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THE THREEFOLD TENSION IN JEWISH HISTORY

Tensions in Israel's history

Three distinct tensions characterize the dynamics of creative forces in each one of Israel's cultures. By tension we mean here a contest, sometimes open, at times subterraneous, between conflicting tendencies that alternately battle and accommodate one another, until they are resolved in a generally acceptable equilibrium which, once attained, determines the character of the culture. An equilibrium is not necessarily peaceful; it is, however, a viable coexistence which turns conflicts into a dominant and endurable normalcy. The nature of these tensions in each culture and the history of their eventual equilibration constitute, in my view, the essence of Israel's history.

The first tension pits "universalism" against "particularism," if the use of these abstract and somewhat hackneyed terms may still be permitted. The essence of this tension is the enduring struggle between the ethnic-national and religious body, with its law and ethics, language, beliefs and customs, style and self-image, as they have been fashioned and molded by the specific, exclusive memories and hopes that have crystallized in the process of its historical individuation, and contrary ideas and visions that break through this ethnic barrier to embrace humanity at large. The need for national separation and exclusiveness confronts the desire for an openness and an expansion that allow spiritual latitude for the insights of all nations.

The second tension characterizing all Jewish cultures sets the desires of the individual Jew against the national collective will. This tension is evinced in the individual's struggle for his private rights and benefits against the control of the collectivity and the demands of its institutions. The measure of individualism and collectivism operating in each one of Israel's cultures has direct bearing on the creative personality and on the esteem in which it is held. Thus, it is important to examine who in Israel is empowered to decree or to change rules of conduct, what is the nature of the leadership – who rises to power and who is deprived of influence – what is the status of dissident sects in a culture and how they are treated. The measure of

freedom an individual is granted in order to develop his creativity also expresses the relation between the universal human account and the national Jewish score, between humanity in Judaism and Judaism in humanity.

The third tension we find in our study of Jewish history is between the various constituent elements of the culture itself. How did race, language, land, religion, economy, social class, army, government, social law, national and religious symbols all fuse into one cultural unit? How does a culture achieve integration, if only a relative and temporary one at times, of its constituent elements? In the course of time many changes occur in the relative strength and importance of a culture's components, and it is important for us to understand what in a culture is a means to an end, and what, in fact, is an end unto itself. A question that raised animated controversy in this century, for example, was whether the Jewish religion was the decisive factor determining the fate of the Jewish people, or whether religion was merely a means that enabled Jews to preserve their nationhood, a sort of "instrument of exile" (*kli golah*), to use a famous phrase, provided by Israel's hidden Guardian to insure that the people would not perish when the national soil slipped from under its feet. Was the heavy yoke of Torah and commandments imposed in order to shield it from assimilation among the nations of the world? What are the elements of a culture that preserve and protect a nation: is it the contents of its faith, or practical precepts or perhaps external factors like land and language? The third tension is illustrated by the manner in which each culture related to its inheritance, for example, to the Land of Israel or to the Hebrew language. In this regard the goal of the Messianic vision can be defined as the desire to alter the existing relationships between a culture's different constituent elements.

Our study points, then, to three great tensions in all Jewish cultures:

1. Between nationalism and universalism;
2. Between the Jewish individual and his collectivity;
3. Between the elements constituting a culture: land, language, religion, state, present conditions, and visions of the future.

Every person lives between the opposing poles that characterize his culture. But in the course of a lifetime the tensions that govern one's world may undergo some change. There were periods in Jewish history of both negation and affirmation, twilight zones between cultures, when a Jew experienced a shifting in the equilibrium between these tensions. We have stressed the inadequacy of theories that see in Israel's history a single, uninterrupted and integrated national-universal vision. Nor can it be alleged that this history is founded on harmony between universalism and particularism, i.e. on the perfect equilibrium between the opposing tendencies to redeem the nation and to save the world. Jewish historians

have too long ignored the internal contradictions within each culture between visionary aspirations and actual dispositions; they have especially ignored the shifts in emphases and the intentional omissions employed by cultures in their struggles with one another and with the outside world. They have further neglected the study of the resultant changes. Having failed to make the distinction between different cultures, many scholars have inevitably failed to notice such changes. We should beware the lure of that seductive theoretical-sentimental abstraction known as "Jewish essence," for it has, as we try to prove in this study, no basis in the reality of Jewish history. It is, I believe, quite evident that each Jewish culture expresses different views on the universal Creator, who is a God of justice and righteousness to all nations, and a God of Israel, who elevated one nation alone to be His chosen people.

Israel and the nations

Let us examine this first tension and the equilibrium, or resolution, it achieves in the Biblical, Talmudic, and Poetic-Philosophic cultures. We preface this discussion with some general remarks about the dualistic framework of all human existence. The fundamental dualism of our life condemns us to perpetual oscillation between abstract humanism and historical-concrete nationalism, between intention and realization, between our elevated, unsullied ideals and the unseemly reality of our mortal existence. Human beings seek in these oscillations a measure of equilibrium and respite. The tension between reality and its "potential" is inescapable; no degree of moralizing, nothing, in fact, short of Messianic intervention, can resolve it. Neither is it possible to gloss over Jewish nationalism by resorting to "ecumenic" concepts: symptoms of Jewish particularity in no way contradict the universal spirit; on the contrary, absent the distinctive marks of Jewish particularity, the ecumenic spirit only leads to wholesale assimilation by obviating the entire problem upon which the tension depends. A rational ethic is by definition universalistic and the more ethical and rational, the more general it tends to be. The same holds true for the universal monotheism of an Israel purely "of the spirit," postulated as a rival to Christianity. Such an Israel is doomed to complete extinction.

However, there is no doubt that the coupling of the monotheistic idea with the notion of God's zeal for the national honor of His favored people, irritated the pride of other nations and roused resentment. We need not go so far as to accept the generalization proffered by Toynbee and others that Europe's nationalistic fanaticism originated from Jewish Scriptures and tradition, that Nazism, therefore, was a logical, if unholy, offspring of Judaism, and that the poison emitted by Hitler was of Jewish provenance,

but there is no doubt that the absoluteness of God's unity, joined to the absoluteness of Israel's unity, provoked Gentile charges of Jewish separateness and xenophobia.

The tension, at any rate, existed also within: how to weld, without arousing resentment and strife, a universal religion addressed to all human creatures, with a national creed? The universalistic idea is not in itself inconsistent with the idea of power and dominion. After all, God's kingdom is also a dominion. In every confrontation between two opposing forces, an organizing and ordering power inevitably makes its authority felt. The results of such struggles are destructive whenever a temporary and partial realization is misconstrued for a complete and permanent fulfillment. On the other hand, in a reality where arbitrary might prevails, where there is no hope for the promise to be fulfilled, utopianism crops up, or worse still, cynicism. The tragic dualism of our existence is expressed in this inescapable tension – the existence of power devoid of meaning, and of meaning bereft of power. The object of divine providence is to unify these two, power and meaning. The kingdom of God – the ultimate purpose of human history – signifies the attainment of plenitude in all of life's undertakings; Israel's role is to be the instrument that expresses the Prophetic vision of God's deeds and might.

Besides the obvious dichotomy between an idea and its realization, the idea itself is subject to articulation in greater or lesser degrees of fidelity or "authenticity." The idea of a reality transcending national and geographical barriers toppled the local pagan deities and created an ecumenic world, but in fact it was difficult to eliminate national definitions and distinctions. "Every definition is a negation," said Spinoza – this rule is very much true in the life of nations.

Israel's national separateness, the cause of so much Gentile reproach, was, however, an absolutely necessary condition for the universalist idea. Without this individuation of the national image in a peculiar historical essence, no universalist idea could be nurtured. Israel understood that only national individuation insured existence in this world, and that every existence was necessarily limited, individuated. Leo Baeck's words are appropriate here:

> Had monotheism not become the religion of Israel, had it not gained its firm security by becoming a national possession, or had not the national consciousness of being the chosen people given it the spiritual strength which carried it forward, it might, perhaps, have become the secret, mysterious doctrine of an esoteric sect, and in some old writing a record might have been left of it. But it would never have been able to resist the change of time, and so to become the religion of all time.[1]

The development of the universal ethical idea is an issue unto itself. Clearly, it was an idea that combatted both particularistic idolatry and philosophic

paganism. The latter, incidentally, also achieved in its time a high degree of cosmopolitanism, especially in the Cynic and Stoic schools (the word "cosmopolitan" itself was coined by the Cynics).[2] It is also clear that the universalist idea was always more than merely another way of looking at existing reality; it was above all a desire and wish, a human ideal, the noble expression of a hidden intent seeking to be revealed in the fulness of real life. The instrument for this revelation was, as we have said, the "chosen people."

The idea of Israel's chosenness proclaimed that the Jewish people was destined for a special role in the soteriological process, which is the essence of man's history in this world. The idea of the election justified the national individuation required for the fulfillment of the ideal. The covenant between God and Israel expresses the mutual relation between universalism and particularism and all the problematics entailed therein. Israel is free to abandon God, to betray the covenant, and to indulge in the worst, idolatrous kind of particularism. But it is also privileged, and this has even been imposed upon it as a commandment, to be the instrument of divine universalism and to assume the special status of those who dare to be chosen and dare to give self-conscious expression to their chosenness. Fortified by the idea of its chosenness, Israel's faith in its lofty historical role could withstand conditions that belied all signs of outward success. The external results were not taken as any kind of decisive proof. On the contrary, to all appearances Israel was actually inferior to other nations – the few and the weak trying to make their way among the numerous and the strong, hardly a "success story." The idea of chosenness demanded, of course, a certain abstention from the ways of the nations, a separation for the purpose of sanctification: "You shall be holy to me, because I the Lord am holy. I have made a clear separation between you and the heathen, that you may belong to me" (Lev. 20.26).[3] Devotion to this exalted destiny imposed certain hardships. But the universalistic message anticipated in its visions a future where that which had been hidden would be revealed. Beyond the cloud veiling all nations a real force was at work, as yet imperceptible to the blindness of human eyes.

Clearly, there is a close connection between universal monotheism and the idea of one humanity acting on one historical stage. Religious cosmopolitanism grasped the whole world as a single unit transcending the barriers of nations and territories. But the basic dualism of human life does not permit beings of flesh and blood to see clearly the full revelation of God's will. In this full revelation all tensions are resolved, but no eye has yet seen this resolution, at any rate, no human eye.

The tension between a universal religion and a religion peculiar to one nation has many facets. Notwithstanding the widespread diffusion of its offshoot religions, Christianity and Islam, which, in their own ways, emphasized its universalism, the religion of Israel never succeeded in gaining acceptance among other nations and remained the lone legacy of "Abraham's seed." Christianity, we know, held that the two tendencies, the prophetic-universalistic and the Pharisean-nationalistic-particularistic, failed to achieve in the Torah and in the usages of the Jewish people any kind of satisfactory integration for the general humanistic mind, and therefore the Jewish faith could only spread among the nations after the impediments of its individuation, its "stubbornness," "ritualism," and "legalism" had been removed.

The chosen people and the universal God

Let us now examine how this tension was reflected in the cultures of Israel. The Jewish people lived and developed in the midst of the Mediterranean cultures, in a region where many nations and creeds met. Israel intermingled with them. Nowhere does the Bible commend Israel for cultivating a racial purity. Nonetheless the nation did develop an image of separateness, of "a people that dwells alone, that has not made itself one with the nations," in the words of the foreign prophet Balaᶜam (Num. 23.9). Another classical formulation of the reason for hatred and persecution of Jews in the diasporas was given in Second Temple times by an outspoken and well-known foe: "There is a certain people, dispersed among the many peoples in all the provinces of [the] kingdom, who keep themselves apart. Their laws are different from those of every other people" (Esther 3.8).

The Bible presents the history of Israel as the individuation of a people through faith in one God and a covenanting of an alliance with Him, and as a series of rises and falls in the nation's self-image, an oscillation between a "holy nation" and an entity "like all other nations." The process of individuation was disrupted by idolatry, especially by the cults of Baᶜal and Ashtoret, the deities of the land and its fertility. Scriptures emphasize that there is no natural bond between the people and the land: "because the land is Mine" (Lev. 25.23). The Land of Israel was given to the nation only by virtue of its covenant with God. Israel's Holy Days celebrated events connected with the exodus from Egypt, but no festival was ordered for marking the conquest of the land or for any other national-territorial triumph. The tremendous novelty of the Biblical culture in its rejection of idolatry was the idea that Israel's national God was not the God of only one nation and one land, but the lord of all nations and all lands. Israel's special tie to its land in no way limited the jurisdictional reach of its God.

The Biblical culture conceived the idea of a universal God and expressed this idea in many forms, two of which are key: the God of Israel is the God of the world, ruler over nature and over the history of all nations; his Torah, although given to Israel in a special covenant, is destined for *all men*. The

God of Israel is Lord and there is none other, and faith in Him and in His teaching must be accepted by all men. The two ideas are quite explicit: on the one hand, Biblical accounts testify that God Himself, as it were, consented to the idolatry of the nations and gave His true Torah only to Israel. He is God of a particular nation and a specific land. Banishment from the land, "the Lord's inheritance," is viewed by David as a threat to go and worship "other Gods" (I Sam. 26.19). Ruth the Moabitess in following Naomi to the land of Judaea hopes to "take refuge under the wings of the Lord God of Israel" (Ruth 2.12). But on the other hand, idolatry is looked upon as belief in falsehood, as worship of "wood and stone." The Prophets' vision expresses the desire to spread Israel's Torah among the nations, and the belief that at the end of days this Torah will be universally accepted. God's covenant with Israel will be kept forever, but the nations, like Israel, will all continue as separate entities. Every nation will keep its own distinctiveness, but all will rise together and come to tell the Lord's praise in Jerusalem, "when peoples are assembled together, peoples and kingdoms, to serve the Lord" (Ps. 102.22).

The Prophets' chastisement is prompted by their assessment of the state of the covenant: why does Israel not keep it? What if Israel persists in denying it? But the Prophets also know that, regardless of Israel's adherence to the covenant, the Lord of all the earth, the God of justice and righteousness, does not cease to be the God of His chosen people. God is destined to root out idolatry and establish universal justice and peace in the world. Sinful Israel is punished by Assyria, "the rod" of God's anger (Isa. 10.5–6) which is sent to devastate Israel, the "godless nation," and "trample them like mud in the streets." But the Assyrian too will not be spared. "Because you yourself have plundered mighty nations, all the rest of the world will plunder you" (Hab. 2.8). And the same justice is in store for other nations: the spilled blood and the land's iniquity will all be atoned for. At the end of days Israel will return to Zion from the far corners of its dispersion never to stray again from the path of righteousness, and the nations will imitate its ways. The vision, "for as the waters fill the sea, so shall the land be filled with the knowledge of the Lord" (Isa. 11.9), the final triumph of righteousness and peace in the world, is also the vision of Israel's redemption in Zion, when all will acknowledge that God alone is king over all the land.

Ideals clash with reality

Modern Biblical research has brought to light many of the direct and oblique influences which the narratives and beliefs of the Bible absorbed from the surrounding ancient Mediterranean cultures. It has long been established that the stories of Creation, Adam and Eve, the garden of Eden, the flood, all contain materials borrowed from other ancient cultures, but it is also clear,

as such scholars of standing as Kaufmann, Cassuto, and others have shown, that the Bible breathed new life into these stories, in keeping with its own new faith of individuation.

Scholars have pointed out an interesting parallel: the idea of man created in God's image was one of the cornerstones of all Jewish cultures, though its interpretations differed from culture to culture. We know, for example, how vigorously Maimonides fought against any conception that suffered the incorporification of God's image and likeness. It has now been shown that in the Canaanite language, following a Babylonian model, the simile, *tzelem᾿elohim* ("the image of God"), was in fact a corporeal simile, "in keeping with the anthropomorphic conception of the deity among the ancient near eastern peoples."[4] This is the reward for seeking enlightenment of Biblical meanings in the expressions of the neighboring cultures!

In a collection of letters addressed to the kings of Assyria in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, we read: "The father of my lord king is Bel's image (*tzelem*), and my lord king is Bel's image (*tzelem*)." Scholars have established that it was customary in the language of the Assyrian court to compare the king to the image and likeness of a god. All other mortals are but the shadow of god, but the king himself is his god's very image and likeness. It is in this context that we can now appreciate the Biblical declaration that *every man* is created in God's image, that the title king belongs thus to every man. And this spiritual royalty is the lot of all human beings, not only of the Israelite, as Rabbi Akiba said: "Beloved is man in that he was created in the image (of God). (It is a mark of) superabundant love (that) it was made known to him that he had been created in the image (of God)" (*Avot.* 3.18).

Rabbi Akiba's dictum proclaims that Israel is beloved of God because they were called children of the All-Present. The ancient pagan nations viewed only their kings as sons of God. Hammurabi declared himself to have been sired by a god. In Psalm 2.7 we hear of another king who brags that God had said to him: "'You are my son . . . this day I become your father.'" In the Bible the expression is merely metaphorical and symbolic; moreover, in contradistinction to notions prevailing in the Assyrian and Babylonian courts, the Torah took the concepts of fatherhood and sonship out of their literal meaning and applied them to Israel as a whole by way of endearment, "You are the sons of the Lord your God" (Deut. 14.1), and it is on this that Rabbi Akiba based his dictum.[5]

Opposing this universalistic aspect of Scripture, the aspect which recognizes God's image in all men and commands, "love thy neighbor as thyself," there is always that other, particularistic dimension, which stresses the exclusivity of the covenant. This covenant commands that the nations of Canaan be destroyed, Amalek exterminated. It does not forbid to "press foreigners" (Deut. 15.3), and to "charge interest on a loan to a foreigner" (Deut. 23.20). Scripture countenances bloody deeds against

non-Israelites committed by King David that were far out of keeping with the spirit of his son Solomon's prayer for "the foreigner . . . who does not belong to thy people Israel" (I Kgs. 8.41). Jeremiah's "Pour out thy fury on nations" (10.25) sounds antithetical to the Messianic vision that he himself, and indeed all the Prophets, proclaim elsewhere.

The reality that so collided with the vision was in fact the theme of the Prophets' chastisement, "There is blood on your hands" (Isa. 1.15), or "O my people! Your guides lead you astray" (Isa. 3.12). The tension was a daily, palpable anguish. Israel, the "chosen people," and man, the "image of God," did not behave in the anticipated and desired manner. Instead, they indulged in militant nationalism and jealousy, often led by those ideologues of particularism known in the Bible as "false prophets." Yeḥezkel Kaufmann has devoted many pages to the dissonance between laws and reality in First Temple times.[6] The laws did not reflect actual practice and it is difficult to learn from the writings of visionaries anything about the historical reality.

Moreover, you also find in the Biblical culture complaints that God, who does "whatever [He] pleases, in heaven and on earth" (Ps. 135.6), fails to exercise justice, "Why dost thou countenance . . . why keep silent?" cried Habakkuk (1.13). The tie between Israel's Holy One and a just God "who does no wrong" (Deut. 32.4) was to many members of the Biblical culture far from apparent. They saw the incongruity between His cruel deeds and His benign commandments. The terrible events following the incident of the Golden Calf are just one example: Moses "took his place at the gate of the camp and said: . . . 'These are the words of the Lord the God of Israel: "Arm yourselves, each of you, with his sword . . . Each of you kill his brother, his friend, his neighbour"'" (Exod. 32.26–7).

Within the Biblical culture itself one finds considerable discussion over God's ethical image. A great gap yawns between the dictate of Deut. 20.16, "In the cities of these nations whose land the Lord your God is giving you as a patrimony, you shall not leave any creature alive," followed, often to the embarrassment of modern readers, by "do not destroy its trees by taking the axe to them . . . the trees of the field are not men that you should besiege them," to the vision of universal justice and peace when the land will fill with the knowledge of God "as the waters fill the sea." It is difficult to point to any one of Israel's cultures for a smooth, intelligible, and sustained equilibration between the universalism of the Prophetic-Messianic vision and the individuated chosenness of its carriers.

From the Bible to the Talmud

Nineteenth-century Bible scholars tried to prove that the Prophets' faith in one God evolved in the course of a long process of intellectual development,

a view still held by many scholars today. I tend to agree with Kaufmann that the creators of the Biblical culture conceived from the outset a universal God rather than a limited national deity, but I believe that Kaufmann exaggerated the purity of Israel's early monotheism. Biblical literature was intimately familiar with the pagan faith practised by Israel's neighbors, and the idols so vehemently execrated in the Bible were not regarded simply as insignificant local fetishes. Kaufmann's narrow concept of myth fails to take into account the numerous Biblical images and stories which closely resemble the myths of other nations. The nature of mythology as it is defined today by modern researchers, such as Eliade, would encompass a considerable amount of the Bible's mythical material, and it is difficult to deny that even Judaism's universal monotheism, with all its lofty abstraction, was not immune to the influence of a mythology that was pagan, particularistic, tribal, and national.

It is also clear, however, that it was widely believed in the Biblical culture that the universal God revealed His name and His will to Israel alone, that this was His nation, whereas to other peoples He did not thus reveal Himself; to the latter, the Leader of the world and the Judge of all the earth remains a "hiding God." The Torah relates the creation of man and the spread of his progeny on the face of the earth with no mention of Israel, its land, or its temple. Idol-worship and the separation into tribes and nations came later, after the revolt against the universal God. The history of the nations, like the history of Israel, unfolds the rises and falls in the level of acceptance or rejection of the universal God.

The account of the world's beginning and the vision of its end illustrate the Bible's view that the end of days will witness the triumph of the national God, for He is from the outset the God of all the world. This Jewish idea became progressively more pronounced and eventually spread among the nations, but not in its distinctly Jewish garb. Through Christianity, Israel in time exercised a tremendous spiritual influence over the nations of the world, but this occurred only after the collapse of the Jewish commonwealth. Jews had always considered themselves God's favored children and now they were banished from their Father's hearth. Judging at least by the outward appearance of historical events, their history gave little proof of divine predilection.

The universalistic dimension in the Talmudic culture was expressed in a number of fundamental opinions and certain new ordinances and institutions. One of the more important opinions was that the Holy One had wanted to give the Torah to various nations, but they refused to accept it: "The Holy One, blessed be He, offered the Torah to every nation and every tongue, but none accepted it" (*Ab. Zar.* 2b). The nations of the world could have obtained the Torah and all its benefits, but they rejected the restrictions on bloodshed and adultery and the many commandments against which

their instincts rebelled. The Torah was by nature a general-human law, but it was in the nature of the other nations to reject it. In the terminology of our study we would say that other cultures were nurtured by superordinating concepts and by archetypal collective experiences which did not enable them to accept the principles of Israel's culture.

Researchers have pointed out that in ethical-religious matters the Talmudic culture introduced many emendations to Biblical statements that were difficult for the Sages to accept literally. These emendations were usually initiated with the intent of defending the honor of the nation, the Patriarchs, kings or saintly men, and especially in order to preserve the loftiness of the Bible's ethic and an unsullied concept of God, which a literal reading of the Bible might undermine. "Moralizing," is the term coined by Leon Roth for this Talmudic tendency. Isaak Heinemann likewise gave numerous examples of this tendency and enlarged upon the practice of taking texts out of their literal meanings.[7] Literal meanings were often rejected because they seemed to imply polytheism or an incorporification of God, for example, "'And He rested on the seventh day.' And is He subject to such a thing as weariness?"[8] But, more importantly, these revisions reflect the Sages' new moral understanding. The struggle within the Talmudic culture between the expansive universalistic pole and contractive nationalistic pole was marked by opinions such as the following.

The universalistic aspect of Pentateuch, Prophets, and Hagiographa – man created in God's image, the commandment, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," statements like "God has told you what is good; and what is it that the Lord asks of you? Only to act justly, to love loyalty, to walk wisely before your god" (Mic. 6.8) – appeared in the Talmudic culture in a theory about seven basic universal commandments given to Noah's sons, and in such sayings as, "The righteous of the nations have a share in the world to come," and even, "a gentile who occupies himself with the study of the Torah equals (in status) the High Priest" (*Bab.K.* 38a). A number of non-Jews are referred to in the Talmud as sages and saints and even entire nations, such as the Medes and the Persians, were recognized for certain noble qualities. The Edomites, for example, supposed descendants of Esau, were given credit for the honor exhibited by their progenitor toward his father Isaac. Moreover, famous converts, saints, and sages had issued from the seed of terribly wicked men. The entire history of the world proved the merits of certain foreign nations and the sinfulness of Israel. On no lesser an occasion than Yom Kippur, when the book of Jonah is read in the synagogue, the inhabitants of Nineveh, a foreign city, are hailed as models of repentance. The annihilation of Amalek recounted in I Sam. 15.2 ("This is the very word of the Lord of Hosts . . . Go now and fall upon the Amalekites and destroy them, and put their property under ban. Spare no one; put them all to death, men and women, children and babes in arms") elicited from the

Sages these provocative questions: "And if human beings sinned, what has the cattle committed; and if the adults have sinned, what have the little ones done?" (*Yoma* 22b). Here the Rabbis question how this kind of indiscriminate killing accords with the rule: "A man shall be put to death only for his own sin" (Deut. 24.16). These questions indicate a large measure of individualism in the valuation of human deeds. But there were also many questions that were stifled, with the help of the verse, "Do not be over-righteous" (Eccles. 7.16). There were limits to the "moralizing."

The nations' antagonism to Israel and its Torah, and the savagery and licentiousness of the Hellenistic-Roman environment did little, however, to endear to the members of the Talmudic culture even idolators of such pacifist universalism as the Stoics. The Sages frequently refer to the nations of the world as wicked, both in the sense of wicked behavior and in the sense of their hostility to Israel. In contrast, they extoll Israel above all nations and loudly tout its praises.

The tension in the Talmudic culture is exemplified in the variance between two versions of a famous *mishnah*: "If any man saves alive a single soul, Scripture imputes it to him as though he had saved a whole world" (*San.* 4.5 in Danby's translation).[9] There are some who claim (e.g. J.N. Epstein) that this is the correct version of the *mishnah*, but there are others who maintain that the *mishnah* speaks not of one soul, but of "one soul in Israel." This is the version that appears in Ḥanoch Albeck's edition[10] and we need hardly comment on the significance of this variance.[11]

In keeping with their universalistic bent, the Sages taught that a non-Jew who converts becomes an Israelite in all things. The verse, "Ye shall therefore keep My statutes and My ordinances which, if a man do, he shall live by them" (Ezek. 20.11), they expounded as follows: "It does not say 'If a priest, Levite, or Israelite do, he shall live by them,' but 'a man'" (*Ab.Zar.* 3a, also *San.* 59a). We should note the new Talmudic institution of conversion: no longer was residence and absorption of a foreigner in the Land of Israel, a geographical-cultural adhesion, considered sufficient for conversion; admission into Abraham's covenant was effected through a special ceremony. This concept of conversion as a religious institution was inaugurated during the time of the Second Temple. This new form of conversion brought foreigners under "the wings of the Shechinah" by allowing them to enter in full awareness and intent into the covenant that God had contracted with His people.

Indeed, in one respect, it can be said that Isaiah's Messianic vision of "the foreigner who has given his allegiance to the Lord" (Isa. 56.3) became a reality during the Second Temple. This vision had been temporarily suspended by Ezra and Neḥemiah whose experience of the acute demographic decimation following the first destruction prompted them to reject converts as a threat to the nation's racial purity and its spiritual existence.

But some generations later Sages again accepted the foreigner who embraced the Torah as an Israelite in all things. The Halachah was essentially egalitarian, more accommodating and accepting, in fact, than the Aggadah, which often reminisced fondly on the "seed of Abraham," i.e. on Israel's racial excellence.

Between the two poles

But what happened in reality? On the one hand, the Sages taught that the Torah was given in the wilderness, in no-man's-land, and in seventy languages, so that it would be available to all nations: "The Holy One, blessed be He, did not exile Israel among the nations save in order that proselytes might join them" (*Pes.* 87b). But it was also said: "Proselytes are as hard for Israel (to endure) as a sore" (*Yeb.* 47b). The Shechinah accompanied Israel into exile, shared its sorrow in all the diasporas, and upheld its faith that only through the Torah would humanity attain eternal salvation. But when the adversities multiplied, and salvation delayed in coming, Judaism shrunk within the four walls of its Torah, there to find whatever solace remained after the loss of the commonwealth and the destruction of the Temple. The Prophets had promised that the nation would not perish, that at least a remnant would survive. But they had also warned that God would abandon His people if they failed to obey Him. The transgressors of the covenant would not escape punishment: "They grow rich and grand, bloated and rancorous; their thoughts are all of evil, and they refuse to do justice, the claims of the orphan they do not put right nor do they grant justice to the poor. Shall I not punish them for this? says the Lord; shall I not take vengeance on such a people?" (Jer. 5.28–9).

The belief that, by giving the Torah, God had implanted in His people eternal, indestructible life gathered strength in the Talmudic culture, but the tension did not ease. There was an expansion of Judaism's universalistic reach as a result of the newly introduced concepts of conversion and "the righteous of the nations," who have a share in the world to come. But working against this expansion was the opposite tendency to shrink within Israel's own four walls. This was expressed, for example, in a series of derogatory sayings that begin with "the best of Gentiles . . ." and in a number of ordinances regarding idolatry and ritual uncleanness.

Israel's particularistic, separate, and individuated aspect did not diminish. Immediately upon the destruction of the Temple the Gentiles brought forth the argument that a people lacking political power, bereft of independence, smitten and dispersed among the nations was not a chosen people, but a despised and inferior nation. The Christians now made the claim that they were the true Israel, heirs of Israel's chosenness and primacy. The tension is particularly acute in the Talmudic culture because of the patent incongruity between the belief in the election and the anguished reality of the destruction. Only in the Messianic belief could the two conflicting elements, the universalistic and the particularistic, be welded together. Only in the ultimate vision of a universal covenant and an all-embracing knowledge of God could the concern for the preservation of the nation's uniqueness be allayed. The gates of nationhood were never thrown wide open to admit anyone who chose to enter. Although I do not see here a fundamental opposition between a "static morality" and a "dynamic morality" (in Bergson's definition), there was a ceaseless tension between the inclination toward national individuation according to the Torah, and the universalist vision of that same Torah, between life's actual practices and the hoped-for practices, for both Israel and the nations, in a future life.

Conflicts with the Gentiles in ancient Israel

From a *halachic* point of view, hostility between Jews and Gentiles was by no means inevitable. The Halachah established certain fundamental differences between Israel and idol-worshipers. Israel had been harnessed into the "yoke of *mitzvot*," whereas the Gentiles only had to keep the seven Noachian commandments; any who did so could be considered "righteous of the nations." These seven commandments were akin to the "laws of nature," which the Greek philosophers perceived as necessary conditions for all individual and collective existence, consisting essentially of prohibitions against bloodshed and incest and the adherence to a recognized rule of law.

But when, toward the end of the Second Temple period, the Talmudic culture had solidified and spread, a wall of contention and rivalry arose between Jews and Gentiles in the Land of Israel. Three main reasons, political, religious, and social-economic, accounted for this development. Politically, the Jews never resigned to Roman rule. The foreign government was viewed as the rule of evil and throughout the predestruction period, and even more so afterwards, Jews continued to challenge the cruel plunder, the compulsory labor (*anagria*), and the corruption which Roman rule brought upon their land.

In reality the Jewish attitude toward the Gentiles during the Tanna'itic period was dictated largely by a strong desire to set as great a separation as possible between Judaism and idolatry. The Sages' prohibitions, Maimonides said, were decreed "in order to keep people away from heathens, so that Israelites might not mingle with them, lest such commingling should lead to intermarriage." For this reason they forbade "drinking with heathens, even in circumstances where no apprehension need be felt for libation wine; and eating their bread or cooked food, even where no concern need be had for heathen cooking utensils."[12] The decree establishing the

ritual uncleanness of Gentiles certainly helped to limit contact between Gentiles and Jews. Some scholars believe that this decree applied originally only to worship at the Temple, while others think that it pertained from the start also to non-religious spheres of activity.[13]

The history of the Halachah also testifies to the bitter struggles of the Jewish community against the settlement of foreigners in the Land of Israel. The fear that foreigners would take possession of Jewish lands and homes prompted various prohibitions against sale and lease of land to foreigners. "Nor be gracious unto them" (Deut. 7.2) is rendered as, "nor allow them to settle on the soil" (*Ab.Zar.* 20a). The idea was to prevent foreigners from gaining a foothold in the Land of Israel and to insure that Jews would not be dislodged from it. We speak here of the Land of Israel in the boundaries specified by the *halachah* for the observance of commandments related to the land (such as tithes), and not of its Biblical political or historical boundaries. The boundaries we speak of – "every place that had been in the possession of the Babylonian returnees"[14] – were in fact the real boundaries of the Jewish settlement during the early Tanna'itic period. Without going into the details of the map, we know that Israel included Greek cities outside the boundaries prescribed by the *halachah*, and mixed cities within those boundaries. There were instances of both peaceful and hostile relations between Jewish and Gentile neighbors, depending on the circumstances and the times. For example, the Hasmonean Kings, convinced of the legitimacy of Jewish rights to the entire Land of Israel, embarked upon a policy of destruction of Gentile settlements throughout Israel. Thus did Simeon the Hasmonean reply to King Antiochus VII's demand for the return of cities captured by him: "We have not occupied other people's land or taken other people's property, but only the inheritance of our ancestors, unjustly seized for a time by our enemies. We have grasped our opportunity and have claimed our patrimony."[15] This spread of the Jewish population came to an end with the Roman conquest, but the struggle did not cease. The Jews who regarded the entire land as their patrimony tried to dislodge the foreigners, by war, banishments, or by use of economic pressures, and the foreigners continued to oppose these attempts. They condemned the Jews' desire for separateness and accused them of arrogance, contempt of other nations and religions, and general misanthropy.

The two conflicting Tanna'itic tendencies are both reflected in the history of the Halachah: befriending the Gentiles and welcoming them through conversion, but also insulating Israel from their influence by harsh prohibitions. The Halachah, however, always required that the Gentiles be treated peaceably: one visited the Gentiles' sick, one eulogized and buried their dead, and one consoled their mourners, all "for the sake of peace."

The Tanna'itic expressions "for the sake of peace," or "for fear of profanation of God's name," or the expression "for fear of ill feeling" more

common in the language of the Amora'im, denote clearly the limits of decent, permissible aloofness from the Gentiles, commensurate with the interests of practicality and utility; not too much familiarity, but no hostility, friendliness without closeness. Just as the Sages forbade any act that might shame the name of Israel, so they forbade any abstention from an act that could exalt the name of Israel's God. Rabban Gamliel of Yavneh forbade theft from a Gentile, because it constituted "profanation of God's name." The profanation of God's name was a transgression of such serious nature that even repentance and Yom Kippur did not atone for more than one-third of it, suffering atoned for another third, and only death cleansed entirely.

The mixed communities in the Land of Israel were rife with Jewish-Gentile conflicts. The large city of Caesarea, founded by King Herod as a city of Gentiles, is a case in point. Judging by Herod's advocacy of Gentile interests in Caesarea, the Jews feared he planned to base his rule on the land's foreign population. He was, according to Josephus Flavius, "King over Jews and Greeks." The Gentiles of Caesarea ferociously attacked the city's Jews whenever opportunity arose, until finally, in the war of destruction (70 CE), they exterminated the town's entire Jewish population. The same state of ceaseless tension existed in Ashkelon, Acre, Tyre, Susita, Gader, and other locations. In fact, the bloody conflicts and unrest continued during the Tanna'itic period in those towns which had a Gentile majority and a Jewish minority (as in the coastal towns and in the communities east of the Jordan), and in cities where there was a Jewish majority and a Gentile minority.[16] The tensions between Jews and Gentiles in ancient Israel left upon the Halachah an indelible mark for all future generations. One may say that the Jew's attitude toward the Gentile crystallized in the final days of the Second Temple and thereafter changed very little throughout the generations of faith. Subsequent Jewish leaders may be more benign and receptive toward Gentiles, others may be more strict or hostile, but the Halachah itself remained unchanged. The events that had stirred the turmoil in the streets of ancient Caesarea and Jaffa continued to be experienced in their original traumatic acuteness for generations to come.

A better understanding of some of the conflicts that pitted Jews against Gentiles in ancient Israel, and a critical examination of how these conflicts eventually came to be reflected in the Halachah, enable us perhaps to respond more easily to the question: what was it that really prevented the spread of Judaism among the masses of idol-worshipers at that point of the Hellenistic period when the tremendous conversion movement first got under way? It should, at least, be easier now for us to understand the question itself. The scholars, we know, hold divergent views on this question. Christian scholars believed, of course, that it was Jewish "ritualism" and "legalism" that impeded the spread of the Jewish faith. The national need to separate from other people raised a tall barrier between

Israel and the nations, they thought. Jewish scholars maintained that strict practices and rituals were also adopted by Christianity and Islam, with no ill effect on their ability to expand. Kaufmann thought that it was only the ignominy of national defeat – the destruction of the Temple, the exile from the homeland, and subsequent catastrophes – that brought the conversion movement to an abrupt end. The Jews themselves felt that God's success in Jewish history was necessary for the spread of their faith. Israel's political success or failure determined the extent to which its faith would be accepted or rejected. Religion, after all, is not a private sphere of personal opinions and emotions; it is upheld – in practices, institutions, and rituals – by a group or a nation. When a group or a nation succumbs in political defeat, its religion too is seen in the eyes of its adherents, and even more so, of course, in the eyes of outsiders, to have failed. Israel's faith promised glory and greatness, a return to ancient honor, but a reality of poverty and oppression perpetually plagued the nation's religious consciousness: "How long, O God, will thy enemy taunt thee?" cries the Psalmist (74.10). "Why should the nations ask, 'Where is their God?'" (79.10). Foreign sources also attest to this attitude toward the Jewish religion, as, for example, Cicero's derisive comment: "How dear [is this nation] to the immortal gods is shown by the fact that it has been conquered, let out for taxes, made a slave."[17]

After the destruction of the Temple and especially after the failure of Bar Kochba's revolt (135 CE), the Sages had to defend Israel's religion both against the pagan argument that a vanquished people could not be a chosen people, and against Christianity's claim to the inheritance of the chosenness precisely on the grounds that it was an Israel of the spirit and not of the flesh, i.e. that it was indeed a church of all nations. Against this background the Talmudic debates about proselytes and the righteous of the nations, whether they were beloved by God, or whether they were a curse, become more understandable. The tension was clear cut: the God of all flesh chose Israel to spread the faith among the nations of the world. An increase in proselytes was an added testimonial to the veracity of Israel's faith. But, as we saw earlier, when times grew worse and catastrophes multiplied, the Sages came to question both the possibility and the necessity of effecting true conversions. Nonetheless, throughout the Amoraʾitic period efforts continued to bring non-Jews "under the wings of the Shechinah," until the Christian church prohibited this activity entirely.

Throughout the ages Christian theologians reproached Judaism for its national particularism, in which they saw the chief obstacle to its development into the universal faith envisioned by the Prophets. I tend to agree with the scholars who maintain that the disastrous political defeat was a far more likely cause for the nation's failure to propagate its faith. But the main cause of the failure is rooted, as we have said, in the cultures of the pagan nations themselves, in their inability to accept a religion devoid of the

kind of mythological elements they had been accustomed to. The Jewish conception of God, world, and man had to assume first a Christian mantle, and later a Muslim garb, in order to become the heritage of many different nations.

The tension in the Poetic-Philosophic culture

The tension that juxtaposes the two polar conceptions regarding the nature of the Jewish people – universalism versus particularism, expansion versus contraction, the loftiness of faith and morality versus the conceit and confinement of narrow boundaries – that tension which characterizes all of Israel's cultures, is also very much apparent in the Poetic-Philosophic culture of the Middle Ages. Like all our other cultures, accommodation was sought between the yearning for the brotherhood of mankind in one faith and the opposing need for a chosen people's national individuation.

The creators of the Poetic-Philosophic culture were well aware that the belief in the common origin of mankind was as binding as a principle of faith. They believed that the Biblical story about the origin of mankind exemplified the religious-ethical conception that the oneness of the human race originated from the same source as the oneness of God. Monohumanity and monotheism were one idea: faith in the common origin of the human race equalled, as it were, the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* by one God.

In this culture, too, the outstanding expression for the oneness of the human race was to be found in the concept of man created in the image of God and endowed with intellect and the power of speech, a reflection of God the Creator. In the world of beings man stands, as it were, on one plane with God and is only "little less than a god" (Ps. 8.5).[18] Faith in the oneness of the human race enjoins brotherhood and friendship. To love one's fellow human beings becomes a supreme ethical command, and the worth of each individual created in the image of God is magnified.

I believe it can safely be said that the Poetic-Philosophic culture generally strove toward expansion rather than contraction, toward religious universalism over tribal or national particularism. Henri Bergson, as mentioned earlier, spoke of "two sources of morality and religion," one of which creates a "static" morality and religion, while the other creates a "dynamic" one.[19] Regarding the "static" morality and religion, Bergson said that these served the needs of a closed society, a society imprisoned in its past and its heritage, engaged primarily in strengthening the group's internal cohesion and in excluding outsiders. On the other hand, the "dynamic" morality and religion ignore ethnic boundaries and extend a loving affirmation to all human beings. In this sense one may say that in the Poetic-Philosophic culture the "dynamic" aspect prevailed. Bergson held these two sources of morality and religion to be "not of the same essence," i.e. so unlike one

another as to allow for no gradual transition between them. In Israel's cultures, however, the contrast between these two concepts is not, I believe, quite so radical; it resembles rather a ceaseless tension between the two elements.

The Poetic-Philosophic culture sees in Judaism no substantive dichotomy between national individuation and the oneness of the human race. Chosenness expresses a religious-moral dynamics, a major forward thrust in the history of mankind toward the opening of new wellsprings of human love and respect. In this Israel carved out for itself a unique path in the history of the world. It was, however, a path replete with obstacles and suffering that led to heights of spiritual devotion, but also exacted tremendous sacrifices, and at times engendered strange distortions bred of crude popular arrogance.

The tension in the Poetic-Philosophic culture between universalism and particularism is illustrated in the differing opinions of Judah ha-Levi and Maimonides on the nature of Israel's superiority and the ensuing opinions on the status of proselytes. According to ha-Levi, Israel is endowed with a special position among the nations of the earth by virtue of the "divine influence" that elevates it above all other nations. Proselytes cannot be considered equal to Israelites. "If this be so," says the King of the Khazars, "then your belief is confined to yourselves?" The Sage replies:

> Yes, but any Gentile who joins us unconditionally shares our good fortune, without, however, being quite equal to us. If the law were binding on us only because God created us, the white and the black man would be equal, since He created them all. But the Law was given to us because he led us out of Egypt, and remained attached to us, because we are the pick of mankind.[20]

Ha-Levi goes on to prove that not only is Israel "the pick of mankind," but every single Jew is in fact "visibly distinguished from the ordinary degree of mankind." Of course, ha-Levi does not advocate a modern naturalistic racism. Israel's nature is a spiritual essence and it is the "divine influence" which distinguishes it from other nations.[21] Nonetheless, it is the nature of only one people.

In contrast to this opinion, which was surely not a lone position, Maimonides, in direct contradiction to the Mishnah's ruling in tractate *Bikkurim*, permits the convert to utter in prayer the words "God of our fathers." In his famous responsum to Obadiah the Proselyte, Maimonides states:

> You should therefore pray, "Our God and God of our fathers," for Abraham is also your father. In no respect is there a difference between us and you. And certainly you should say, "Who has given unto us the Torah," because the Torah was given to us and the proselytes alike . . . Do not think little of your origin: we are descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but your descent is from the Creator.[22]

What we see here are not simply two different approaches to the acceptance of proselytes, something analogous perhaps to the difference between the strict criteria of Shammai versus the leniency of Hillel, which the Talmud so picturesquely illustrates in the famous stories about Gentiles who came to these Sages for conversion. No, the reasons for the disagreement between these medieval scholars are deeper than mere approaches or points of strategy. Maimonides differed from ha-Levi in the matter of the proselytes because he could not agree with him on the fundamental issue of Israel's chosenness.

Both thinkers try to find a proper balance between the two ideas – national individuation versus the oneness of humanity. Ha-Levi, as we have explained, endows Israel with a natural superiority over other nations, which he sees as a sort of natural-racial (albeit spiritual) quality, while Maimonides attributes Israel's chosenness to God's will and the decree of His wisdom: "He willed it so; . . . His wisdom decided so."[23] To Maimonides there is no natural difference between Israel and the nations. Ha-Levi thinks that Israel's unique quality is manifested by the gift of Prophecy; the "divine influence" clings to Israel alone and only Israel is worthy of Prophecy. All other mortals, proselytes included, who cleave to Israel's religion, may "become pious and learned, but never prophets." "Those . . . who become Jews do not take equal rank with born Israelites, who are specially privileged to attain to prophecy."[24] In contrast, Maimonides stresses that it is possible for a Prophet to arise from among the Gentiles and, "if [he] urges and encourages people to follow the religion of Moses without adding thereto or diminishing therefrom, like Isaiah, Jeremiah and the others, we demand a miracle from him. If he can perform it we recognize him and bestow upon him the honor due to a prophet."[25]

We can say, then, in summary that these two medieval creators of the Poetic-Philosophic culture saw the religion of Israel as universal in two respects. First, Israel's God was the God of all nations, and, secondly, His Torah was worthy of acceptance by all people, because it was a law of righteousness and justice for every being created in the image of God. Of course, Israel was a chosen people and endowed with particular holiness, but all people were enjoined to walk in its path, to follow the "light unto the nations." In their Messianic vision both thinkers saw the nations of the world accepting the Jewish faith and "then they will revere the origin which they formerly despised."[26] But in matters of religion Maimonides saw no difference whatsoever between a born Jew and a proselyte.

This is not to say that the national-religious element was absent in Maimonides' thinking; the Talmudic commandments regarding separation from the nations receive renewed validation in *Mishneh Torah*:

> We should not follow the customs of the Gentiles, nor imitate them in dress or in their way of trimming the hair, as it is said, "And ye shall not walk in the customs of the

nation (which I cast out before you)" (Lev. 20.23); "neither shall ye walk in their statutes" (Lev. 18.3); "Take heed to thyself that thou be not ensnared to follow them" (Deut. 12.30). These texts all refer to one theme and warn against imitating them. The Israelite shall, on the contrary, be distinguished from them and recognisable by the way he dresses and in his other activities, just as he is distinguished from them by his knowledge and his principles.[27]

The "knowledge" referred to here is a Jew's faith, as explained in the 'Book of Knowledge,' the opening section of *Mishneh Torah*. Maimonides' strictness draws from the sayings of Tannaʾim and Palestinian Amoraʾim regarding the Gentiles. This passage on the issue of temporary residence of aliens in Palestine, clearly an echo of the suspicion and hostility prevailing during the Second Temple between Jews and Gentiles, is illustrative:

When Israel is predominant over the nations of the world, we are forbidden to permit a Gentile who is an idolator to dwell among us. He must not enter our land, even as a temporary resident, or even as a traveller journeying with merchandise from place to place, till he has undertaken to keep the seven precepts which the Noachides were commanded to observe; as it is said: "They shall not dwell in thy land" (Exod. 23.33) even for a time. If he undertakes to observe these seven precepts, he becomes a denizen proselyte.[28]

In general, however, Maimonides tended toward moderation, to a softening of the tensions, going as far as the written *halachah* permitted, and sometimes even beyond, as we have seen in the matter of the proselytes: "God charged [us] concerning the love of the stranger, even as He charged us concerning love of Himself, as it is said: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God' (Deut. 6.5). The Holy One, blessed be He, loves strangers, as it is said: 'And He loveth the stranger' (Deut. 10.18)."[29]

So much for the first tension. We have learnt from our long experience, validated by research in the last generations, that it is no easy task for a consciousness of chosenness to accommodate an all-embracing love of others. It is difficult for nations imbued with a sense of their own election to live at peace with one another. There is, in fact, no nation that does not believe in its own chosenness, either in the realm of spiritual or material assets, or in its destiny to wield power, or both. We allude to a complex social-spiritual and psychological phenomenon that takes intricate and, at times, dangerous turns. Nations reaped tremendous benefits from their consciousness of destiny, but also paid a heavy price for it. Chosenness is but one side of the coin; its other face is constriction within the narrow limits of nationalism. Belief in one's election may easily turn into a complex of superiority which, in turn, may be covering a sense of inferiority. Vulgar distortion lies in ambush for every noble idea.

Israel's history has been characterized by the great disparity between mighty visions and the reality of daily existence. This was true in ancient

times, when the nation still dwelt in its land, as also later in the diasporas. Of course, there is a vast difference between a weak and exiled nation, imbued with a universal vocation it cannot fulfill because of its weakness, and a powerful nation or religion which sees itself destined to bring salvation to the world according to its lights. How power is maintained and used – that is the test of a people's chosenness, if we may borrow this theological concept for a non-metaphysical context. It is only with the establishment of the State of Israel that the Jewish people has acquired the right to mediocrity, that basic right of every nation to exist without having to justify its existence by the "contributions" it makes to other nations, and without lofty goals of enriching "civilization" in general. But this right, which does not stand in the way of an adventurous spiritual voyage toward greatness, and all that it entails in the State of Israel is a chapter unto itself.[30]

Integration of the elements

This framework of meanings which encompasses goods and values, literary and artistic creations, public institutions and interpersonal relations, temple and king, religion and army, and many other components, this framework known as culture – what is the nature and measure of its unity? Thousands of events and deeds, a chaotic amalgam of tools and opinions must coalesce into a framework of orderly meaning, into a cultural life whose constituent elements possess a certain commonality. All efforts are geared toward the creation of order from chaos, toward the structuring of the accidental and contingent into purpose, the harmonizing of contradictory phenomena into a whole world structure.

Anthropologists, sociologists, and philosophers have assumed that culture is not merely a collection of building blocks, but an entire organic edifice, a coherent unit of meanings, a unified configuration, or a functional unit, but few have elaborated on the nature of this unity.[31] Clearly, mere geographical contiguity or chronological proximity, or both, do not constitute a unified entity, either separately or together. An assemblage of particles (congeries) is not a unit. It is possible for two or even three cultures to develop within a single geographical location. Even in the tiny Palestine of the Hasmoneans one could find remnants of the waning Biblical culture, buds of the newly developing Talmudic culture, and side by side with these two Jewish cultures the Graeco-Roman culture was spreading. Jerusalem in the days of Herod was a city of many contradictions, and perhaps only a minority of its population was Pharisean. Neither is chronological sequence, generally delimited by political turning-points, such as the destruction of the Temple or the French Revolution, decisive in defining a culture in this sense. There is much of the accidental and the haphazard in geographical contiguity and chronological sequence.

Most scholars tend to emphasize the integration of a culture's elements from a functional-causal or organological aspect. They speak of culture as an operative-functional unit, or as a living body, and employ technological or organological metaphors accordingly; a culture's elements are compared to physical limbs or to interconnecting parts of a machine. Marx and his disciples examined society from both these angles and determined that the means of production were the decisive factor in establishing the superstructures of law and order, government and administration, literature and art. This decisive factor wields an overwhelming influence over all other elements, and when it is removed, the latter undergo change or vanish. It is, in fact, so critical an element in organizing a society, and so much of a condition to a proper understanding of its functioning, that the entire development of the culture can be accurately foretold and explained given a correct understanding of the means of production. Max Weber elucidated the influence of religious concepts and fervor on the work ethic and on the rationalization of all spheres of life. The concept of functional unity enables us to determine the overall relationship between the changing elements of culture and sheds light on many areas hitherto shrouded in darkness. This conception serves as the basis for modern studies on such issues as the relation between an economic crisis and birth or divorce rates, between urbanization and crime, between loneliness and suicide rates. If you can demonstrate that variable A is indeed the cause, or at least the antecedent, of variable B, you have established a universal rule; uniform order emerges out of that which previously seemed a mere aggregation of unrelated occurrences, thus enabling an intelligent prediction and a prescient orientation.

Other scholars have claimed to detect at the root of every culture a single, central grand design, an overall spiritual direction, a psychological source from which all details originate and which, in turn, all details must validate. In this view the nature of a culture's cohesion is not determined by spatial or chronological occurrences, nor by a causal relation, whereby one element is responsible for bringing about the creation of other elements. Rather, it is the pattern of one overriding psychological-spiritual design which exists *a priori* in all constituent elements of the culture, just as an individual's life-style can be recognized in all spheres of his activity. The Gothic cathedral, the works of St. Thomas Aquinas and the feudal hierarchy all belong to the same thirteenth-century style, just as compulsory education, technological inventions, and general elections are unmistakable hallmarks of our century. It is utterly impossible for a materialistic, industrial, and consumer society to embrace the values of, say, Rabbi Bachya Ibn Pakuda or Rabbi Isaac Luria, the "Holy Ari." The two are entirely different essences which simply do not go together. This model of cultural cohesion, then, largely ignores the causality factor in favor of a common internal essence.

This explanation, like the functional theory mentioned earlier, does, in fact, shed great light on widely different spheres of endeavor within a culture. Guided by the integral design, or the inner intention, of a certain culture, one is more readily able to grasp the relation between its cosmology and architecture, as Spengler explained, or between philosophy (a culture's measure of rationalism) and music, as Max Weber argued, or between achievements in the plastic arts and religious institutions, and many similar phenomena, which "belong" with each other in the overall large pattern. This third explanation can be found in the writings of a number of philosophers of history, including Buber.[32]

All such theories on the nature of a culture's integration must be viewed with great reservation. Geographical location and chronology, periodization according to primarily political turning-points – none of these creates a culture or makes a culture cohere, in our sense of the concept. A culture can stretch over a number of periods: the Talmudic culture began to unfold in the days of the Second Temple and reigned long after its destruction. In pre-expulsion Spain three cultures – the Poetic-Philosophic, the Mystical, and the Rabbinic – simultaneously vied with each other for dominion. The quest for a single design that animates the whole culture and is, as it were, its very breath and soul, its fundamental essence, is a very difficult undertaking, and really, an endless one. It readily outgrows the bounds of scientific inquiry to the point where it sees the will of a metaphysical power operating beyond the intentions of the culture's creators.

The perspectivistic pluralism advocated here seeks to take fully into account the intentions of individual creators, which alternately collided, compromised, and sought accommodations with each other. When these intentions merge into a single dominant tendency, a new culture takes over from its predecessor. It is in this sense we have spoken here of tensions and their equilibrations in Israel's cultures.

Halachah relating to the Land of Israel

Earlier in this chapter we described the third tension as one in which different elements of the same culture conflict with one another and strive for an equilibrium that will be found acceptable and enduring. How did relations crystallize between language and religious faith, race and temple, army and economy, social classes and government? We conclude this chapter with a brief look into the tension that existed between law and land – what happened when commandments whose fulfillment presupposed habitation of Eretz Israel, the Land of Israel, were dissociated from the land as a result of exile and changed circumstances?

During the seventy years of the Babylonian exile, living in the diaspora became a new mode of life for Jews, a communal life without sovereignty,

land, or temple. Israel's far-flung dispersions were made up of exiles by choice, who had emigrated from the Land of Israel long before the destruction, even before the exile of the ten tribes, as attested by the Prophets Amos (9.14–15), Hosea (11.11), Isaiah (11.11), and Jeremiah (23.7–8), and of involuntary exiles. Together these two groups grew into a large Jewish community living outside the boundaries of its land. Notwithstanding the miraculous return to Zion (517 BCE), an unprecedented feat in the history of exiles, the decisive fact remained that a large Israelite diaspora which had arisen in Babylonia chose not to return to its homeland. This diaspora first presented the problematics of Jewish extraterritorial existence: a large Jewish community living outside its country of origin, which prays indeed for the "ingathering of the exiles," but which, in reality, experiences this prayer as a somewhat distant aspiration, as a vision of full redemption in a Messianic future.

The Land of Israel was elevated in the Talmudic culture to the highest level of sanctity, yet despite this tribute to the ancestral land, Talmudic Jews settled comfortably on foreign soils. Was it not justifiably argued over the centuries by both adherents and opponents of the Talmudic culture, by way of praise and censure, respectively, that it had made it possible for Jews to strike root in any land of exile? The Talmudic culture assumed that the Israelite nation was itself holy, thus wherever it wandered in exile, holiness – the Shechinah – followed it. Israel's holiness was incapable, of course, of hallowing foreign soil, and the waters of Babylon or the rivers of Europe and America did not match the majesty of the Jordan, but observance of the Torah no longer required habitation of the land. The Torah's authority had universal validity, not merely for an hour, and not only in the Land of Israel. Moreover, the Sages justified this dissociation between law and land by pointing out that the Torah had not been given in the Land of Israel, but in the wilderness.[33] Moses had only yearned to enter the land so that he could fulfill the "many precepts commanded to Israel which can only be fulfilled in the land of Israel" (*Sot.* 14a).

Most of the 613 commandments (in Maimonides' count, for example) hinge to some extent upon habitation of the land, and the existence of the Temple and the priesthood. Thus most of the original commandments depended on values and assets which were later abandoned. The Talmudic culture's great undertaking was to draw a distinction between the validity of universally applicable commandments, and commandments that drew their validity from the land and the Temple, and which were suspended with the destruction of the Temple and the exile from the land. The ordinances of Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai were an attempt to give the commandments autonomy so that they could be separated from Temple service and from habitation of Eretz Israel. Certain items were suspended even before the destruction of the Temple, such as the remission of debts on the seventh

year. Hillel instituted his famous *prosbul* ordinance to counteract the practice whereby needy borrowers were denied credit as the seventh year, the year of debt remission, approached. Hillel's *prosbul* separated between the prohibition on collecting a debt extending into the seventh year, and the Bible's express command not to shut the door before needy borrowers. It was an example of the sort of "ruse" (*ʿormah*) we mentioned earlier in our discussion on the Halachah (chapter 4). This was also the case with capital punishment, i.e. with the penal code laid down in the Bible, which was abolished forty years before the destruction of the Temple. The Sages may still have believed that the "law of the four modes of execution was not abolished. He who is worthy of stoning either falls from the roof, or is trampled to death by a wild beast; he who merits burning either falls into the fire or is bitten by a serpent," and so forth (*San.* 37b). They might still say, "Since the day of the destruction of the Temple, although the Sanhedrin ceased [and capital punishment could no longer be decreed by Jewish courts], the four forms of capital punishment have not ceased" (*Ket.* 30a), but, in reality, they instituted a new penal code. Jewish courts throughout the ages ruled according to a Halachah distinctly autonomous of Temple and land.

Christian-Jewish debate centered precisely on this separation. The Christian claim was that the destruction of the Temple had, in fact, voided most of the commandments, and this was quite correct, as we have explained. The Sages responded to this argument by insisting that the destruction had no bearing on the Torah's validity. In the dispute between the second-century Christian apologist Justin Martyr and the Jew Tryphon, the former seems to have an edge when he contends: "Let us consider . . . whether one may now observe all the Mosaic institutions."[34] He refers to the observance of commandments after the destruction. And Tryphon (who is not the same person as Rabbi Tarfon, as some scholars have suggested) is forced to acknowledge that sacrificial offerings can no longer be presented. This argument strengthens Justin's claim that the *raison d'être* for all Torah commandments no longer exists. It was an argument sounded repeatedly in the course of medieval disputations between Christians and Jews. It reappears in a changed form in Spinoza's contention that Judaism is the religion of a particular state and that its commandments hinge upon habitation of its land. Once Jews ceased to live on their land, the validity of their Torah also ended.

Alert to the danger entailed in such arguments, the Sages gave every commandment an autonomous validity, as if every commandment was *ipso facto* valid and binding in every place where Scriptures did not specifically condition its observance upon some other commandment. For example, one may bring a burnt-offering without the *ʿomer*, and one may bring the *ʿomer* without the burnt-offering, although in the past, when the Temple still

stood, the two had to be brought together. Or, "The [absence of the] blue [in the fringes] does not invalidate the white, neither does the [absence of the] white invalidate the blue" (*Men.* 38a).

The intention of endowing every commandment with a reality of its own is particularly evident in the desire to dissociate the commandments whenever possible from their dependence on the Land of Israel and on the Temple.[35] In this the Sages were aided by Scriptures, which designated certain commandments as being valid "for ever," "for all time," "from generation to generation." Such commandments include the sanctification of Yom Kippur and the Holy Days, even though these days are always mentioned in the Bible in connection with ritual sacrifices. Similarly, the eating of *matzah* and bitter herbs on Passover is no longer tied to the offering of the Paschal lamb.

In the same tendacious Talmudic spirit, large bodies of commandments became atomized into individual precepts each one of which preserved its own nature. They adopted a rule that everything that had to be abandoned as a result of the destruction of the Temple and the exile was considered suspended, while that which could be observed regardless of physical location, was made an autonomous precept. It is interesting to note that whenever possible the Sages tried to salvage even such commandments as were dependent on the existence of the Temple. Rabbi Akiba, for example, still wished to preserve the dedication of the firstlings, a distinctly Temple-bound practice (*Tem.* 21a). The Sages also ruled that the commandment regarding the Sabbatical year (*shemitah*) remained in effect in the Land of Israel with or without the Temple, as did the prohibition on eating fruits during the first three years of their growth (*ᶜorlah*) and the requirement to dedicate the fruits of the fourth year in Jerusalem (*kerem revai*).

The Babylonian exile, therefore, had laid the foundations for a Jewish life without Eretz Israel and without a Temple. The Talmudic culture erected a system of commandments which allowed exiles to dwell in foreign lands and still maintain their faith – an example of the equilibration of a tension.

We should perhaps briefly consider here how the relation between the Jewish people and its historic homeland was viewed by the two most recent Jewish cultures. The phenomenon of a Torah freed from dependence on the land, as illustrated by the Talmudic attitude to the Land of Israel, aroused great interest in members of the Emancipation and the National-Israeli cultures. This was, after all, the view of Abraham Geiger (1810–74) and his colleagues in the Reform movement, that Israel's Torah was a faith and a system of precepts that required no physical land. But it is interesting to note that even votaries of the nationalist school, like Dubnov, Aḥad ha-ᶜam, and Bialik, expressed similar views, though for a different purpose. Let us examine one indicative paragraph by Bialik.

Bialik repeatedly argued in his lectures that the nation had retained for its

guidance only dessicated Rabbinic laws, an entirely abstract Judaism. The nation had torn its culture away from its early roots, from the soil and nature of the Land of Israel, and had transformed all its concrete holdings into abstract, spiritual, easily mobile possessions, in keeping with the requirements of its errant, vicissitudinous life.[36] Bialik then proceeds to describe a situation which most aptly characterizes the culture of the Emancipation: thanks to his cerebral, *pilpulistic* weapons, the Jew survived all the heavy battles in his self-preservation. With this mobile mental baggage he was also able to insinuate himself into all the nations and cultures of the world. Tangible, bulky assets were unfit for hasty, clandestine movement, but brains and ideas could easily penetrate all barriers. The Hebrew people thus infiltrated every country in the world and poured its energies into these cultures for its own benefit and for that of humanity at large. Echoes of Jost, Zunz, and Heine on the "itinerant homeland" together with ideas from Graetz, Dubnov, and Aḥad ha-ᶜam on the "instrument of exile" combine in Bialik's description of the spiritualization process which characterized the Talmudic, the Rabbinic, and the Emancipation cultures, based on their attitude to tangible possessions, and especially to the tangible Eretz Israel.

The National-Israeli attitude to the Land of Israel will be discussed at greater length in chapter 8. Here we merely wished to point out the problem of integrating a culture's components and the difficulties of integration in Jewish history. Since we have rejected three explanations for the formation of integration in a culture, i.e. geographical proximity and chronological continuity, one cause or a system of causes (economic or religious), and a culture's central grand design, it becomes clear that full integration is achieved by live men and women, and especially by their leaders, who, in each culture, struggle for the equilibration of the tensions we have described.