and intelligence, lack the capacity for reflection; as, for example, children and feeble-minded persons. But surely, one whose intellect is able to attain certainty on what he has received by tradition, and who refrains from

investigation owing to sheer indolence or because he holds God's commandment and His Law in light esteem, will be punished and held guilty of negligence."¹¹

In its second stage, a culture disseminates its own interpretation of the Scriptures; this newly revitalized version then becomes institutionalized. We have said that while it is true that every one of Israel's cultures is a new opening, a vital explosion of bold creative forces yearning to revive the cultural domain with its own fresh waters of salvation, each culture also aspires to be a renaissance of something older than itself, a restoration of the Biblical culture. The Scriptures were held to be God's revealed word, or Israel's spirit revealed in its purity: only the first generations were privileged to see God and His world in their original luminance. The rest of us are burdened with the task of rediscovering the light of their early, bright vision. Even though each culture manipulates the Scriptures (by way of "creative exegesis," as explained in chapter 2) with great freedom and claims for itself definitive authority, the Biblical literature always remains "Holy Writ," the cornerstone of Israel's very existence. Yet the builders of each new culture stress that Scripture is to be properly understood, and this, of course, in their way. The Mystical culture goes so far as to claim that without its interpretation, the Bible in its literal meaning (*peshat*) is nothing but a barren desert. How so? The letters of the word "בראשית" (in the beginning) are the same letters as those that make up the words "אתר יבש" (a dry place). Removing Kabbalistic wisdom from the understanding of the Written Torah, says *Tikkunei ha-Zohar*,¹² is like removing the fountain from the spring, reverting the universe to chaos, impoverishing the world and prolonging the exile. Thus, the Kabbalistic interpretation to the first words of the Bible boldly informs us that the written Torah, unaided by Mystical knowledge, is but a barren desert.

This kind of interpretation transposes one culture into the sphere of another in the belief that this transposition, though an adaptation to life's new requirements, actually unveils the essential core of that other, original culture, and removes from it any hint of latterly acquired corruption and blur. Indeed this exegesis attempts a new view of life, a new thought, a vision of God, Torah and Israel, which transcends the historical guise of these superordinating concepts. The generations of faith feared deviations from the divine source embodied in Scripture: the new and the recent, being farther removed from the divine source, were inevitably inferior to the more ancient. The possible compromise in this struggle between early generations, with their outdated strategy of salvation, and the changed horizons of the new age, was exegesis.

The problematics of exegesis and the ways in which it reflects not only Scripture itself, but the literal sense as well, is discussed in chapters 2 and 3. Here we merely point out the tactics of a culture in its second phase, in the stage of solidification and institutionalization, when it employs a variety of means in order to strengthen its authority. Foremost among these, as we

have said, are the revitalization of Scripture by way of "creative exegesis," drawn from the new ontology, and the dissemination of the exegetical version of the newly dominant culture.

Stagnation and collapse

In its third phase of development, a culture becomes routinized in a self-evident ontology, a reality that now feels like "second nature" and no longer elicits wonder. The matter-of-fact overcomes, then silences, the enigmatic and the querying. A culture into which creators have poured their energies, whose life's blood has watered its network of meanings for the redemption of the world, now becomes a unit of given facts, a heritage that stands on its own, seemingly impervious to change, to be accepted as it is, as in the first bloom of its youth. Objectivization and dogmatization are symptoms of this stage. The gnawing from within, however, grows more insistent, and the meanings begin to decay and disintegrate. New creative forces are waiting to rise from the underground. It should, however, be reiterated that we cannot expect to find a clear, straight line of progression from one phase to the next. History is full of disjunctions and fluctuations, and leaps are more often the rule than slow evolution. Nonetheless, we can distinguish in the development of a culture at least those three phases we have listed. The third phase deserves particular attention, and we shall elaborate on it now, as we summarize the entire theory of cultures.

No culture undertakes to build its edifice without a proper strategy for the successful resolution of the problems and anxieties that afflict the times. Every historical document, whether a written text or an archeological finding in clay or stone, hints at the entire strategy, or at least at a part of it. Every document embodies the effort to overthrow the burden of defects stacked upon a culture; it can be understood in the light of the transactions carried on at the time by the members of the culture with one another and with their predecessors. The novelty of a culture is that, armed with its strategy, it opens up new avenues of salvation for its builders-members. It is not easy, however, to find candid formulations of the proposed strategies. Israel's cultures do not always openly acknowledge the need for change or adjustment. But even in the Talmudic and Rabbinic cultures, there evolved a number of rules that were meant to justify, even demand, a strategy of change. These were known as "instructions for the hour," "the need of the hour," "the times require it," and the like.

No culture can emerge from naught; if the forerunning culture has been utterly destroyed, a new one cannot simply arise from its ashes. Yet, clearly, the convulsions of crisis and destruction do open up new opportunities. Every new culture is buoyed precisely when faith in the ability of the preceding culture to console and redeem begins to falter. This progressive undermining lays bare the failings of the previous strategy and of the entire

preceding ontology. And in this respect there is no difference whether faith has been undermined by external or internal causes. Every culture struggles to rise from its underground position as a counter-culture into conditions that will promote the penetration of its consciousness, its ontology, into the hearts and minds of the general public.

Attempts to salvage from the ruins

Each culture is first triggered by a real experience of conflagration and collapse, or by the perception of imminent conflagration and collapse. The builders of the new culture seek to salvage whatever they can, or need, from the ruins of the old culture. They may congratulate themselves upon the sacred rescue-mission they have performed and may ascribe their motives to dutiful devotion to the fathers and reverence for the system of meanings the latter had erected. Indeed it is notable that aside from occasional acrimonious outbursts of controversy in times of extreme crisis, Israel's cultures generally did not ill treat each other.¹³ What the members of a culture do not like, they simply leave to oblivion; whatever appeals to them as a life-giving draught, they utilize, their aim being to draw unto their fledgling culture the sanctity and authority of venerated predecessors. Every one of Israel's cultures luxuriates in the past; it gathers, preserves, and remembers. But, as we have explained, it also scatters, forgets, and buries. No matter how hard a culture fights for its life, no matter how insistently it keeps claiming that it is a unified, complete entity, no single element of which may be rejected (like that stone-structured dome in the Rabbis' famous metaphor of the Torah, where the dislodgement of a single stone brings about the collapse of the entire dome), these claims now go unheeded. This kind of disregard for a ruling culture's directives, the disregard that ventures to pick and choose at its convenience ("the whole Torah is from Heaven, except a single point, a particular *ad majus* deduction or a certain *gezerah shawa*," *San.* 99a) elicited from the Talmudic Rabbis the sharp rebuke contained in the verse: "He has brought the word of the Lord into contempt" (Num. 15.31).¹⁴ These admonitions notwithstanding, new cultures always seemed bent on undermining the entire dome, so that some building-blocks could be thrown out and others reused for their own new edifices.

The cultures of Israel may at first glance appear as an accretion of meanings, many of which have been relegated to deepest oblivion. Yet Israel's cultural heritage is not a graveyard in which meanings lie buried in the dust of ages with not a hope of resurrection. Rather, meanings lie side by side, or one on top of another, awaiting the sound of the trumpet that will awaken them to return and serve the needs of the living, either in their original meaning, or in a changed form, according to the needs of subsequent ages.

Final eclipse

Tradition refers to the collapse of a culture as "forgetting" ("When the Torah was forgotten from Israel"), whereas the building and buttressing of a new culture is referred to as "establishing." The Talmud mentions a number of "forgettings" and "establishments" in the history of Israel: "For in ancient times when the Torah was forgotten from Israel, Ezra came up from Babylon and established it. (Some of) it was again forgotten, and Hillel the Babylonian came up and established it" (*Suk.* 20a). I interpret these expressions as hints that empower the superordinating concepts of Judaism (i.e. God, Torah, Israel) to assume new meanings in accordance with the changed needs of the age, in other words, as hints at a culture's collapse and the beginnings of a new one.

The chasm that separates between the Talmudic and Biblical cultures is nowhere better illustrated than in the *aggadic* story we mentioned earlier about Moses who ascended to Heaven and found the Holy One, "engaged in affixing coronets to the letters of the Law" (*Men.* 29b). The idea here is that the Torah cannot be placed in the hands of Moses without these "coronets," because Rabbi Akiba will in the future "expound upon each tittle heaps and heaps of laws." When Moses wishes to hear what Torah scholars, post-dating him by many generations, are talking about, he seats himself in a distant back row and listens to their discourse upon the law. But he is unable to "follow their arguments." So wide has the gap grown between his Torah and theirs that his spirit is weakened, his strength deserts him, and he is not consoled until he hears Rabbi Akiba say, in response to his pupils' challenge as to the source of a certain *halachah*: "It is a law given unto Moses at Sinai".¹⁵

And indeed how could a member of the Biblical culture, one of its chief architects no less, understand the thought processes, the language and style of a member of the Talmudic culture? The entire language of the Mishnah is alien to a member of the Biblical culture, the language of the Gemarah even more so. For language is not merely a tool or a form. It is a most fundamental construct in the organization of knowledge and wisdom, and a change in language entirely alters not only cognitive conception, but also sense perception. Language enters into the very marrow of experience and thought, and imbues the latter's capacity to conjure sights and crystallize general concepts. The *aggadah* story cited above makes clear that each culture speaks its own language of concepts, metaphors, and symbols, and that consequently it is difficult for its members to understand the language of another culture, and virtually impossible to grasp finer nuances and deeper meanings. This is the reason for corrupted meanings and for misunderstandings between cultures.

Another observation about the disintegration and collapse of cultures is, I

believe, that not one of Israel's cultures vanished from the world as a result merely of internal exhaustion. True, after a certain period of time, every culture begins to show signs of fatigue, its power to console and redeem wanes. But more often than not, closure came upon a culture due to ravages, expulsions, and catastrophes from without. It is difficult, of course, to calculate accurately the true relationship between an end resulting from a depletion of energies, an arrival at an impasse, and an end that descends, unforeseen, from without. Perhaps both modes of decline are interconnected. This is how the author of *Seder olam zuta* ("Brief Order of the World," a chronicle of unknown date, probably from the sixth to eighth centuries) described the end of the Talmudic culture: "After the court of Rav Ashi, Israel was dispersed a great dispersion, and disputes increased, and the roads fell into disrepair, and the study of Torah declined."¹⁶ Internal and external factors are indistinguishably interwoven in this statement.

I myself tend to believe that certain cultures, especially the Biblical and the Poetic-Philosophic, had their lives cut short before realizing their full creative potential. In contrast, the Rabbinic culture has arrived at an impasse: its output continues to pile up with no fertilization from without and with little inspiration from within. The tremendous forces it commanded in its heyday, which could, in the midst of harsh exile and debilitating persecutions, brighten and lend dignity to the life of east European Jewry, began to ebb in the eighteenth century. For a while it revived again when Ḥassidism injected the vitality and enthusiasm of the Mystical soteriology into the waning Rabbinic ontology. But when the foundations of the Jewish reality upon which the Rabbinic ontology was based began to weaken, the Rabbinic culture could no longer rule as before. I attempted to prove elsewhere¹⁷ that this undermining of Rabbinic supremacy had occurred well before the actual collapse of the guardian walls of tradition in the French Revolution. The earth-shaking events that occurred outside the ghettos did not come as a surprise to western European Jews. True, the Emancipation was the product of non-Jewish visions, but the transformation that had paved its way in the Jewish world was the result of internal choices. Some time later, I was gratified to find my analysis supported by Benzion Dinur,¹⁸ who, contrary to commonly held belief, thought that the changes taking place in European Jewry did not result from the onslaught of the Jewish Enlightenment, the Haskalah. The Maskilim's critique, according to Dinur, sought to salvage a world that was already disintegrating. The internal Jewish world had begun to break down earlier, following the failure of the Sabbatean movement, and as a result of the new ontology that had begun to penetrate certain circles in the upper stratum of western European Jewry. These became the creators of the Emancipation culture. Once the foundations of the new ontology were embraced by a large public, the Rabbinic tradition lost its status in western countries. But it

continued to exist, and in the State of Israel it has even experienced a recent revival.

The wealth of Jewish cultures

The age-old Jewish world stretches before us in richness and breadth, embracing in its generous fold at least seven large provinces, which we have designated as the cultures of Israel. It is tempting, of course, to gloss over the glaring discrepancies between one culture and another by insisting, as tradition has so often done, that whatever appears novel is simply a facsimile of an older original, which alone is worth preserving. Indeed, the gates of interpretation were never closed, but historical honesty requires that we note both sides of the coin: the seven cultures have much in common, to be sure, but the distinctions separating them cannot be disregarded; the continuity is there, but the ruptures must be taken into account too. It is precisely because these distinctions amount to such fundamentally different ontologies that the question must be posed: what is it that sets Judaism apart as a unity within diversity and as a continuity amidst change (if indeed it possesses a unique essence). The term "unique" used here conveys neither a complimentary nor a pejorative connotation, but simply suggests a sense of difference and distinction, in the spirit of the Rabbis' testimony about Israel that "Israel are distinguished by their ways from all other nations" (*M.K.* 16b).¹⁹ Every culture is "distinguished" from its neighbors and Israel, clearly, did not quite resemble any other nation. Even if we do not appreciate the opinion that "all of Israel's deeds are stranger than those of all the nations of the world" (*Pesikta Rabbah*, 15), many of its deeds are clearly "separate unto themselves" (*Exod. Rabbah*, 15), unlike the ways of other nations, separate and unique. Similarly, the same recognition of distinctness must be accorded to Israel's seven cultures. From this wealth of cultures stems the uniqueness of the *totality* of Jewish history.

The pity of it is that over the ages much of this wealth has been lost. Time and time again Israel's treasure houses were plundered and decimated. Just as in the Middle Ages Jewish property and financial capital seldom endured in Jewish hands for more than three generations, so too the heritage of the spirit seldom survived intact. Catastrophes and persecutions precluded steady accumulation. But there was a deeper reason for the absence of accumulated spiritual capital, one which our theory of cultures readily accounts for: although each culture preserved and cultivated previous achievements, it also disqualified and rejected much of the old, to the point of transforming, often quite beyond recognition, even uncontroversial elements. It is a privilege of the modern historian to be able now to survey all seven cultures "as they were" and as they fancied themselves to be, together and individually; he alone is able to restore to long-buried and rusted treasures their brilliant luster of old.

Our theory of cultures should forestall the facile optimism of historical functionalism as it has occasionally appeared in the social sciences, especially in sociology and anthropology, whereby whatever serves the community in its struggle against adversaries or natural catastrophes is thought to be preserved in its culture, while that which is ineffective is supposedly rejected and forgotten. The Rabbis of the Talmud had already unwittingly propounded this kind of functionalism: whatever the generation required, they said, was preserved, and whatever it did not require, disappeared. More recent historians like S. Dubnov and R. Mahler held a similar view.

My observation has been that every culture also preserved gross misjudgments, retrogressive notions, and withered wisdoms that were of little benefit to the living in their day, much less so after they had passed, while the excellent was not always cherished. The creative momentum of each culture was not spared blunders and absurdities, and these too continued their existence, to the detriment of the inheritors who now wish to take possession of their complete heritage. Moreover, we see plainly in Israel's history how difficult it was to bury anything with finality. That which had once been apocryphal literature, something external and contradictory to "Torah," was revealed in another culture as being of paramount importance. Those apocryphal visionary books shook off their dust in the Mystical culture and experienced a remarkable revival. We note, however, that in their second incarnation they made a more cautious appearance, hiding under the safe screen of great Talmudic names like Rabbi Simeon bar Yoḥai, Rabbi Israel the High Priest, Rabbi Akiba, or Rabbi Ḥanina ben Hakaneh.

Politics and culture: conflicts and tensions

The concept "culture" in this study refers to a framework of various types of meanings which are embodied, with a certain measure of permanence and in relative uniformity, in the deeds and institutions of the individual and the society, all geared toward the ultimate goal, redemption. We have explained that every culture is a network of meanings which shape personal and collective life-experiences by addressing the four main categories of human distress. Every culture is, therefore, in its essence soteriological, that is, it seeks to mend and to redeem, and this explains why religion figures so largely in culture, even when it takes a secular form: God, the supreme symbol of religion, is "the One performing grand salvation in the midst of the earth" (Ps. 74.12).²⁰

But every culture is also a political phenomenon. Human beings forge their life-experiences in the inter-personal relations that activate their economic and political behavior, and in the prototypes they create for their thoughts and actions. This forging cannot take place outside the framework

of existing meanings. Human beings find the fabric of their culture spread before them. It antedates their birth and it continues after their death. Nonetheless, their culture hinges on them, on their experiences, on their solution to the distresses of their existence. The relationship is therefore dialectic, complex, and bristling with tensions between the prerogatives of the individual and the public exigency. Superficially, it may appear that politics, which attempts to organize this relationship, is nothing but the battlefield upon which rights and privileges, properties and possessions, freedoms and servitudes are fought over. But the essence and source of this battle in our theory of cultures is the struggle over the right to define the cultures' meanings – their nature, their worth, their relative rank. The adversaries in the political arena fight over the organization of meanings; for a meaning must signify something, i.e. it does not deal so much with the private, narrow acts of individuals as with institutionalized public acts, such as a hand outstretched in greeting, or a public office. In this ceaseless battle, politics endow the meanings manifested in a society's conduct with relative stability, until it triumphs as a regnant meaning, accepted voluntarily by the majority, or imposed upon it. Aristotle already pointed out that politics was, due to its power to exercise authority, the most decisive "art" in life, "chief of all the arts."²¹

We conclude from all this that the controversies that animated Israel's cultures were political in nature, i.e. they were disputes over the interpretation of meanings: what do the superordinating concepts and the archetypal collective experiences mean, and how are they to be organized into a coherent system capable of exerting control in all spheres of life? Examples of these struggles can be found in all our cultures. The example I shall bring here, while it is perhaps political by its very nature in that it concerns the relations between Israel and the nations, nonetheless adequately illustrates, I believe, the point we wish to make.

We know that the early Hasmoneans waged war not only against the Seleucian rulers, but also against aliens residing in the Land of Israel, mainly in the Hellenistic towns surrounding Judaea, forcing upon them conversion to Judaism or exile. A town whose residents refused to accept Israel's Torah was destroyed and its people banished. A new concept emerged at this period: the "cleanness" of Eretz Israel versus the "uncleanness" of heathen lands. "Jose ben Jo'ezer of Zereda and Jose ben Joḥanan of Jerusalem decreed uncleanness in respect of the country of the heathens and glassware" (*Sab.* 14b).²² Here we have the first Tanna'itic "pair," two of the early creators of the Talmudic culture, decreeing and instituting the Pharisaic notion that the Land of Israel was to be preserved "clean." On many issues the Hasmonean kings, in particular Alexander Jannaeus, failed to see eye to eye with the Pharisees, but this decree they gladly adopted: there was room in the Land of Israel for none but Jews and Judaized aliens. The extended meaning of the notion "uncleanness" was

thus exploited to vindicate the Hasmonean conquests. The very extension of the concept was a political act that carried with it a number of important consequences during the Second Temple and thereafter.²³

Trailblazers and rearguards

The creative endeavor engages a range of talents: innovators, renovators, vanguards, always some romantics, and also parasites feeding on crumbs left over from earlier creators. The concept of culture proposed here explains the phenomenon of van- and rearguards by clarifying the methods advocated by a culture for its soteriological strategy. We see plainly how some of the bold innovators ventured far out ahead of the pack to define and organize meanings into a new cultural framework, yet their message remained unheeded – the hour was not ripe, or their strategy ineffectual. Others, no less innovative, enveloped their message in venerable old trappings, which seemed at the time to contain no novelty at all; only some time later was the seemingly conventional message recognized as having blazed forth a trail toward a new culture.

An example of this phenomenon may be drawn from the history of the Poetic-Philosophic culture. We know that Jews in antiquity, i.e. in the first two cultures, did not incline toward rational cognition, the kind that is acquired through “objective” observation and abstraction. In this their creativity differed from that of the Greeks, who had invented the concept “theory” (from the verb *theiatei*, meaning to observe phenomena, as also in the word “theater,” another word derived from that same root). The man of theory observed the unfolding events of existence, but refrained from intervening in them. The ancient Hebrew also acquired wisdom, but this wisdom expressed itself in affinity for his family, his people, and his God, a spiritual affinity of religious devotion. During the first two cultures he thought in terms of the perceptible. His abstract concepts were few, although in one such concept the early Jew arrived at the summit of abstraction, in breadth and in power. That, of course, was the idea of a God entirely inconceivable by means of the sense perceptions. Generally, however, knowledge was acquired by a Jew in ancient times as something he experienced “in all his bones,” in his body and soul, in love and in fear, in anger and in joy. As a result of the strong imprint left by the first two cultures on the entire history of Israel, this early mode of non-abstract cognition is apparent in subsequent cultures as well.

It is possible, of course, to speak of “Jewish philosophy” during Biblical and Talmudic times, and many scholars have indeed presented the basic concepts of the Prophets and the Rabbis as systematic creations. Scholars have especially admired the abstraction of certain Talmudic aphorisms which seem to encapsulate a comprehensive theology, sayings like: “Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except fear of Heaven” (*Ber.* 33b).

The keenness and succinctness that characterize conceptual definitions in a number of Talmudic sayings bear witness to an experienced use of fine-tuned conceptual tools, resembling those used by the Greeks. Best known perhaps for the vigor of their conciseness and abstraction are the maxims in the *Ethics of the Fathers* (*Pirkei ʿavot*). But, in general, one may safely say that Jewish thought prior to the Poetic-Philosophic culture had not acquired systematic form. Problems were conceived disconnectedly, with little thought of fusing them into a comprehensive intellectual unity. There had been some early attempts at systematization, but failing to gain recognition as innovations, they had left little mark. The prevailing strategy of their culture did not permit such innovators to sail out and chart new courses, and they were thought in their time to be no more than an additional prop to the already existing cultural edifice.

Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE–40 CE) was an exception. This seminal thinker devised a theological system not unlike those created in a later period by the Poetic-Philosophic culture. But he himself, despite the influence he exercised over the development of Christian thought (“from Philo to Spinoza,” in H.A. Wolfson’s famous thesis),²⁴ was little known among his own people and was not revealed as a precursor of the Poetic-Philosophic culture until that culture belatedly discovered him in the sixteenth century. During his lifetime Philo had no influence on Jewish thinking; the Talmudic culture, in the upward momentum of its swing to power, rejected and buried any work tainted by the encounter with Greece. Thus, it was only upon the second encounter between Greek thought and Judaism, through the mediation of Islam, that a Jewish Poetic-Philosophic culture was finally created. In ancient times, the conditions for its development were more favorable in the Hellenistic diaspora than in Eretz Israel, where the soteriological strategy of the Pharisees had already become entrenched.

This kind of reintroduction of ancient, previously ignored, sources occurs also in the Mystical culture. It is possible that the roots of the Mystical culture go back to antiquity. In the Talmudic culture one finds strong intimations of opinions that became prevalent in the late mysticism, which would explain why the *Zohar* was attributed to Rabbi Simeon bar Yoḥai and his son, and to their disciples. But the Mystical culture did not become a full-fledged and large-scale ontology until those early intimations had undergone major transformations. Those who were later thought of as the initiators of the Mystical culture were not recognized as such in their day, and it is quite possible that they had never intended to initiate this culture at all.

The concept “culture” as a heuristic tool

Thus far we have given preliminary explanations on the theory of Israel’s seven cultures. It is difficult, however, to conclude this introductory chapter

without some additional elucidation of the primary concept in our study, namely the concept "culture." Our theory is anchored on an understanding of the comprehensive context of historical research in general and of the research methods used. This theoretical basis radiates in many directions. The following deals with the methodological aspects of the concept "culture" and with its meanings in a number of research areas. This explanation will, I believe, bring out the unique nature of our theory.

The nature of the model

Immersed in the tide of historical processes, man is ill equipped to grasp the entire meaning of human (or Jewish) history, for history is never at a standstill point of conclusion and consummation. It is forever in flux toward an unknown future. Those who view the whole of history as one completed unit of the past, lacking an outreach toward the future, invariably drift into foggy speculation and vain casuistry. On the other hand, even though it is unwise to seek one meaning for the whole of history, it is difficult to observe its phenomena and proceedings without wishing to endow them with meaning: what "really" happened, we ask, and what was the nature and purpose of these deeds and events? But while it is vain, in my opinion, to pursue "the meaning of history," it is certainly quite legitimate to look for the meanings of specific events and acts. In particular, we can seek and discover those meanings and intentions that the participants themselves saw in their history, we can examine and find out how they explained to themselves and to others the occurrences of their lives. On this point it is surely possible, based on the sources, to arrive at some kind of "true" assessment. How to interpret sources accurately is in itself a difficult problem, and we shall have occasion to return to it in chapter 8. Here we merely wish to stress that the idea that there could be a meaning for the whole of history is a dubious and hazy ideological concept, and we have no use for it except by way of negation: to distance ourselves from its fallacy and from those who have embraced it and lost their way in its labyrinth. But we do have a keen interest in the meanings that former generations imputed to the events of their own times, to their ontology, to their institutions and actions. In this kind of empirical research, it is possible to discover units of meanings and arrangements of orders and disorders that I have labeled cultures.

The concept "culture" is used here as a heuristic model for the study of Israel's history. Theories of scientific method, as well as theories of cognition and of language in the philosophical systems current today, distinguish different types of models. There is, for example, a model that is meant to represent the modeled object, but in altered proportions, such as a miniature airplane. Then there is a model which, by its attributes or actions, sets out to imitate the original, as when a private act of charity serves as a metaphor of

the entire idea of charity. In religious language it was said that a man must imitate the attributes of the Holy One: "Just as He is gracious and compassionate, so be thou gracious and compassionate . . . as He clothes the naked . . . so do thou also clothe the naked" (*Sab.* 133b). For the uses of research, however, it is the heuristic model that is particularly useful; it is a construct that guides the researcher in acquiring knowledge, as, for example, Bohr's model of the atom, or Freud's model of the psyche. Whatever its type, the model parallels certain qualities of the original, but it never itemizes or exhausts them all. Hence the rather extreme claim of one thinker: "There is no such thing as a perfectly faithful model; only by being unfaithful in *some* respect can a model represent its original."²⁵ Disregard of this basic fact leads to an erroneous interpretation of the model's behavior. In some measure the model resembles all human means of expression that attempt to elucidate the enigmatic and the arcane by way of "transference." These linguistic forms are called metaphors, i.e. comparisons that "lend" or "transfer" the meanings from a tangible item to an abstract object, or vice versa. "The model functions as a more general kind of metaphor."²⁶

Thus "culture" is for us a symbolic representation of a very specific reality, contrived for the purpose of describing and explaining the history of Israel. The unit "culture" is a construct devised for the purpose of understanding, and the researcher labors to bring it as near as possible to "reality as it was," fully aware all the while that it is quite impossible for it to be reality "as it was" in its entirety. Absent this awareness, he falls into an error in categorization, stripping the model of its metaphoric character as though it were entirely materialized in reality. The concept "culture" as it is used here, is akin to Max Weber's concept of the "ideal type."²⁷

Hegel proffered the concept of the state as a heuristic model of this kind. His philosophy of history postulated the state as the primary historical unit and in this context Hegel discussed the kingdoms of China, India, and Persia, as well as the Napoleonic empire. These states were in his view both the patent subjects of history and the units of meanings through which one could understand the historical process. The error in this construct was that it ignored whatever was not state, and lumped together in one state the history of many nations over a very long period of time. Hegel's Kingdom of Persia, for instance, included, through the entire millenium of its existence, all of Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt, Judaea, and Samaria.

Other well-known heuristic models have been postulated, usually, as in the case of Hegel, with little discrimination as to their nature and functions, by Oswald Spengler ("Kultur"), Erich Voeglin ("configuration") and Arnold Toynbee ("civilization").²⁸ Toynbee's concept of "challenge and response" is reminiscent of Hegel's thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, but they are less dialectical and more emotional. In fact, they are rooted in Scripture. The Bible, remarked Toynbee, is deeply ingrained in our hearts, though we may not be aware of this. The Bible frequently addresses the individual in calls,

commandments, warnings, or as Toynbee puts in, in challenges: the first man is challenged not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge; Noah is challenged to build an ark; Abraham is called to "go forth," etc. Success is obtained by a straightforward response; failure results from a distorted response (also known as sin). The challenge-response model is quite different from the model of cause and effect in natural phenomena.²⁹

In one respect the soteriological concept of culture that I have presented here coincides with Toynbee's view that the essence of history is always the story of religion, for example, that the rivalry between paganism and Christianity in Greece and Rome, and the eventual conversion of the pagans to the Christian faith, was a decisive factor in ancient history. Metaphysical philosophers of history have always set their hearts on analyses of world history that would encompass in their grand sweep the entire historical horizon revealed to them. The study of the details they left to historians. They assumed that history indeed revealed a coherent structure, not a chaotic hodge-podge of countless order-resistant details. History was basically a forward-march which might be experienced as progress or evolution, as a cyclical recurrence, or at some other rates of change, or any other combinations of the above, as, for example, that history repeated itself partly in cycles and partly in forward motion, like the revolving of a wheel that swiftly propels the vehicle forward while spinning around itself in cycles.

Closest to our own model of culture is Pitirim A. Sorokin's concept of "systems of culture,"³⁰ of which there are basically three: the ideational, the sensate, and the idealistic. There are also mixed systems of cultures. Both the basic systems and the satellite combinations have highs and lows, whose rate and occurrence Sorokin calculated with precision. All the cultures of the world are built on the basic system or on a combination of systems.

Two concepts in the study of culture today

The concept "culture" is set forth here in contradistinction to the two definitions of the term that are most current today in scientific discourse and in everyday language: the humanistic definition and the anthropological-sociological definition. Each is based on a different conception. The humanistic conception reserves the word "culture" for only one set of human creations. Not every individual or group action, not every public institution can be considered a product of culture. Culture and public activity are not synonymous notions. The humanistic conception holds it as self-evident that a community can produce a variety of required tools and artifacts, as well as opinions and beliefs. The question is, what are the special qualities that make these a unit worthy of the designation "culture." Not every human proceeding can be dignified by this name.

The humanistic concept is normative-evaluative: good manners and

refined taste, works of art and thought, everything beautiful and noble belongs to culture. It makes sense, therefore, to say that absent a literature or art, certain people, and even entire nations, have no culture. Being normative, the conception distinguishes between high and low levels of culture. The humanistic conception, consciously or unconsciously, presupposes (but seldom concedes openly) that there exists a world of universal, general, and human values operative throughout all the expanses of geography and the transformations of history, and that it is possible to determine objectively who generates and supports such values and who rejects and subverts them. Certain details of this objective evaluation may fall prey to disagreements, but the prevailing rule declares: wherever there are no universal values, there you find a low culture, even barbarism, regardless of tools and artifacts. The concept "culture," therefore, stands in opposition to barbarism, lack of culture, primitiveness, etc. Furthermore, some groups possess a high culture while others have inferior cultures. A group that has embraced universal values and lives by them is said to possess a high culture, whereas a group that seals itself off in ethnocentric tribalism has a culture of the inferior sort, if it can be thought to have a culture at all.

Art, literature, philosophy, and religion are the foundations of culture, according to the humanistic concept; some in this school of thought emphasize in particular the religious element. T.S. Eliot, for example, believed "that no culture has appeared or developed except together with a religion." Moreover, only religion imparts order and tradition, without which a culture cannot achieve any kind of internal spiritual integration. Because of the decline of religion in our day, western society lacks a true culture, according to Eliot.³¹

The anthropological-sociological concept emphatically rejects the normative-evaluative approach. In this view, works of art, religion, and philosophy are only a portion, and not necessarily the choice portion, of culture as a whole. They may be noble in the eyes of its members, but in the eyes of the examining researcher they deserve no preference and should be treated no differently from other more prosaic components of culture. Culture, said the great anthropologist A.L. Kroeber, is "the mass of learned and transmitted motor reactions, habits, techniques, ideas and values – and the behavior they induce."³²

The anthropological-sociological concept recoils from evaluation: everything human belongs to culture and there is no basis for any preference of one element over others. Culture is beyond good and evil, beauty and ugliness. The notion that culture is the totality of all life's experiences, rather than the result of exerted powers and talents, produces a neutral and tolerant conception of culture. This conception has had a long intellectual history, originating from the polemics between biological determinism and speculative philosophy (such as Hegel's). Culture is the totality of a group's

actions, and the outcomes of its actions, in relation to its environment, everything that individual and society acquire and organize through their power and talents in accordance with their needs. This is how the concept was defined by Tylor and other early anthropologists and most sociologists have followed this definition. The need for neutrality in scientific inquiry contributed to the spread of this concept in our times.³³

The new approach

The concept "culture" that I employ in this study is neither humanistic nor anthropological-sociological. It shares with both concepts the emphasis on the special dimension of human endeavors in history, which are not products of instinctual automatism, as biological determinism would have it. It holds that even though culture belongs to the realm of the living and requires a corporeal body and world in which to reveal itself, beliefs and principles, art and technology, language and institutions are not transmitted from generation to generation via biological channels. The Torah, as we know, is not passed on in inheritance, but is acquired in the exertions of creativity and perseverance. But in contrast to these two primary theories of culture, the concept we have offered here distinguishes in culture three dimensions. The entire concept has been labeled "soteriological" in order to emphasize the third, most important, dimension. A soteriological conception which defines culture, any culture, as a system of meanings expressing a three-dimensional public ontology that includes individual and corporate redemption, cannot be narrowed to a definition of culture as the sum of men's "adjustment to their surroundings," as Sumner and Keller proposed.³⁴

The emphasis on the struggle waged by human beings in order to change the conditions of their life so as to mend the world and to redeem themselves does not disregard the minutiae of everyday living, or economic and political issues, nor the evil and the ugly that require mending. The mundane tools, the clothes, and methods in which meanings are embodied are not dismissed in aristocratic disdain, for in this concept culture is not the outcome of an ethereal spirituality hovering in rarefied spheres of abstraction.

The proof of a concept's strength is in its fecundity. The test for this new conception of Israel's history is, therefore, its power to understand and to illuminate. The principal thesis of our study, as it has been presented in this introductory chapter, now requires proof and illustration. This the following chapters propose to do as they deal with methods of Scriptural exegesis, with conceptions of the *mitzvot* in the different cultures, with problems of tensions and legitimation, and with historical perspectivism. We begin with the Bible, that cradle of all Jewish cultures, how its interpretations changed and how it was changed by interpretation.

2



INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE IN ISRAEL'S CULTURES

Our study postulates that each one of Israel's cultures understood Scripture in its distinctly unique way. The profound differences in how the Bible was interpreted, and how its sanctity was valued, clearly demonstrate that any notion of there being but one single Jewish culture cannot be entertained except metaphorically. Nothing could better illustrate the fundamental differences between the seven ontologies than the wide variance in interpretations of Scripture itself. Before we begin our discussion of exegetical methods in a number of Israel's cultures (not all can be analyzed in the limited space of this study), we shall classify the methods of interpretation into five types. A clearly defined classification of interpretational approaches should help us understand the nature of interpretation in general, and of Biblical interpretation in particular, and should reveal the originality of the comparative method we are advancing here. Our method sets out not only to explain texts; it aspires to a "hermeneutics of cultures," to an understanding of how each one of Israel's cultures relates to the Bible itself, and how it relates to the preceding cultures' understanding of the Bible. We thus venture beyond Scriptural exegesis into a realm where entire cultures comprehensively interpret each other. This cultural hermeneutics is the foundation of the comparative method that I propose.

Five types of interpretation

How the Bible was interpreted in each of Israel's cultures can first teach us something about interpretation in general. Let us consider these five major types of interpretation:

1 *Reconstructive* interpretation sets out to explain a text without straying beyond the boundaries of the assumptions underlying that text or, to use Abraham Ibn Ezra's (1092-1167) famous metaphor in the introduction to his commentary on the Bible, "If the truth is like the center point inside the circle," then this kind of interpretation strives toward the "center point of