INTRODUCTION

Throughout the ages theologies, theories of culture, and historical interpretations have attempted to provide satisfying answers to the mystery and exigencies of the enduring Jewish existence. Perhaps the very persistence of the question, both in Jewish scholarship and as a Jewish preoccupation in the larger sense, testifies to the elusiveness of any one answer. Certainly this persistence serves as a caution against the temptation to seek but one, definitive, all-encompassing notion of Judaism. We may find such definitions of Judaism convenient, often very persuasive. Nonetheless, they are more often than not articulations of wishful, non-existent constructs, a figment of the imagination of scholars and theologians.

One may legitimately wonder: what did Judaism mean to Maimonides? What did it mean to the late medieval Mystics–Kabbalists? What does it mean to us? Surely, meanings have changed. If we were to assume that they have not, if we thought, for example, that Maimonides' concept of God was identical to that held by the Mystics, or that the latters' concepts were identical to the notion of God as presented in the Bible, how are we to explain even such seemingly innocuous idiosyncrasies in our culture as the curious fact that God is described by entirely different appellations in the Bible, the *Guide for the Perplexed*, and the *Zohar*? In the Bible He is known as the Lord of Hosts (*ʾel tsvaʾot*), the Almighty (*ʾel shaddai*), the Most High (*ʾel ʿelion*); to Maimonides He is the Primal Cause, the Incorporeal that no corporeal entity can apprehend; and to the Mystics of the *Zohar* He is the Hidden One, the Boundless One (the *ʾen-sof*). Is it possible that these three seminal books, each representative of a separate and unique culture in our history, incorporate radically different concepts, as different as their vocabulary, of something so axiomatic, so undisputed, as Israel's God?

Until the last century, Jewish scholarship rarely showed interest in historical research. With the exception of Josephus, no Jewish historiographer of stature comes to mind. One may well wonder why. Perhaps Jewish scholars and leaders in the ages of traditional faith found comfort in a Jewish history whose meaning could be viewed as a monolithic, unchanging,

eternal, God-given destiny, and that historical inquiry, with its unsettling tendency to reveal the contingent and the accidental, was pushed aside as a distraction from the serious pursuit of meaning. There were, no doubt, other causes for this view, which require a serious theory of change and stability that would account for the traditional belief of many Jewish generations in the undisrupted continuity of their history, and the unity of its meaning.

Serious attempts to grapple with the meaning of Jewish history have, of course, been made, but most interpretations of history have generally fallen into one or more characteristic fallacies. One has been *pars pro toto* – taking one set of ideas from one significant period (which will shortly be redefined as a "system of culture"), and making it representative of *all* Jewish cultures, for example, to argue, as modern liberalism did, that Judaism is essentially ethical and prophetic, or that it is legalistic-*halachic* (Talmudic, Rabbinical), or Mystical, or that it transcends history altogether. Some prominent theorists guilty of this error are Naḥman, Krochmal, Aḥad ha-ʿam, Yeḥezkel Kaufmann, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Yitzhak Baer, and Benzion Dinur.

A second fallacy has been to view the totality of tradition as transhistorical, i.e. each idea in Judaism is as valuable as any other; the whole heritage is equally holy (an Orthodox fundamentalist view). Yeshaʿayahu Leibowitz is a well-known proponent of this concept.

In modern times yet a third error has arisen: a radical relativism rejected the continuity that had hitherto been perceived as endemic to Jewish history and stressed its precise antithesis – lack of consistency, a diversity of sources incapable of forming a unity. Everything that a Jew thinks or does is intrinsic to Judaism, the Israelitic prophet of Baʿal is no less "Jewish" than the "true" Prophet of the Lord. Berdyczewski exemplified this approach.

It is not, I believe, unfair to say that theological interpretations tend to suffer from a lack of historical understanding, leading to a total neglect of the distinct historical and religious character of the different articulations of our heritage and the imposition of one set of meanings on all of them alike. Indeed, theology is fundamentally inimical to history. We recognize that Christian theology, for example, stamped its own brand of meaning on Jewish history: the Bible became the "Old Testament," and Israel's past a mere prelude to a new covenant. Post-Biblical Jewish theology has been no less audacious in interpreting the Bible according to the changing religious requirements at different periods. Regrettably, the gap between theological doctrine and the results of historical research has not narrowed in recent times, in spite of our legitimate expectation for a more objective approach in modern Jewish historical research. The "essence" of Judaism is still frequently viewed as though it were an entity in itself, rather than a complex struggle of historical situations. Leo Baeck, for example, professed that the tragic experiences of the Holocaust had deepened his previous theological

conceptions, yet in the face of the most shattering, disruptive cataclysm, he too still sought Judaism's timeless essence as the consistent, logical center of all Jewish experience. Even today one still encounters a revival of the "essential" tunnel-view of Jewish history.

It is not difficult to arrive at an essential theology that exemplifies one aspect, or one layer, or one system of culture in Judaism, but it is impossible, in my view, to construct a theology that encompasses *all* of Judaism's systems of culture except in very general and superficial terms. The reason is obvious: even the superordinating concepts of Jewish history – God, Torah, Israel's chosenness – have different meanings and functions in each culture. It is impossible, according to my view, to sum up the totality of Jewish religious truth, and even less the complexities of historical Jewish life, in a Hegelian fashion. That is, there is no principle of unity which would illuminate the true essence of Judaism as the ultimate synthesis, once and for all. This must be said against all neo-Hegelian attempts in Jewish theology and history, from Naḥman Krochmal and Samson Raphael Hirsch to Yitzhak Baer. We merely find optimal expressions of Jewish creativity, i.e. some systems have been more creative than others, and not all cultural diversities in the Jewish world are self-sufficient entities. In religious terms one might say that it is impossible to fence God into any of the notions that have been construed of Him at any particular period, or in any one of the seven systems of culture presented in this study. Jews everywhere – in Jerusalem, in Babylonia, in Cordoba and in Cracow – molded their experiences in different constructs or modes. If we insist on seeking those trends or expressions which were *common* in all our history, we should not be surprised, or disappointed, when we find that these trends share only very general characteristics. This paucity in satisfying generalizations with which to rationalize our history will, I trust, be amply redeemed by the wealth that our new theory uncovers: not one Jewish culture, but seven.

I propose that Jewish history be considered as an unfolding of seven successive systems of cultures. These systems (or cultures, for short) are conceived as organized sets of meanings in the practical, as well as in the theoretical and soteriological (redeeming) realms, of human endeavor. By culture I mean a set of shared symbols which represent an organized collective attempt to express the meaning, or meanings, of life and to make the world habitable by transforming its impersonal vastness and frightening dimensions into an understandable and significant order. Through culture, a chaotic and opaque environment becomes a meaningful world. Clearly, then, by this definition culture does not merely designate the sum of men's "adjustment to their surroundings," in Sumner's and Keller's famous phrase, but rather the reshaping of life's conditions by adapting them to man's search for practical, theoretical, and redeeming knowledge.

The ontological uniqueness of each culture produces quite distinct

interpretations of the superordinating concepts that govern Jewish existence – God, Torah, Israel's chosenness – and of the nation's archetypal collective experiences – the exodus, the kingdom of David, the destruction of the Temple, etc. The fact that these concepts and experiences have abided throughout Jewish history contribute to the impression of unbroken Jewish continuity and permanence. Our point is that while the concepts have endured, their meanings have changed, the inevitable result of the changes occurring in the ontologies underlying these concepts and experiences.

A culture implies a grouping of elements in which inconsistencies have been minimized. In reality, incompatibilities never disappear altogether. Three principal tensions characterize each Jewish culture: between universalism and particularism (relations to other nations and religions); between the individual and the nation (rights and duties, who gets what, and how much); between the different elements constituting culture (language, land, temple, economy, army, leadership, etc.). It is the nature of cultural systems that what is intelligible and "normal" in one culture ceases to make sense in another. Paradoxes, contradictions and inconsistencies, hitherto tolerable as only seeming, not real, difficulties, become opaque and intolerable. It is not without some amusement that we read in the major writings produced by each culture earnest protestations about the logical, emotional, and moral poverty, the regrettable human lacunae of the heretofore venerated bearers of the former system. Incoherences and antinomies no longer go unnoticed.

The struggle between the cultures involves socio-political forces. Leaderships assign roles, status, and sanctity. When a leading group becomes dominant by establishing its system of meanings as valid and redeeming, it tries to legitimize its interpretations *vis-à-vis* its opponents. Enemies, then, are those thinkers whose influence must be removed, whose interpretations must be wiped out. It is, of course, hard to find in any of the older Jewish cultures (as in most traditional cultures) fair accounts of the ideologies of adversaries. The Bible is far from stating fairly the ideas of pagan religions; the Pharisees hardly mention the Sadducees or the Essenes. Censorship and bans were common devices for combatting ideological adversaries in Judaism. Analogous conflicts in the non-Jewish world often involved far harsher methods. Adversary movements are sometimes known to us by the derogatory labels they were given by their more powerful opponents: the Jesuits in Spain named their foes "Liberals" to connote licentiousness, in contrast to the "Serviles," the loyal ones. The uncomplimentary name "Pharisee" was probably coined by the Sadducees.

Needless to say, the renewal of each system occurs within a specific material framework. A culture confronts a new power structure within its environment and expresses the dynamics of political events and socio-economic institutions. The pattern of these confrontations and struggles is

reflected in each culture. However, I do not believe that each culture is an adaptation of these patterns and even less that it is derived from socio-political structures. On the contrary, each system selects those elements which are adaptable to its principal valuations, and no system is identical with any previous or with any subsequent system. The Rabbinic culture, for example, is by no means identical with the Talmudic culture, for the very reason that it came later and that it unquestioningly accepted the authority of the Talmud. Regardless of its innovations, each system accepted Judaism's superordinating concepts and strengthened the traditional view that all of its new developments stood safely within the framework of the true heritage. It maintained the identity of the perennial themes in Jewish life and continued the dialogue with previous generations in an attempt to innovate and preserve, to adopt and modify, to reject and integrate. The nature of the differences and innovations depended upon the leadership's creative powers, and upon the peculiar circumstances surrounding the development of cultural formations.

Each system of culture creates its own language of images, concepts, and symbols, which distinguishes it clearly from that of its predecessors: a generation raised in the Hebrew language of one culture, such as the Biblical, would barely comprehend the meaning of images and symbols used by the Talmudic or Mystic cultures. The famous *midrash* about Moses who was unable to understand a discussion among the Rabbis illustrates this point. The thinking of a people within a historical culture is circumscribed by the imagery it employs; only within the range of this imagery can terms be used meaningfully. In each culture a certain set of experiences had a decisive impact upon the imagery and conduct which became unique to that particular culture. The central new experiences were articulated in an innovative terminology, new images, reinvigorated symbols.

Different Hebrew systems of language have struggled for the expression of the central experiences of the five traditional cultures (from the Biblical to the Rabbinic). The existence of a large mass of inherited words and phrases cannot obscure the fact that the dominant meanings are the new ones. They are powerful enough to reinterpret the old meanings in the climate of the emerging central experience of a new culture. The new symbols color the whole inherited imagery. Even the names of God, as we mentioned earlier, are not identical in each of the traditional cultures. The same is true for the denomination and description of Torah and Israel. These, too, are given new names which necessarily convey new connotations. A Biblical man could not have understood the first *mishnah*, and a Talmudic man would similarly have failed to understand a chapter in the Hebrew translation of the *Guide for the Perplexed*.

The convergence of at least five systems of language is most evident in the Daily Prayer Book. The efforts of the Rabbinic culture to merge the previous

four languages into its own is a unique phenomenon. It resulted from this culture's sense of piety which inhibited open legitimation of its own innovations. The Rabbinic culture accepted the Talmudic Sages as its highest authority, and related to them as they, in turn, had related to the Bible. But, whereas the Talmudic Sages innovated freely, the scholars of the Rabbinic culture seldom abandoned or cancelled Talmudic pronouncements by aggressive reinterpretations of their own.

Even in times of relative political and economic stability, a cultural system was preserved only through intense efforts of cultivation. The preservation of a culture is part of the creative process of its evolution and diffusion. Its producers and preservers are its co-creators, for without preservers to nurture it, no system can sustain itself. This idea is at the core of the commandment to study the Torah. Each system renewed this commandment, though always adapting it to the study of its own particular concepts and innovations. For medieval philosophers like Saᶜadiah Gaᵓon and Bachya Ibn Paquda, for example, the study of philosophy became a religious duty.

The Talmudic culture saw paramount importance in making Torah-study not merely a religious and intellectual discipline, but also a means of establishing personal identity associated with a social role, and especially with a new occupational role. Originality notwithstanding, ideas by themselves often have no historical consequences, and great powers of creativity may be lost when not effectively communicated. Ideas require carriers, disciples, teachers, and schools. It has often been said that the inherent qualities of an idea or a set of teachings do not by themselves render such ideas fertile or consequential. The transmission and diffusion of ideas is decisive for the increase or decrease of their influence. The study of Torah became a social role and created a social identity for many individuals who in ancient times were known as Sofrim (Scribes), and later as Ḥachamim (Sages) and Rabbis. Torah-scholarship became widespread only after the destruction of the Temple. Here we may apply Tocqueville's thesis, given in the context of the French Revolution, that the real changes, or the tendencies toward change, had actually been evident as early as fifty years prior to the revolutionary outburst: Hillel the Elder fought unsuccessfully for the popularization of Torah-study in his day (*c.* 30 BCE to 10 CE). The results of his efforts, however, were only felt after the destruction of the Temple, when the Pharisaic revolution had firmly established the dominance of the Talmudic culture.

No nation is totally segregated from other groups, but probably no other nation was as involved in the history of so many other groups and cultures as was Israel. In this historical-geographical sense the Jewish people is indeed a "people of the world," a universal nation, in Dubnov's famous phrase. There was little in human history that was entirely alien to Judaism.

Its history is interlocked and interwoven with events and ideas of various peoples and, in a way, it refracts the changing character of itself and its neighbors by a variety of modes of participation and segregation. The influences were manifold. Yet despite this involvement with the history of so many nations, the Jewish people was able to preserve its identity, a phenomenon which long ago became a focus of wonderment, as well as of scholarly effort.

Jewish creativity consists of a remarkable ability to embrace new elements. For example, Jewish Halachah incorporated Hellenistic and Roman law, and changed a number of legal constructs of ancient Judaism, and yet the Talmudic culture was clearly distinct both from Hellenism and from ancient Judaism. New ideas from without were admitted and incorporated into the overriding constructs in order to cope with events more effectually and to anticipate them where possible.

But what is it that makes Judaism unique? By unique I mean distinct, not in a sense of being arrayed against other nations and civilizations, or being superior in an evaluative moral context. Jewish history is unique for better or for worse, as is every individual and culture, and its problem has always been how to communicate its individuality and how to co-operate with other unique individualities. The idea of Jewish history as a series of successive renaissances, or restorations, views the core of Jewish cultures as a meeting-ground between history and theology, where the restatements of religious constructs became strategies for defending and preserving Jewish life and its significant meanings. The "response" to hard "challenges," to use Toynbee's terms, was aimed at restoring authentic Jewish selfhood, a strategy against the alienation, anomie, and apathy resulting from the intermittent attempts to be "like all nations." Although the Jewish people cultivated its distinction and uniqueness, there were also powerful drives toward assimilation. (For early literary references, see I Sam. 7.20; Ezek. 20.32; I Macc. 1.11–12, or Maimonides' epistle to the Jews of Yemen.) The struggle between identification with Jewish selfhood and alienation from it is the essence of the Jewish drama. The ordinating religious constructs, like the covenant, sin, reward and punishment, the remnant of Israel, the day of judgment, the Messianic idea, martyrdom, served as the very instruments whereby the authentic could be distinguished from the alienated. The struggle between the two was the perpetual theme of theology and history alike. The *mishnah* Ḥelek is a case in point: it comes closest to defining principles of Jewish faith, and it is obviously polemical against Sadducees, Gnostics, and apocalyptic believers. It sets standards for distinguishing what it considers authentic in Judaism from the irrelevant and dangerous.

Like creators of other systems, Maimonides too was critical of his forerunners, whom he characterized as incoherent and impoverished. (Despite such scathing critique, however, the forerunners remained for

Maimonides part and parcel of Jewish history.) Maimonides consciously attempted to offer a new theological creed and a definitive theory for daily conduct, thereby presenting Judaism as a unified body of intellectual doctrine and moral discipline. He expressed the intellectual doctrine in principles of faith, a credo, and the moral discipline, in his reformulated precepts of the law. Leon Roth rightly saw in Maimonides' system all the elements of a complete apologia. Here was an attempt to respond to the challenge of the outside world by rationally expounding the grounds for a Jew's unique mode of life, while at the same time participating in intellectual endeavors of global interest. No wonder the *Guide for the Perplexed* was hailed enthusiastically and acclaimed as a great new revelation.

One avenue of access to the past was never neglected: each system was a new opening leading back to the Bible. The Bible was the only written book which was never deprecated by any system of Jewish culture (unlike some of the books representative of other cultures). It has always occupied a central position as the Holy Writ in which the divine word was recorded by Moses and the Prophets. It became the cornerstone of all subsequent systems, with each phrase and word inspiring hosts of new ideas. Even the purely narrative portions of the Bible were made to convey profound, often hidden, messages. The Kabbalah attempted to reinspire not only every word, but every letter, and this in *all* the books comprising the Bible. Other cultures generally felt varying degrees of affinity with different verses, chapters, or books of the Bible, but each renaissance of the Bible that constitutes the emergence of a new culture was also a rebellious disruption of the continuity, a revolt against the previous system. These reinterpretations of the Bible were by no means simply a matter for the ingenuity and skills of individual exegetes, but an effort by the new culture to establish, through its exegesis (homiletical, allegorical, anagogical, or mystical), the "true" meaning of the holy text, according to its own ontological presuppositions. The conceptual and evaluative frameworks used by the individual exegetes are based on distinct cultural systems. Characteristically, each system raised objections to interpretations which did not coincide with its own aims, and confidently claimed that only its own modes of exegesis could elicit the true meaning of the Bible or of any later system. The controversy was waged not over minor details of interpretation, but over the significance of the total framework of conceptual and evaluative principles.

Our awareness of the various perspectives by which the meanings of the Bible were ascertained in each culture no longer permits us to adopt any of the hitherto established modes of Biblical interpretation. Our approach to cultural hermeneutics calls for a new comparative method, one that attempts to supplement the critical-scientific approach of modern exegesis by clarifying the presuppositions underlying the various cultures in their

efforts to interpret the Bible. The exegesis of the Song of Songs is a prime example of cultural hermeneutics.

Jewish history thus conceived as a series of conflicts and reaffirmations of culture is dramatic, innovative, and full of surprises. Unfortunately, its fascinating character is obscured both by the normative-sanctifying historiography and by the functional approach. The former sees only the sacrosanct continuity; no controversy, if it is within the framework of accepted premises, ever presents a contradiction to the norms. The functionalist approach looks at all the elements of culture as interdependent and mutually adjusted. Both are inadequate approaches to an understanding of historical reality.

Of course, reality is more than knowledge of reality; it may suggest many forms or systems of knowledge. It is difficult to find a transhistorical absolute standpoint from which historical reality can adequately be described. We comprehend different perspectives; this does not mean, however, that we can only affirm a relativism of values. The multiplicity of these perspectives, as it is expressed in the different Jewish cultures, is a sign not of fragmentation or defeat but of the wealth and generosity of Jewish life. Perspectivism as a historical view is a modest model, in comparison to the sweeping aspirations of the theological and idealistic approaches. It does not attempt to speak in the name of providence, transhistorical guidance, the invisible hand, or the "objective" universal structure of history. For this reason, I believe it is a more appropriate model for our life experiences and for the intellectual and scientific climate of our times. The balanced perspectives allow us to uncover the fulness of historical experience. As every great piece of literature seeks to provide insight into the complex fabric of contesting forces, so Jewish historical writing must now discover the orchestration of the disparate notes which constitute Jewish culture in its dialectical continuity.