

**THE
CASE
FOR
JEWISH
DIASPORA**

**DAVID
KRAEMER**

EMBRACING EXILE

Embracing Exile

Embracing Exile

The Case for Jewish Diaspora

DAVID KRAEMER

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

© Oxford University Press 2025

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system,
transmitted, used for text and data mining, or used for training artificial intelligence, in any form or
by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly
permitted by law, by license or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographics rights
organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent
to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

CIP data is on file at the Library of Congress.

ISBN 9780197623541

DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197623541.001.0001

Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc., United States of America

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
1. The Lay of the Land	1
2. Biblical Explanations of Exile	20
3. Biblical Narratives of Diaspora	31
4. Zion in Babylon	62
5. Medieval Jewish Teachings on Exile	87
6. Exile, the Jewish Mystical Tradition, and the Sephardi Diaspora	109
7. The Great Theorizer of Diaspora: The Maharal of Prague	127
8. Hasidism and the Eastern European Diaspora	135
9. Haskalah, Reform, and Early Zionism	146
10. Modern Jews on Diaspora	162
11. Exiles and Their Diasporas: The Lessons of the Jews	205
<i>Notes</i>	215
<i>Bibliography</i>	225
<i>Index</i>	229

Preface

My interest in Jewish teachings and traditions concerning the Land of Israel and the people Israel's relation to it began when I was a junior in college in the mid-1970s. My experience while attending Hebrew University that year could not have been more thrilling. Unlike many of my fellow students, who lived in university housing for overseas students, I chose to live, with two new friends, in the midst of Israeli society, and we were lucky to find for rent a newly built apartment in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. There, we found ourselves in a living history—not only a new one, which included the rebuilding of the Jewish Quarter itself, but an ancient one, surrounded as we were by historical sites and important new excavations.

As we hung up our wet laundry to dry on the roof that year, we overlooked the mosque known as the Dome of the Rock, along with Al-Aqsa, both on the platform we called the “Temple Mount,” the location of the ancient Jewish Temples. And I will never forget the day I heard excited yelling coming from the narrow street beneath my window, which I discovered was in reaction to the uncovering of a famous Byzantine road, the Cardo. Yes, that's right: I saw the Cardo the very day it was rediscovered. How could such experiences not leave their imprint on me forever? How could I not be drawn to the land where the historical roots of my people were to be found?

Later that year, I had a formative and, in some ways, contrary experience during the Jewish holiday of Shavuot, which commemorates the giving of the Torah at Sinai. It is a custom on Shavuot to stay up all night studying Torah = traditional Jewish texts (this ritual is called a “*tikkun*”). It is also a custom on this holiday to read the biblical book of Ruth. So I found myself late at night in the living room of a private apartment in Jerusalem with a group of American Jews who had recently “made Aliyah” (immigrated; literally “gone up”) to Israel, discussing the story told in Ruth. Early in the book, Naomi, on account of a famine in the Land, leaves Bethlehem for Moab, accompanied by her husband and two sons. In the space of just a few verses, all three of the men die.

What was the reason for their death? An early rabbinic commentary, shared by one of the circle of students at the tikkun, suggests that they died because they had left the Land of Israel. You can only imagine the enthusiasm of the assembled recent immigrants, inspired by their experience of Israel's post-1967 "miracles," for this particular explanation. If living outside the Land is sinful, then their choice to move to Israel was, from the perspective of traditional Judaism, a laudable one. But while they were nearly gleeful, I experienced a distinct sense of discomfort. I was, like most of them, a child of the American Jewish diaspora. But unlike them, I had not decided to make Aliyah, and I was soon to return to my home in the diaspora. Did the tradition I was then learning to love think such a move would be wrong? Did it think I deserved to die for going "outside the Land?" I knew from personal experience the potential of Jewish life in diaspora, and though I, like many young Jews of that time, felt the pull of Jewish life in Israel, I certainly did not feel myself a stranger or foreigner in New York (in whose suburbs I had grown up), Boston (where I attended college), southern Florida (where my family lived at the time), or elsewhere. On balance, I felt that America was more my home than Israel. Were my feelings condemnable in the eyes of Jewish tradition?

When I returned to the United States for my final year in college, I first devoted myself to exploring the Land-centered part of the tradition that excited me. That year I researched and wrote, under the guidance of distinguished professor, Marvin Fox, a senior honors thesis on "The Commandment to Settle the Land of Israel in Rabbinic Literature." In this work, extending for some 130 pages, I explored the entire canon of classical rabbinic teachings pertaining to the Land and the Jewish obligation to settle there. At the time, I heard the voice of these sources calling me, as a result of which I heard only them, failing to appreciate how they functioned in context, a context that, I would later learn, sometimes preserved contrary voices. I also failed to appreciate that a canon the examination of which could be contained in a mere 130 pages (even if those pages were written by an undergraduate and could certainly have been supplemented with other examples) was hardly massive.

Soon after this, first as a graduate student and then a professor of Jewish history and tradition, I began studying the Judaism of the diaspora, commencing with the Babylonian Talmud and then turning to communities where that Talmud held sway. In the course of my studies, I learned that Jewish history in the diaspora was not one long story of persecutions and

woes. In fact, Jews in diasporas have often lived comfortably, and even flourished—creating, adapting, and simply living, often in conditions that were little different than those of their neighbors. I also grew increasingly aware of the fact that the longing to return to Zion was not the only motivating ideology of Jewish life and dreams.

Over the years, I learned more and more of the Jewish teachings and traditions that affirmed and even celebrated Jewish life in diaspora. Some of these I learned from the writings of others with interests similar to mine, but most I had to pursue, to seek out, or simply to encounter serendipitously. No work, I discovered, had been devoted to collecting them systematically. As I taught these traditions to excited students at various levels, I realized that if the job of documenting this “alternative” tradition had not yet been done (it was “alternative” only because it had been neglected, not because it stood for a counter-tradition in Judaism), I had to do it. My students encouraged me, insisting that I had an obligation to help make this part of Jewish tradition better known. The product of my long exploration of this neglected Jewish voice is this book.

There are many people to whom I owe gratitude for the book you are holding. First are the many scholars who have explored one aspect or another of the tradition I gather and document here. Without their work examining attitudes and practices of diaspora Jews regarding diaspora through the centuries, I could barely have begun my work. You will find the names of those scholars in the endnotes. Second, I am deeply grateful to my many students with whom I have engaged in dialogue concerning these diaspora teachings. Their challenges and insights have improved my understanding immeasurably, and even if I can’t identify them individually, their collective wisdom informs much of what I write in following chapters. Third, I am grateful to supportive colleagues, including Ismar Schorsch, Alan Cooper, and Eitan Fishbane, who directed me to sources with which I was not familiar. Finally, multiple readers for Oxford University Press offered astute critiques and wise recommendations concerning earlier versions of this book, from the initial proposal to earlier drafts of my complete “manuscript” (when are we going to find a more correct term for what we now produce?). What you will read is also greatly improved because of their demands for high quality. I must add that what I say about the anonymous readers is doubly the case with respect to Oxford editor, Nancy Toff. Her support and guidance through this process have been invaluable.

1

The Lay of the Land

There is what might be described as a “canonical” history of the Jewish diaspora, according to which Jews in exile have experienced an unending sequence of sufferings as strangers in foreign lands. This history extends as far back as the first Judean exile at the hands of Babylonian forces, with the biblical account (in the book of Esther) of Haman’s threat to annihilate Jewish exiles in the Persian realm understood to represent the danger to Jewish lives in all exiles. But the bulk of the canonical narrative focuses on events and experiences that followed the destruction of the second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE. From that time onward, according to the much-repeated story, Jews wandered from one diaspora to another, suffering in each. Diaspora Jews suffered and died at the hands of the Crusaders, then suffered and fled before the Spanish inquisitors. Diaspora Jewish life followed a path that led through ghettos and pogroms, and ultimately to the Holocaust.

Although there is undoubtedly truth to this narrative of suffering, it is partial and incomplete. Equally as true is a narrative of Jewish diasporas that emphasizes the peaceful and productive qualities of Jewish diaspora experience, and the ways those qualities have enhanced Jewish life, religion, and culture. This alternative is a narrative of Jews mixing with host faiths, cultures, and traditions, adopting both the languages of their neighbors, in the literal sense, and the “languages” of their neighbors, in the broader, cultural sense. It is the story of Jews absorbing and adapting elements of the diaspora cultures in which they made their homes, enriching the Jewish culture they had inherited and permitting them to reinvent themselves, often unconsciously, thus providing new energy and strength for diaspora communities to come. This story recognizes that medieval Jewish culture in Islam would not have been the same without Arabic poetry and philosophy, that early modern Jewish culture in Christendom would have been poorer without the inspiration of Christian artists and artisans. This version of diaspora history has been increasingly excavated and heralded by historians in recent decades, and while there is room for debate over the balance of the

favorable and unfavorable in any given setting, the emergent recognition that diaspora Jewish life was often rich and rewarding cannot reasonably be denied.

Undeniable, too, is the recognition that the bulk of Jewish history *is* a diaspora history. Most historians of the ancient Jewish world agree that already in the period following the Babylonian exile and even the return, most Jews lived and would continue to live outside the Land of Israel. Subsequent to the wars with Rome in the first and second centuries, though a vibrant Jewish center continued to exist in the Galilee, an increasing proportion of Jews found their homes in the diaspora. From the beginning of the Muslim period onward, somewhere upward of 90 percent of the world's Jews lived in Muslim lands outside of Palestine, until migration patterns (along with conquests and expulsions) brought more and more Jews to Christian Europe, from south to north and from west to east.

What did Jews make of their diaspora experiences? It is essential to ask this question for several reasons. First, though one might assume that the answer to this question is obvious—after all, from the Hebrew Bible onward, Jews have often explained exile as punishment for sin—the reality is more complex. The exile-as-punishment explanation is but one of many and not necessarily the most prominent one in any given period or setting. Second, if the reality of diaspora experience was more balanced than both myth and older historiography would have it—if diaspora Jews lived peacefully and even flourished as much as they suffered—then that experience could not have been configured solely as punishment.¹ All along, there must have been more positive interpretations of Jewish life in diaspora by the side of the exile-as-punishment trope. Why “must have been?” Because humans are creatures who justify their existence, both consciously and unconsciously. The stories we tell are not neutral, nor are our laws, nor are our commentaries. We tell and repeat stories to make an argument, to justify a condition, to persuade those who are listening to us of something. The stories we tell are the ground for the laws we write and enact, which will in turn reinforce the assumptions that lay beneath our stories. And the commentaries we write, the interpretations we offer, will re-cast and re-direct the traditions we inherit, assuring that the orthodoxies of the past now speak to the experiences of the present. If humans justify their existence, then diaspora Jews must have justified their lives in diaspora.

In what we might call the traditional Jewish story, Jews were invited to think of their exiles through the ages as punishments for their sins, and they

were promised that if they returned to God (*teshuva*) they would be returned to the Promised Land. This story gave them reason to persevere in times of hardship, living with the hope that they would one day leave their hardship behind. But this story did not help Jews make sense of their frequent experience of comfort in their diaspora homes—and they were their homes. Diaspora Jews living in relative peace, for whom the vision of exile-as-punishment could hardly have explained the totality of their experience, must also have justified their diaspora existence. Yet we rarely hear of such justifications, and many will be dubious that they even exist. But if we are right about human habits of justification, they must exist. It is the recovery of these justifications to which this book is devoted.²

Even while ritually expressing, in their daily prayers and other rituals, the hope for their final deliverance, Jews through the generations also developed what we might call ideologies of diaspora, concepts and ideational constructions that would allow them patiently to await the coming of the messiah for generations, if not forever. This book will document this claim in detail, calling upon examples from all ages and lands in which diaspora Jewish life was lived. The material we examine will be diverse, representing all manner of Jewish creativity.

What we are exploring is not ideologies in the proper sense. “Ideology” is a modern term, and it is generally used to describe a totalizing system of ideas that aims to motivate populations toward action. Jewish narratives, beliefs, concepts, or teachings pertaining to diaspora generally do not cohere into a system, and pre-modern Jewish writings rarely totalize in the way that, say, Marxism does. It is fair to say that Zionism is a Jewish ideology then, but not that Talmudic teachings pertaining to Zion or Exile/diaspora are. At the same time, even if they are not ideologies, such traditional teachings or narratives do motivate populations toward action, even if that action is remaining in diaspora homes and building a life there.

Our use of the term “ideology” is closer to what Daniel Bell describes as the “popular usage” of the term, that is, “a vague term...denot[ing] a worldview or belief-system or creeds held by a social group about the social arrangements in society.”³ In Jewish writings and expression, ideology in this sense may be contained in a narrative (such as the story of Joseph) or a spirited deliberation (such as in the Talmud). It may emerge from the assemblage of isolated comments (as in the teachings of Hasidic masters) or from more systematic expositions on the meaning of Jewish life in exile (such as in the writings of the Maharal of Prague), in ways that approach modern

ideological argument. It may even be found in the illustrations of Hebrew manuscripts. We will use “ideology” side by side with “teaching,” “tradition,” “concept,” “belief,” and other words in these semantic fields, all while insisting that diaspora Jewish beliefs justifying diaspora/Exile are not isolated. They do, at least, form part of a system, adjacent to and sometimes, though not necessarily, in tension with teachings aspiring to a return to Zion.

Furthermore, while Jewish diaspora-thinking is not-quite-ideological, it does share certain qualities or characteristics with ideological systems. Thus, Daniel Bell admits, “‘styles of thought’ are related to historic class groups and their interests...ideas emerge as a consequence of the different world-views, or perspectives, of different groups in a society...there is an ‘elective affinity’ between ideas and interests...all ideas serve interests.”⁴ To these brief formulations could be added many others, and they all add up, more or less, to the same thing: the expression of ideas, whether in declarative statements, embedded in narratives, or intimated through rules, enactments, or rituals, serve a purpose, and that purpose will relate in important ways to the people who give them expression. In our context, this means that diaspora Jews living for generations in relatively comfortable diasporas will formulate narratives affirming and justifying that reality. In addition, as Bell writes, “What people say they believe cannot always be taken at face value, and one must search for the structure of interests beneath the ideas; one looks not at the *content* of ideas, but their *function*.”⁵ For us, this means that even when Jewish prayers articulate a hope for a return to Zion, we must consider whether that hope is present- or future-oriented, and how it relates to other expressions and structures that solidify Jewish life in diaspora.

If, in modernity, ideology is the realm of intellectuals—a small, elite group—the traditional Jewish equivalent, including narrative and legal writings, commentaries, and so forth, is also the realm of an elite, in this case the well-educated, male, literate elite. This means that most of the materials we encounter will directly embody the voices and values of particular Jewish elites, almost all men, and not of the people more generally. But, while recognizing their source, we should not make the mistake of thinking that these expressions speak only for such elites. Canonical writings are canonical not because of what they essentially are but because of the way they were received—because they were accepted as authoritative by the community at large. This means that what they said resonated with larger numbers of (in our case) Jews, and, being authoritative, what they said continued to influence the opinions of common Jews from one

generation to the next. Crucially, for Jews, canonical works include not just biblical and classical rabbinic texts, but also such works as the Zohar—originally elite but in more recent generations, popular and influential—and collected teachings of Hasidic masters, always more popular. Further, the literate elites in the Jewish world were rarely ivory tower intellectuals. Most engaged and sought to influence the Jewish populace, in direct and indirect ways, and they often succeeded. So the voices we encounter will not speak for a lettered elite alone. It is fair to say that these voices represent the opinions and beliefs of larger swathes of Jewry as well.

Having clarified what I mean by “ideologies,” it is crucial that I say something about what I mean by “diaspora.” Diaspora as a phenomenon, concept, and specific historical experience has been much studied in recent years, and its essential qualities (that is, its definition) much debated. Because of the length and diversity of Jewish diasporas, it is best, for our purposes, to accept an eclectic definition, avoiding overly narrow assumptions of what diasporas must be. In the 25th anniversary edition of *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*,⁶ Robin Cohen offers a list of nine characteristic “strands” that qualify diasporas, each if not all of which combine (forming a metaphorical “rope”) to define the diaspora phenomenon. These strands are a refinement on earlier definitions, reflecting and responding to critiques and subsequent discussions in the field since earlier versions of his publication. They are as follows: “dispersal” = “flight from an original home, often under traumatic circumstances”; “expansion” = “movement from a homeland in search of work or a better life”; “retention” = “preservation of a collective memory about an original homeland”; “idealization” = “construction of a myth of the real or imagined ancestral home”; “return” = “development of a return movement to the homeland”; “distinctiveness” = “a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time based on a sense of particularity, a common history, the transmission of a common cultural and religious heritage and the belief in a common fate”; “apprehension” = “an uneasy relationship with host societies”; “creativity” = “the prospect of an enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism involving entrepreneurship, creative imagination, scientific achievement, and professional success”; and “solidarity” = “a sense of identification, empathy with and co-responsibility for co-ethnic members in other countries.”⁷

Most of these terms obviously pertain to Jewish diasporas and Jewish conceptions thereof, and I would accept all of them without hesitation. But many students of Jewish history and thought would be puzzled by creativity

(and, perhaps less so, by expansion), or at least would not include it in their definition/description of Jewish diasporas, affirming and positive as it is. Indeed, even Cohen offers as his first example of the “victim diaspora” type the Jewish diaspora,⁸ and while he corrects the tragic vision by emphasizing that “the Jews’ considerable intellectual and spiritual achievements in the diaspora simply could not have happened in a narrow tribal society like that of ancient Judea,”⁹ he admits (laments?) that “the tragic tradition was dragooned into the service of Christian and Jewish theology.”¹⁰ The word “dragoon” says much, as the tragic view leaves virtually no room for the fruitful creativity that in reality characterized Jewish as well as other diasporas. Recognition of this reality has rarely been given its due in conventional discussions of Jewish diaspora, until, in recent times, historians have begun to correct the historical record. The history of ideas that follows will correct the parallel record of Jewish beliefs and opinions.

Cohen describes, but does not sufficiently emphasize, the dual orientation of diasporas, the Jewish one above all. A diaspora is a diaspora because it recalls, and in some measure yearns for, an idealized “original” homeland. At the same time, it admits that, at least until some unknown future, its current “hostland” is indeed home. These dual poles of orientation are crucial to the diaspora’s identity. This means that diaspora Jews will never (as long as they remain a Jewish diaspora) abandon their sense of a common origin in the Promised Land, nor should we expect them to reject the possibility of returning to that “Land” (which may be conceived as an idealized, non-territorial entity) in some unknown future.¹¹ At the same time, diaspora Jews can be expected to rationalize, justify, and even celebrate the diaspora pole of their dual orientation. Their prayer to ultimately return to Zion will not negate the possibility that “Zion” may now be found in the diaspora. Nor will residence in Zion eliminate the essential diaspora spirit of a people returned to their land.

This book is a history of “the diaspora idea in Judaism,”¹² with a particular focus on expressions that affirm or justify diaspora life. It is not a history of Jewish diasporas as such. Such histories are the substance and focus of much historical writing about Jews, and this is a field that will continue to grow, contributing ever greater nuance to our understanding of the experiences of Jews, both good and bad, in their various diasporas.¹³ I have nothing to add to the important work that has already been done in this field. But the contributions of historians of Jewish diasporas are crucial to this history, for it is impossible to understand the ideas expressed without appreciation of the settings in which they were born.

As a book about affirmations of diaspora, what follows will not be a complete, balanced representation of Jewish traditions of exile and redemption through the ages. Since the beginnings of Zionism, there have been many volumes that have gathered and commented upon traditional (and post-traditional!) Jewish teachings expressing the hope for redemption (whether religious or secular), the aspiration or longing to return to Zion. Until now, there has been no equivalent volume collecting Jewish teachings that affirm, support, or justify exile/diaspora. So this book may be understood as a corrective—as the other side of the coin, the rebalancing of scales, directed at exposing a fuller picture of Jewish teachings pertaining to the question of Jewish place and home.

One potential stumbling block in our exploration will be the language of Jewish expression and its limitations. Most of the teachings we will examine are written in one or another form of traditional Hebrew, and they overwhelmingly use the term “*galut*” (exile) to refer to what we are calling diaspora. In its earliest, biblical usage, *galut* is associated with divine punishment and, as a consequence, has an unavoidably negative connotation—describing a condition from which Jews must be delivered. In fact, due to that association, it has become customary to use “exile” and “diaspora” dichotomously, with the former implying a negative experience or judgment and the latter being more neutral. But traditional Hebrews had no word for “diaspora,”¹⁴ so Jewish expressions about diaspora had little choice but to use the term “*galut*,” whatever the message or affect of the speaker. Crucially, we should not assume that the meaning of the term, along with related terms and concepts, remained static. Language changes with usage, and this is as true for Jewish language referring to exile (“*galut*” and its reversal, “*geulah*,” “redemption”) as it is for any other language.

For example, the early part of Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 23 offers a rabbinic exposition of the phrase from Song of Songs 2:2, “like a lily among the thorns.” Among the various interpretations offered there (pars. 5–6), we find a sequence suggesting that the lily is Israel (or the righteous of Israel) and the thorns are those who oppress Israel. Israel, the flower, is in need of redemption, and all that is necessary is God’s intervention to effectuate that redemption.

In one application of this metaphor, the Midrash says, “Just as when the owner wants to pick the lily from among the thorns, he will burn around it and pick it,” in similar fashion will God one day “pick” Israel from among her enemies—“Halamo [which is hostile] to Naveh, and Susita [which is hostile] to Tiberius, and Kastera to Haifa, and Jericho to Neuran, and Lod

to Ono.” The former are all towns with gentile populations, while the latter are towns with predominantly Jewish populations. Specifying the application of the metaphor, the Midrash concludes, “In the future [literally “tomorrow”], when the time of redemption has come for Israel, what does the Holy One do to them? He brings the fire and burns outside of them [the Jewish settlements].” To redeem the Jews, God must destroy the enemies that surround them. The gentile towns will be “burned” and the Jewish ones survive for final deliverance.

Even if we are not familiar with all the locations specified in this Midrash (and even if some are difficult to identify), one thing is unmistakable: they are all towns/cities in the Land of Israel. So what this Midrash is saying is this: Jews living in the Land, who are, as the Midrash says earlier, “enslaved to the nations of the world,” need redemption from the enemies who surround them in the Land itself. To which period or reality does this teaching apply? “To these generations.”¹⁵ In other words, rabbis—and presumably other Jews—who lived in the Land of Israel in the Byzantine era, subject to the domination of others and surrounded by adversaries, believed they were in need of redemption. Those who need redemption are now living—existentially, at least—in “exile” (whether or not the term is actually used). So it is possible to be in “exile” even in the Land of future redemptive realization. “Exile” need not be in exile.

Conversely, we should also not assume that use of the term “exile” implies any given set of conditions—say, suffering and oppression. As we will see in later chapters, lamenting exile became a ritual for Jews, and speaking of “bitter exile” a formula—even a verbal tic—even when Jewish writers or speakers lived in relative comfort and celebrated their Jewish lives in a particular “exile.” In different settings, Jews may mean or feel something very different when they speak of exile, and we must judge meaning according to the evidence of the setting, not according to some pre-conceived notion of exile deriving from another time or context.

To lay a foundation for the history of ideas, we begin with a brief history of Jewish diasporas, as understood by the best of recent Jewish historical scholarship.

The history of Jewish diasporas begins with the Persian emperor, Cyrus, who, sometime in the 530s BCE, gave permission for exiled Judeans to return to their former homeland. Despite their freedom to do so, many did not return. Instead, they voluntarily remained in their comfortable new

Babylonian homes, the first generations of what would become the longest-lived diaspora community in Jewish history (this community effectively came to an end only after the founding of the state of Israel in the twentieth century). Probably from this time onward (and certainly not long after this), the combined populations of Jewish diasporas would always exceed the Jewish population of the Holy Land. At the same time, Jews who returned to the Land from Babylonian exile were not exactly independent. On the contrary, Jews in their Holy Land were first dominated by Persians, then Greeks, and then (with an interruption of less than a century for the Hasmoneans, the successors of the Maccabees) Romans.

There was a revolt against Rome between 66 and 73 CE, and the Jewish forces were defeated. But Rome did not first conquer Judea during this war. Rather, Rome had taken control of Jewish territories with the downfall of the last of the Hasmoneans, a full century earlier. Under Rome and before the revolt, Jews in Palestine, in their various small territorial domains, enjoyed “autonomy,” but certainly not independence. So the shift to direct Roman rule after the revolt was meaningful but not world-changing. This was not a case of independence followed by defeat and subjugation.

Equally importantly, there was no new exile as a product of the Jewish war with Rome. Unlike Babylonia centuries before, Rome did not have a policy of exile for its defeated peoples.¹⁶ Rome did take prisoners of war—such as those prisoners of the Jewish war famously depicted on the Arch of Titus in the Roman forum near the Colosseum—and there were certainly Jews who fled the violence and ravages of the war. But Palestinian Jews were not exiled as a matter of policy, and most remained in or near their former homes in Judea or greater Palestine. That there continued to be many Jews in the Land in the following centuries is evident from contemporary histories, documentary evidence, and archaeology. Rabbis in the Galilee produced the Mishnah in the late second to early third centuries, and they produced the first Talmud and many Midrashic texts sometime in the fifth century. In the late fourth through the sixth centuries Jews built significant synagogues in the Galilee and the Jordan Valley. They had recognized political leadership in the person of the Jewish Patriarch. The Jewish population in the Jewish Holy Land did not dwindle significantly until the sixth century, and this for reasons that had nothing to do with defeat and exile.

Nor did Jewish life outside the land change substantially as a result of the Roman wars (though the Jewish populations of nearby territories certainly increased with refugees from the wars). There had long been a Babylonian

diaspora, and by the time of Jesus there were well-established diasporas in Egypt, throughout Asia Minor, and even in Rome. Diaspora was already a regular part of Jewish life when the Jerusalem Temple was still standing, and it would continue to be so for the next two millennia.

The post-destruction diaspora community concerning which we know the most, thanks to the rabbis and their Talmud, is that of Babylonia, the land that would come to be known as Iraq. Jews had resided in Babylon since the Babylonian exile, but we know little about the experience of those Jews before the rabbis arrived due to lack of surviving documentation. Once the rabbis arrived from Palestine in the late second century, though, they sought to join and influence the long-established community, enjoying conditions that provided little reason for complaint. Rabbis report of themselves that some were materially comfortable and some less so—just like everyone else! But nearly all, from the third to the sixth centuries, lived as they pleased, with rare exception unimpeded in their practice of Judaism. While Palestinian Jewish life was challenged and even languishing, Babylonian Jewish life was thriving, yielding eternal benefits. Babylon provided the rabbis a fertile ground for the study of Torah, and the end-product of this centuries-long experience was the great Babylonian Talmud, which would define Jewish life everywhere from the early Middle Ages until recent modernity.

In the seventh century, the Persian empire of late antiquity collapsed, making way for the Muslim conquest. The replacement of empire for empire did little to diminish the strength of Jewish life in the same lands. In the Muslim world, where the vast majority of Jews lived from the seventh until the twelfth century, Jews enjoyed protected status as a “people of the book.” To be sure, sometimes Jewish protections and prerogatives were trampled by local rulers, but more often Jews lived their lives in relative peace—speaking their own dialect of Arabic, following their own customs, and participating in local trade and society.

During the first significant period of Muslim civilization, under the Abbasids, whose capital was Baghdad, Jews enjoyed ongoing peace, their leaders respected and their right to practice their religion freely undiminished. Though we know little about the old Jewish population in Iraq during this period, we know a great deal about the affairs of the rabbis and their increasingly numerous followers. Early under Abbasid rule, the Talmudic academies re-located to Baghdad, where their authority, recognized by Muslim rulers, grew to international proportions. We even have

testimony of the heads of the academies being treated like royalty, a condition that persisted for centuries, when the international center of rabbinic authority moved elsewhere.

There were even so-called “golden ages” under Muslim domination, particularly in Spain, where Jews rose to significant roles in society, producing law and poetry, and mingling—even intimately—with their Muslim neighbors. One need merely think of the poetry of Judah Halevi (and others whose names are, to most, lesser known) and the philosophy and jurisprudence of Maimonides (the latter in Egypt, though he is often associated with Spain’s golden age, which he did not enjoy) to appreciate the quality of Jewish life in many Muslim settings through these centuries. And it is not only the flourishing of an elite, educated Jewish culture that provides evidence of this reality. Consider the critique directed by one Jew at his compatriots, when he declared “How can you enjoy yourselves, O exiles, and find pleasure in taverns and good food?!”¹⁷ They may have been “exiles,” but they were not suffering.

Jewish life in what Jews have known as “Ashkenaz” (originally northern France and the Rhine region and later central to eastern Europe) was, during these times, but a promise, emerging gradually on soils where Jewish life had only recently arrived. Small Jewish communities grew slowly, and Jewish life was sometimes punctuated by oppressions and poverty (the latter distinguishing Jews as a people from no one). But in this region, too, the picture was far more complicated and Jewish life far richer than is sometimes recalled. Early on in Ashkenaz, the great rabbinic commentator Rashi determined the direction of Torah and Talmud study for all generations to come. While Rashi was still alive, the Jewish populations of the cities of the Rhine—Speyer, Worms, and Mainz—suffered serious losses during the first crusade, but the Jewish populations of those cities recovered within a generation, and they continued to be serious centers of Jewish life and piety. In greater Ashkenaz in the twelfth century, the great Talmudic scholars known as Tosafot learned much from the scholastic methods of neighboring Christian scholars, and their Talmudic commentaries are filled with the spirit of the enlightened “new textuality” of the contemporary French schools. And though the lives of these gentlemen overlapped chronologically with the second crusade, neither they nor other Jews suffered as a result, for both Jews and Christians learned the lessons of the abuses of the first crusade and were thereafter able to prevent violence against Jews, which was not the goal of the crusades in the first place.

To appreciate Jewish experience in this place and period, we need to recall that Jews in Ashkenaz typically lived in small numbers in small towns or cities, where they had no choice but to live peacefully with their neighbors. Making this point clearly is various testimonies of the dependence of Jews (like everyone else!) on local resources for their survival. So Rabbenu Tam, one of the outstanding twelfth-century rabbinic scholars in France, grants permission for Jews to use mills and ovens belonging to Christian priests to prepare their own bread (Tosafot, Avodah Zarah 44b). When one recalls that medieval towns were likely to have had few ovens and that the only available oven might have been the one owned by the church, Rabbenu Tam's permission occasions no surprise. But it is worth noting nonetheless, as it bespeaks a relationship of cooperation between members of the different faiths.

We should not imagine that such relationships were only pragmatic. A colleague of Rabbenu Tam reports that "there are those who permit the purchase of warm bread from gentiles" on the Sabbath (Avodah Zarah 66b). To understand the full implication of this report, we need merely recall that, understood literally, such a transaction would be forbidden to Jews on the Sabbath, so "purchase" must mean something else, something like "acquire on credit." For this to be possible, the Jew and the gentile baker must have relatively good relations and understand one another's practices. Otherwise, the Jew would have to be satisfied with bread baked the prior day.

The evidence for such relations is not rare. Slightly later than the French case, in Vienna R. Isaac b. Moses condemned those who choose bread baked by gentiles over bread baked by Jews, suggesting that Jewish laxity in this matter is widespread. R. Isaac is very explicit in his condemnation, writing that, "everyone [= every Jew] has grown accustomed to purchase bread from his good friend the gentile, and they don't worry about [possible attraction to] his daughters" (*Or Zaru'a*, Avodah Zarah 188). Notably, the word translated here as "good friend" would literally be translated as "lover," and even if such literalness goes too far, there can be no doubt that the term implies warmth and even intimacy. To state the matter simply, the evidence shows that Jews shared both bread and wine with their neighbors, a consequence of living side by side in trust, peace, and sometimes even affection.

That Jews and gentiles lived and worked in such cooperative proximity, and even with warm relations, may come as a surprise to many, who have learned that Jews lived in ghettos and only "emerged from the ghetto" with the enlightenment and advent of emancipation. But the Jewish ghetto is an

early modern invention—the first ghetto was established in Venice in 1516—and before that Jews lived in a variety of settings and configurations, none of them actual ghettos. Jewish texts from Roman and Byzantine Palestine, along with the Talmud of Babylonia, all assume that Jews and gentiles might live in homes sharing a common courtyard. Medieval towns typically had “Jewish streets” or small neighborhoods, but these were not ghettos. Jews, like all peoples, are comfortable living among their own, so such clusters of Jewish dwellings were as likely to be a consequence of choice as of anything else, and such streets or neighborhoods were not exclusive—Jews could live elsewhere in town, and Christians could live in Jewish neighborhoods. Even when the Jewish quarter was located by the side of the cathedral or church complex, as was often the case, this was informed by the fact that this was likely to be the safest place in town; uninformed crowds could sometimes act in an unruly fashion and act out against Jews, but official church policy, usually well enforced, required that Jews be protected.

When we turn our focus to the Renaissance and early modernity, we similarly have to revise the better-known version of Jewish history. The earliest actual ghettos in Italy were places where Jews were required to locate their homes, that is, to sleep at night. But the ghettos were open to two-way traffic during the day, as Jews did business elsewhere and gentiles made their way into the ghetto markets. Moreover, many Italian Jews in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries actually lived quite well. Illustrated and illuminated Italian Hebrew manuscripts of this period are often quite lavish, written by expert scribes on fine parchment and decorated by artists working with vibrant colored inks, and often with gold leaf. These books were clearly commissioned by very wealthy families, families who often created their own coats of arms to claim their distinguished status. Jews living in northern Italy more generally dressed and adorned themselves just like their neighbors, and on the street they would have been hardly distinguishable from their neighbors to the untrained eye. We even know, from Jewish testimonies, that Jews drank the wines of their neighbors, forbidden according to Jewish law but only to be expected in a setting in which Jews felt so comfortable.

One of the greatest of the Jewish diasporas of all time was that of the greater Polish lands, beginning with the Polish “golden age” of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and continuing, even following anti-Jewish outbreaks, into the eighteenth century. This was a period of

unprecedented Jewish autonomy and material success in Polish lands (this condition was interrupted in the mid-seventeenth century but resumed thereafter). Jews made their homes, by invitation and subject to official protection, in both royal and noble Polish towns and territories, and they came to be relied upon as trusted subjects who often served the king or noblemen directly. The relative comfort and security that came with these arrangements led to growth in the Jewish community, both through natural increase and by attracting Jews from elsewhere in Europe. As a result, it was increasingly common for Jews to constitute at least a significant minority—and sometimes even a majority—of the populations of towns in these regions, meaning that Jews and Christians lived in distinct neighborhoods, but side by side and mutually reliant, in one town after another.

These abundant Jewish populations were granted unprecedented judicial and communal autonomy. Regional Jewish councils, which could rightly be called “legislatures” (the term Jews used in Polish was “*sejm*,” the same term used for the Polish legislature), and autonomous courts meant that, with respect to day-to-day affairs, Jews largely controlled their own lives. The judges who served in Jewish courts were rabbis, and the law that controlled their judgments was the law that originated in the Talmud. And while rabbis were secondary to wealthy Jews on the regional councils, it was commonly understood that the regulations that should control Jewish society as a whole were those accepted by the rabbinic authorities. It is not incorrect to call this state of affairs “Jewish autonomy,” and it is fair to say that this constituted the most significant degree of self-government that Jews enjoyed since antiquity.

This was also a period of great Jewish productivity in these lands. Early in this period, prominent rabbis wrote important Talmudic commentaries and codes of Jewish law—writings that are influential to this day. Jews shared the fates of their neighboring populations when it came to prosperity or poverty, but even when Jews, like their neighbors, experienced the challenges of deprivation, their spiritual lives flourished; one need only look to the great creativity of Hasidic spirituality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to understand how fulfilling Jewish life was, even in the face of material hardship.

Following emancipation, European Jews took their place next to their Christian neighbors as citizens of newly emerging nation-states. Many moved to expanding, increasingly vibrant cities such as Warsaw or Berlin, where some sought to join modern society by giving up distinguishing