

INTRODUCTION

Viewpoints on Jewish History

History is one thing, but the idea of it
is something else, and it is manifold.

—Johann Martin Chladenius,
Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft, 1752

HISTORIANS CANNOT PREDICT the future, but they have the power to interpret the past. In their hands, the past is shaped in the same way that the future takes on form in the eyes of the classical prophets. Thus for the poet and scholar Friedrich Schlegel historians were “prophets facing backward.”¹ Schlegel’s remark of 1798 can be understood in two ways, as Walter Benjamin explained: “Traditionally it has meant that the historian, transplanting himself into a remote past, prophesies what was regarded as the future at that time but meanwhile has become the past.... But the saying can also be understood to mean something quite different: the historian turns his back on his own time, and his seer’s gaze is kindled by the peaks of earlier generations as they sink further into the past.”²

Benjamin interpreted Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* as “the angel of history,” the ideal image of a backward-facing prophet.³ He acquired this picture in 1921 and bequeathed it to his friend Gershom Scholem (1897–1982). In the concluding lines of a poem written for Benjamin in 1933, Scholem noted in defiance of Benjamin’s interpretation:

I am an unsymbolic thing,
mean what I am. In vain
You turn the magic ring;
I have no meaning.⁴

It may be characteristic that the twentieth century’s most important prophet of the Jewish past issued a warning against an excessively symbolic interpretation of history, which has been repeated ad nauseam by Benjamin devotees. Scholem was only too well aware how much the history of the Jews in particular had to be kept open to the most diverse interpretations. Although its interpreters’ ambition was to regard historical “reality” objectively, the constantly recurring relationship between their

ideological and political positions and their representation of history is clear.⁵ This begins with the definition of their proper object of study: Is it the history of a nation, a religious community, or a collectivity defined in some entirely different way?

In the course of the past two centuries historians have constantly re-defined the history of the Jews. In the meantime, some of them have themselves become the subjects of scholarly studies.⁶ But whereas a great deal has been written about Jews and Jewish history, and important studies of particular aspects of Jewish historiography in the modern period have appeared, astonishingly enough there is still no general, comparative overview and interpretation.⁷ This is all the more surprising because in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Jewish historiography was seen as having a considerable political function. Jews had relatively little substantial political or even military power to exert in support of their various claims to individual emancipation in Western Europe and the United States, collective autonomous rights in Eastern Europe, or the construction of a state in Palestine. On the other hand, what they *could* show was their consciousness of an especially long history. The early promoters of these three claims derived their legitimation from history. Whereas the advocates of individual emancipation emphasized the Jews' millennial rootedness on European soil, the supporters of autonomy emphasized the historically developed community as the basic form of Jewish existence. Finally, the Zionists proclaimed the historic right to the Land of Israel. In each case historians, as prophets of the past, played a key role in the process of political legitimation. For Jews, more than for most nations and religious communities, history was the primary weapon in this struggle.

Whereas outlines of the future played a crucial role in the narratives of Jewish historians, their non-Jewish colleagues commonly regarded the Jews as historical fossils. In the nineteenth century, these non-Jewish historians were dominated by Christian missionary thinking. Later on, Soviet historiography considered the Jews to be superfluous in class society, and special so-called research institutes devoted to the "Jewish question" served as tools of Nazi genocide. This extreme multiplicity of perspectives may be characteristic of Jewish history; the questions that confront its interpreters are, however, general in nature.

Objectivity and Partiality

In the Japanese writer Ryunosuke Akutagawa's short story "In a Bamboo Grove," which became famous as the basis for Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon*, various individuals testify regarding a murder they have wit-

nessed. Their different versions are obviously incompatible, and yet each witness is certain that he is telling the truth. Only when the testimony of the victim himself can finally be heard does it become clear that each observer was right from his own point of view, but completely misinterpreted the event as a whole.

In historiography, we are moving through a similar grove, but with the difference that—even if we could awaken the dead from the past—there is no neutral authority over and above the event that can tell us what actually happened. Like the witnesses in Akutagawa's short story, historians are also convinced that they are reproducing reality, even though they can report only their own version of the event.⁸ If Gabriel García Márquez began his autobiographical novel with the sentence, "Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it," then the historian might analogously assert, "History is not what actually happened, but what we recount about it and how we recount it."⁹

In the eighteenth century, the historian Chladenius already doubted whether one could stand "above things," for there is "a reason why we perceive something one way and not another: and this reason is the viewpoint [*Sehe-Punkt*] that we take on it.... From the concept of the viewpoint it follows that persons who see something from different viewpoints will necessarily have different ideas of it."¹⁰

During the nineteenth century, different viewpoints all too often coincided with developing national, ideological, and religious perspectives of history. And after the end of the First World War historians of the nations involved in that conflict tried to prove, by appealing to historical sources, that other countries were to blame for its outbreak. In the new countries that emerged from the war, historians sought to complete the transition from "stateless nations" to "nationless states" by producing common myths for groups such as Czechoslovakians or Yugoslavians.¹¹ In a more general sense, for a Marxist historian, class conflict plays the chief role in shaping modern societies, whereas for a conservative historian that role is played by state-oriented politics.

Despite claims to scholarly objectivity, the writing of the history of religion is often influenced by the denomination to which the author belongs or by which he was shaped. Thus, one of the most famous twentieth-century British historians questioned whether a Christian could describe Jewish history objectively: "It is difficult for anyone brought up in the Christian tradition to shake himself free from the official Christian ideology," wrote Arnold Toynbee. "He may have discarded Christian doctrine

consciously on every point; yet on this particular point he may find that he is still being influenced, subconsciously, by the traditional Christian view in his outlook on Jewish history. Voltaire's outlook is a classic case. I am conscious that my own outlook has been affected in this way... This contrast between the historical facts and the conventional Christian and ex-Christian view of the history of the Jews and Judaism shows how difficult it is for anyone brought up with a Christian background to look at Jewish history objectively."¹² A generation later, another British historian, Eric Hobsbawm, doubted that "being a Zionist is compatible with writing a genuinely serious history of the Jews."¹³

It is idle to speculate about whether an author who, like Toynbee, grew up in the Christian tradition, a "non-Jewish Jew" like Hobsbawm, or an author adhering to Zionism are qualified, on the basis of their viewpoints, to write Jewish history.¹⁴ Or should chroniclers of histories laden with conflict ideally come from Mars, as the Israeli historian Benny Morris suggested? "The historian of the Israeli-Arab conflict must endeavour to write on this conflict as if he were writing on the war between Carthage and Rome, or as if he had just arrived from Mars and were observing the situation without any connections and commitments."¹⁵

Between making a naive claim to objectivity, according to which the historian's identity has to be "effaced," and challenging the very principle of reconstructing history, there lies a broad field of historical research. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, most historians strive, in full awareness of their own standpoint, to achieve as much distance as possible from ideological positions. Postmodern positions have succeeded in producing creative lines of investigation, but the literary analysis of texts cannot replace the search for historical facts. That there was a French Revolution, a First World War, and a Holocaust is as much beyond doubt as the facts that certain ideologies caused many people great suffering and that certain persons were responsible for historical events. However, historians will continue to debate the causes of the French Revolution, who bears the heaviest responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War, and whether the Nazi genocide was planned by Adolf Hitler from the outset or decided on only in the course of the war as a result of the inner dynamics of events.

Remembering and Forgetting

In the course of history, "the Jews" have been used as a metaphor for the most diverse ideas. They have been revered as the founders of monotheism and persecuted as Christ killers. For some people they are the quin-

ness of capitalism, while for other people (sometimes even the same ones) they are the inventors of communism. Their history has been read as an exciting success story and as a unique narrative of victimhood. Jews constituted no more than 1 percent of the European population, yet few persons in modern Europe attracted as much attention as Karl Marx and the Rothschilds, Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein, Franz Kafka and Arnold Schoenberg.¹⁶ And few topics occupied more space in the media of the second half of the twentieth century than the Holocaust and the State of Israel.

For the historian, the discrepancy between the small minority of Jews and the great attention they received is a problematic and often even annoying factor. Whatever one says about the Jews and their history has already been said at least once, and still worse, it has probably been refuted many times. Such a fund of scholarly knowledge, superficial popular belief, and deeply rooted prejudices makes it hard to arrive at clear statements. Nonetheless, in the past two centuries historians have repeatedly attempted to write the history of the Jews—and at the same time reinterpreted it.

The historian dealing with Jewish history is confronted by the difficult task of deciding how he (or she) will connect the chronological, geographic, and thematic levels in a way that will be the least confusing for the reader. In the history of the Jews, which extends over several millennia and continents, sacred and profane conceptions of time are intertwined with each other.¹⁷ In the middle of the nineteenth century, for instance, the Jews of France, Russia, and Iran not only lived in different realms but also in different eras—eras of successful emancipation, gradual integration, and complete exclusion. This “simultaneity of the unsimultaneous,” to use Ernst Bloch’s expression, also held for Jews of earlier times, whether they lived in Jerusalem or in the area of Upper Egypt known as the Elephantine in the fifth century BCE, Worms or Cordoba in the twelfth century CE, or Amsterdam or Vilna in the seventeenth century. What bound them together, in addition to the basic forms of a common way of life, was the collective memory of a common origin.

It is the God active in history who demands in the Bible that certain events be remembered. The word *Zakhor* (“Remember!”), which Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi chose as the title for his pathbreaking study on Jewish historiography, frequently appears in the Bible as God’s command to the Jewish people: “Remember the days of old” (Deut. 32:7), “Remember what Amalek did to you” (Deut. 25:17), or most often, “Remember that you were a slave in Egypt!” These biblical commands to remember were

read and internalized by Jews at the time and in later centuries in the most diverse contexts. This culture of remembering certainly contributed to the Jews' being content to be seen not only as the People of the Book but also as the People of Memory—as, for instance, in the eyes of the philosopher Isaiah Berlin: “They have longer memories, they are aware of a longer continuity as a community than any other which has survived.”¹⁸

However, even in a people of memory there is a collective forgetting. The books following the Bible that were written after the closure of the canon remained outside the collective memory and thus became the Apocrypha. The writings of the most important Jewish historian of antiquity, Flavius Josephus, fell into oblivion among the Jews and were handed on by Christians. And who can know what else was forgotten over the intervening centuries? Yerushalmi observed that in the traditional Jewish understanding of history, only certain specific elements were remembered: “Only those moments out of the past are transmitted that are felt to be formative or exemplary for the halakhah [the complex of rites and beliefs that offer a sense of identity and purpose] of a people as it is lived in the present; the rest of ‘history’ falls, one might almost say literally, by the ‘wayside.’”¹⁹

Nation and Religion

The reasons for the particularly rich multitude of ways of interpreting Jewish history are not only its long duration and spread over all the continents but rather the ever more urgent question raised since the end of the eighteenth century as to what the Jews really are: a people, a religious community, or a common culture. Scholars concerned with Jewish history gave and still give the most diverse answers. Whereas some write the history of a nation that even in dispersion always turns around Israel as its center, others see in it the history of a religious or cultural community that has overcome its connection with a specific territory. Still others go so far as to simply deny the existence of anything that can be designated as Jewish history enduring over the centuries.

Ideological and political motives often play a decisive role in the way that the Jews are defined. That is how we should understand the critical assertions of modern historians who attribute to Jewish historiography a particularly heavy ideological freight. Thus the American historian Lucy Dawidowicz writes, “Every people, every nation has used its history to justify itself in its own eyes and in the sight of the world. But surely no people has used its history for such a variety of national purposes as have the Jews.”²⁰ Todd Endelman expresses a similar view: “Since the Jews’

fate and future remained a matter of seemingly endless speculation, Jewish history writing remained harnessed to ideological ends. It served both external, apologetic, defensive ends as well as internal, intracommunal, political ones.”²¹

Are we dealing with the history of a people that for millennia defined itself on the basis of its descent, because according to religious law every child of a Jewish mother is Jewish? Or are we looking at the history of a religion, since outsiders can also become part of the collectivity by converting to Judaism? As a rule, conversion remains a marginal phenomenon, but it is certainly possible that in earlier centuries, whole peoples (or at least their upper classes) adopted Judaism, as did the Khazars, a tribe that lived in the north Caucasus.²² In any case, what we now call ethnic and religious identification is closely bound up together. The Bible is, if you will, both the Jews’ history book and their most important religious source. When in Hebrew the expression *am yisrael* is used, there is always alongside the traditional interpretation—“the people of Israel”—also a religious one. It was only in the nineteenth century that the two levels began to separate. The modern nation-state required the integration of Jews as German or French citizens of Jewish faith. In order to make their new status clear, they henceforth preferred to call themselves Israelites or believers in the Mosaic religion.

In an increasingly secularizing period, however, this purely religious self-definition soon became meaningless for most Jews in the Western world. Like Freud, they called themselves “godless Jews”—and yet remained Jews. Some referred to a “community of fate” united above all by a historical experience.²³ Finally, there were the Zionists, who now based themselves entirely on the national components that had apparently disappeared in Western Europe. For them, religion in the modern age represented nothing more than a force dividing Judaism into orthodox, conservative, and liberal, whereas the national was the sole unifying element. When in his book *Der Judenstaat* (The Jewish State, 1896) Theodor Herzl declared, “We are a people,” this constituted an unprecedented provocation for German, Austrian, and French citizens of Jewish belief.²⁴

It was Jean-Paul Sartre, a non-Jew, who spread the claim that Jews were made Jews by the antisemites: “It is neither their past, their religion, nor their soil that unites the sons of Israel. If they have a common bond, if all of them deserve the name of Jew, it is because they have in common the situation of a Jew, that is, they live in a community which takes them for Jews.... The Jew is one whom other men consider a Jew.”²⁵ The

thesis attributed to Sartre was actually not so original; its core can be found three centuries earlier in the works of a Dutch Jew of Portuguese descent, Baruch Spinoza of Amsterdam: "At the present time, therefore, there is absolutely nothing which the Jews can arrogate to themselves beyond other people. As to their continuance so long after dispersion and the loss of empire, there is nothing marvelous in it, for they so separated themselves from every other nation as to draw down upon themselves universal hate, not only by their outward rites, rites conflicting with those of other nations, but also by the sign of circumcision which they most scrupulously observe. That they have been preserved in great measure by Gentile hatred, experience demonstrates."²⁶

Despite the overwhelming presence of images of the Jews, it is not surprising that most chroniclers of Jewish history were Jews, just as it was mostly Germans who were concerned with German history, and French who were concerned with French history. Questions of linguistic competence, an interest fed from childhood on, and social discourses no doubt played a role in this. Just as Thomas Macaulay in England, Jules Michelet in France, and Heinrich von Treitschke in Germany wrote passionate national histories, just as Catholic and Protestant historians of religion have often argued theologically as well as historically, so have Jewish historians frequently written on behalf of their nation or religious community.

Before the nineteenth century, non-Jewish authors occasionally dealt with postbiblical Jewish history. The first author of a comprehensive postbiblical Jewish history was in fact a Huguenot living in the Netherlands at the turn of the eighteenth century, Jacques Basnage (1653–1723). However, he and his multivolume history of the Jews were to remain an exception to the rule. A century later, in a letter written on February 21, 1792, Johann Kaspar Schiller advised his son Friedrich, then a professor of history in Jena, to do something to remedy the situation: "To my knowledge there is no complete, consistent history of the Jewish people since their dispersal in the world. I think it would be an important and therefore worthy object of the attention of a scholar who would, however, himself have to have a learned Jew at hand who could provide him with the necessary materials. In addition, a skillful development [of this subject] would be of great interest for Christianity."²⁷

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, only a few non-Jewish historians took a serious interest in postbiblical Jewish history, and they did not always have a positive view of Jews. In their research, nineteenth-century Christian scholars sought to lay the foundations for a conversion of the Jews to Christianity, and when during the 1930s and

1940s German historians first tried to deal in a systematic way with Jewish topics, they did so under the aegis of an antisemitic policy in Nazi research institutes devoted to the Jewish question. Alongside these, there were still a few important studies on particular aspects of Jewish history written by non-Jewish authors. However, only in the second half of the twentieth century did a large number of non-Jewish historians begin to discuss Jewish history in a scholarly manner and completely without negative presuppositions.

Scholarship and Ideology

The period covered in this book ranges from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first. There was, of course, earlier Jewish history writing, but it generally occurred in the context of theological observations. Only with the rise of modern scholarship, which made possible the critical examination of holy scriptures that had previously been revered as sacred, did a distanced attitude with regard to the sources become possible. The complex relationship between premodern Jewish historiography and collective memory has been investigated in detail by Yerushalmi. In the framework of the present book it can serve only as the background for the development of the last two centuries.

The first two chapters limit themselves essentially to a chronological account of Western and Central European historians of the “long” nineteenth century, whose turning point is represented by the appearance of its most significant representative, Heinrich Graetz (1817–91). The following chapters focus on the “short” twentieth century, from the First World War to the 1980s, and each of them deals with a specific geographic area. In the third chapter, I discuss Eastern European historians such as Simon Dubnow, historians in Poland during the interwar period, and the short-lived Soviet-Jewish efforts to write Jewish history. In the following chapter I examine the British and American schools gathered around Cecil Roth (1899–1970) and Salo Wittmayer Baron (1895–1989), and then the new tendencies in Germany, with the incipient research on the history of women. Chapter 5 concentrates on the representatives of a mainly Jerusalem-based Zionist historiography. The final chapter discusses the new challenges facing Jewish historiography in the postmodern era, and ends with the first complete survey of Jewish history and culture in the twenty-first century.

Each chapter is focused on a particular “master narrative,” which can be defined as “a coherent historical account that has a clear perspective and is generally about a nation-state. Its influence is not only exercised

to found a school within the discipline, but also becomes dominant in the public sphere.”²⁸ In the case of Jewish historiography, this definition should be modified insofar as only one of the master narratives, the Zionist one, is centered on the Jewish nation-state, while the other master narratives discussed here are directed toward emancipation and nationalism in the diaspora. Finally, we must consider whether postmodern “deconstructivism”—for instance, in the guise of feminism or postcolonialism—has not itself constructed new master narratives.

In view of what has already been said, it is hardly surprising that each generation of historians accuses its predecessors of not being objective, only to be accused of the same failing by a succeeding generation. The early representatives of German-language *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the scholarly study of Jews and Judaism, were convinced that they had thrown off the fetters of a religiously determined account of the past, both those of a traditional rabbinical view and those of the Christian missionary view. However, their claim to have produced a scholarly, objective historical account was rejected by the following generation of historians, mostly Eastern European Jews led by Dubnow. They accused German Jewish historians of writing a purely intellectual history for use as a weapon in the battle for emancipation in Germany, and instead demanded a “sociological” perspective that would give more attention to the institution of the Jewish community. Soon, they themselves were accused of promoting such a point of view only because it served their own political interests, specifically in the battle for national autonomy for the Jews of Eastern Europe. This complaint was made by historians who protested, in the British and American contexts, against the “lachrymose” version of Jewish history that they saw in German-language *Wissenschaft des Judentums* as well as in Eastern European Jewish historiography. For them, only in the free societies of the West was it possible to liberate oneself from this kind of Jewish “history of suffering.”

Nevertheless, these British and American historians also had to face the objection that they wanted to construct a happier Jewish past only because they were writing in a relatively comfortable diaspora. Thus, for example, the early Zionist historians argued that every attempt to write Jewish history in a non-Jewish environment was doomed to fail, since it had to be apologetically oriented from the outset, no matter whether it served the goals of individual emancipation in Germany, collective national autonomy in Eastern Europe, or the justification of an apparently successful assimilation in the United States. For these historians, Jewish history could be written only in a Jewish society, where one was not con-

stantly concerned about the judgment of the non-Jewish environment. Not surprisingly, this Zionist perspective became the target of vehement criticism, especially on the part of the so-called New Historians in Israel. The latter reproached their teachers, often from a post-Zionist position, of having argued just as apologetically as the generations that preceded them, since with regard to the continuing conflict in the Near East they sought to protect their own history. Only with a general relativization and a rejection of any claim to objectivity in the postmodern era did criticism of earlier generations of historians become less pointed. But even in the new claim to represent only one of many possible subjective positions we can hardly fail to discern the hope that by so doing, they might achieve, as it were, a higher level than earlier accounts, which often are described as “pseudoscientific.”

The protagonists to be discussed in a book on modern Jewish historiography doubtless include authors of large-scale works covering many periods, from Isaak Markus Jost and Graetz to Dubnow and Baron, as well as the founders and chief representatives of historical schools. Attention will be given not only to the historians mentioned above but also to those who have contributed to the theoretical questions and fundamental debates about Jewish historiography. In order to provide a sense of the whole spectrum of ways of representing Jewish history, short sections will be devoted to historians who may have had no enduring influence, but who in their own time represented prevalent ideologies.

Not all the figures explored in this book are historians in the sense that they studied or taught history. In the generation of the founders of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, philology—as it was represented by Leopold Zunz (1794–1886), for instance—was the predominant area of study and research. But we should not forget that Graetz in the nineteenth century and Scholem in the twentieth had neither degrees in history nor professorships in the field of history, although they surely enriched our knowledge of Jewish history more than almost anyone else. Even today, some of the most significant studies on Jewish history are not produced by historians in the narrower sense of the term.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, very few of the studies on Jewish history, like other studies of history, were written by women. Women also became objects of extensive research only after the First World War, especially in Germany under the Weimar Republic. It was not until the late 1960s and the advent of feminist movements that a fundamental change in this situation occurred, and even then it only slowly affected scholarly institutions.

Heroes and Eras

Most historical works teach us something about not only the events described but also their authors. If we repeatedly refer to the connection between their political convictions and their image of history, one should not too quickly conclude that writers on Jewish history were slaves to their ideology more than other historians. Like many of their colleagues who wrote other national and religious histories, most of them took up positions between a “polemical” and “value-free” view of scholarship. They shaped their own foundational myths and national character traits. Thus, British historians held fast to the concepts of “parliament” and “empire,” the French Revolution of 1789 represented the starting point for modern French historiography, Italian historiography turned around the Risorgimento, and in Germany the Wars of Liberation and Bismarck’s foundation of the empire “from above” defined historical discourse. The freedom-loving English, the revolutionary French, the Italians who carried on the values of ancient Rome and the Renaissance, and the culturally superior Germans were only a few of the favorite stereotypes of the respective national historiographies.²⁹

In the representation of Jewish history these foundational myths and self-images are quite complex and reach far back. Some of the dividing lines in Jewish history are already present in the historians of antiquity. The questions of whether diaspora should be considered positive or negative and whether Jewish life would be best preserved in a country of its own, which were so often discussed in the nineteenth century, the debates about Jewish history as a history of persecution, and the evaluation of acculturation to the non-Jewish environment—all this is found in an early form and its contradictory interpretation two thousand years ago, in both books of the Maccabees, which offer an account of the battles for Jerusalem and the restoration of the desecrated Temple. The first book of the Maccabees, which was written in Hebrew in the Land of Israel, concentrates on the Hasmonean dynasty, and shows great interest in the geography of Palestine and the details of worship in the Temple. In contrast, the second book of Maccabees was composed in Greek probably during the Egyptian diaspora, and is concerned with the fate of the city and its legal system. Whereas the first book, which is written from a national perspective, regards all non-Jewish rulers as bad, starts out from the assumption that all peoples hate Jews, and also describes schisms within Jewry, the cosmopolitan author of the Greek account emphasizes

the charitable rulers and the good relationships with the non-Jewish environment, and for the most part regards the Jewish community as a harmonious whole.³⁰

The dividing line between the national and cosmopolitan views is not alien to modern Jewish historiography. To remain with the representation of antiquity, this time from a modern perspective: the destruction of the second Temple in 70 CE is generally considered as the turning point between the Jews' existence in a state bound to a territory and their dispersal as a religious community in the diaspora. For historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this can be interpreted in two ways: the more assimilated Jewish historians see in this event the birth of modern Judaism, which now could undertake its mission to spread pure monotheism among foreign peoples, and therefore despite all the tragedy it involved, they consider the end of national existence as exceptionally positive in the long run. Their Zionist-oriented colleagues saw this quite differently: for them, the destruction of Jerusalem ushered in the anomalous situation of a nation without an intact territorial center—a situation that from that point on had to be overcome.

As in any kind of history writing, in Jewish history periodization is an arbitrary act on the part of historians seeking to organize their material and make things easier for their readers. There are always several ways of defining turning points. When, for instance, did the modern period of Jewish history begin? Let us review some of the possibilities.³¹

In the beginning was Frederick the Great. His reforms ultimately led to the dissolution of community structures among the Jews and thereby paved the way for them to enter non-Jewish society. That was at least the way that Isaak Markus Jost (1793–1860) saw it; he was the first Jewish historian to write a multivolume, systematic history of the Jews down to modern times. For him, as a German Jew of the first half of the nineteenth century who still had to fight for complete emancipation, legal achievements were of special importance. His history of the Israelites is therefore also a document for German Jews' battle for equal rights.

In the beginning was Moses Mendelssohn. He embodied the “dawn” of a new Jewish age—at least according to Heinrich Graetz, the most important nineteenth-century Jewish historian. Like Jost a generation before him, for most of his life Graetz had to fight for emancipation. But as a self-confident Jew who emphasized the national dimension of Jewish history, he did not want to see in changes in the environment alone the true starting point for Jewish modernity. His concept of a “Jewish history of

suffering and learning” limited intra-Jewish history chiefly to intellectual history, for which Mendelssohn opened the gates into modernity.

In the beginning was the French Revolution. So we read in the *World History of the Jewish People* by Simon Dubnow, the great Jewish historian of Eastern Europe who, in contrast to his German Jewish predecessors, wished to write less an intellectual than a social history in which community structures and the anatomy of Jewish life in the diaspora were to be in the foreground. Political events that changed structures were thus for him more crucial than individual rulers or thinkers. It was not the appearance of the Jewish thinkers of the Enlightenment but rather that of the modern citizen that marked for Dubnow the beginning of a new epoch.³²

In the beginning was Spinoza. For Salo Baron, the last author of a multivolume Jewish history and the first professor of Jewish history in a Western university, the intellectual and economic transformations of the Jewish community in the seventeenth century were decisive. Baron argued that the Jewish Enlightenment movement known as Haskalah, which is usually said to go back to Berlin in the mid-eighteenth century, actually began a century earlier in the “Dutch and Italian Haskalah.” In his view, the western European pattern served as a model for the history of the premodern diaspora, which he regards as generally successful for individual Jews.³³

In the beginning was Shabtai Zvi. For Gershom Scholem, the founder of modern research on Jewish mysticism, Jewish modernity also began in the mid-seventeenth century, when the pseudomessiah Shabtai Zvi, who came from Turkey, divided the whole Jewish world into “believers” and “unbelievers”—those who followed him and those who rejected him as a heretic. Scholem tried to discern in this the causes of the later fragmentation of Jewish life that was to lead to assimilation, thereby lending intra-Jewish developments at least as much importance as the social circumstances. In addition, this evaluation gave Jewish mysticism a particularly high status, and in so doing clearly contradicted preceding models.

In the beginning was Yehuda he-Hassid. This otherwise largely unknown Jewish mystic, who left eastern Europe around 1700 for Palestine, embodied for Benzion Dinur (1884–1973), a professor of history at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and later Israel’s education minister, the breakthrough into a new era. The fact that Yehuda he-Hassid, together with a small group of eastern European Jews, left the country where he was born and “returned” to the Holy Land marked for Dinur the beginning of the return movement, which ultimately culminated in the found-

ing of the State of Israel. This thesis represents the most radical Zionist attempt at the periodization of modern Jewish history.

Along with periodization we can also see the differing titles of works on Jewish history that cover more than one era as indexes of their respective orientations. It is no accident that Jost's work on the history of religion is called *The History of the Israelites*; that Graetz titles his already nationally oriented work *History of the Jews*; that Dubnow, as a convinced diasporic nationalist, chooses the title *World History of the Jewish People*, in which both the national character of the Jews and their dispersal over the whole world are contained; and that in his monumental work *Dinur* distinguishes between *Israel in Its Own Land* and *Israel in Dispersal*.³⁴ In all these cases the title is already a program.

Despite the differences, we should not forget the common elements. First, the historians mentioned here all start out from the assumption that something like a coherent Jewish history exists above and beyond countries, continents, and time boundaries. Moreover, they share the chronological approach of most of their fellow historians. No matter how differently they interpret Jewish history, they are similar in their selection of the events they describe and the way they organize them. Only after the Second World War did the Israeli historian Jacob Katz (1904–98), in his book *Tradition and Crisis*, radically break with event-oriented history and analyze chiefly the structures of Jewish life in Europe in the early modern period. And only at the end of the twentieth century did historians influenced by postmodernism put the existence of a coherent Jewish history radically in question.

The book seeks to present the varying ways of reading the history of a numerically small group defined as a nation, religion, or community of fate, whose members have played a significant role in world history. While it would be presumptuous to expect that it might provide an undisputed interpretation of Jewish history, this book should help us better understand the ways that its interpreters have seen it.