

CHAPTER 1



Unpacking A DEFINITION

OVERVIEW

In this first chapter, we will introduce you, the reader, to the definition of Judaism, which frames this entire book, and make several observations regarding our definition. In addition, we will lay out the chapter-by-chapter “game plan” of the book you are about to read, and briefly introduce you to each. Have fun as you begin your journey of *The Jewish Experience*!

OUTLINE

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Introduction

Just as in the academic study of religion there is no one universally accepted definition of what we mean when we use the term *religion*, so too there is no one universally accepted understanding of what we mean by *Judaism*. Indeed, many years ago, in an introductory graduate level course in Jewish philosophy, on the first day of class, my professor announced, “There is no such thing as Judaism,

there are only Judaisms (and, by extension, there is no such thing as Christianity, there are only Christianities)!²¹ Shocked as we collectively were, over time, serious study of the Judaic experience continues to testify to the accuracy of his pronouncement.

Complicating this picture even more, there is equally no agreed-on understanding of who the totality of the Jewish people is, either historically or contemporarily. Biblically, the Israelites traced their status and lineage through their male parent, further

subdivided into the three divisions within their society (high priestly families biologically connected to Aaron, Moses' older brother; others within the tribe of Levi; and, lastly, the remaining members of the Israelite community). Postbiblically, rabbinically, and talmudically, identity status was shifted to either one whose female parent was Jewish (a shift in collective identity from Israelite to Jew), or one who underwent the formal rite we know today as "conversion," though it did not even exist in the biblical period.² Thus, for approximately the first four thousand years of Israelite/Jewish existence, identity was male based; for the next two thousand years, it was and is female based. In 1983, the Reform or Liberal or Progressive religious denominational movement in the United

States declared, through its rabbis at their annual convention, that the Jewish identity of children could now be determined through *either* male *or* female parent, *provided* the commitment was to raise that child within the orbit of the organized Jewish community, the child itself underwent significant Jewish rites of passage (brit milah [circumcision], naming, consecration, bar/bat mitzvah, and/or confirmation), *without* necessarily, however, undergoing any act formally recognized as conversion. This decision is still marked by rancorous debate and unresolved tension among the various Jewish denominational communities.³ Today, then, the waters tend to be somewhat muddy as to who is or is not a Jew, depending on parental status or denominational affiliation includ-

BOX 1.1

Definitions of Religion

"Religion is (subjectively regarded) the recognition of all duties as divine commands."

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)

"Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people."

Karl Marx (1818–1883)

"[Religious ideas] are not precipitates of experience or end-results of thinking: they are illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind."

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)

". . . an absolute reality which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world, thereby sanctifying it and making it real."

Mircea Eliade (1907–1986)

"Religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern. . . . [Religion] gives us the experience of the Holy, of something

which is untouchable, awe-inspiring, an ultimate meaning, the source of ultimate courage."

Paul Tillich (1886–1985)

"[A] religion is: a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such a aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."

Clifford Geertz (1926–2006)

"Religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant."

Peter Berger (b. 1929)

". . . a belief system that includes the idea of the existence of 'an eternal principle . . . that has created the world, that governs it, that controls its destinies or that intervenes in the natural course of its history.'"

Dorothy Nelkin (1933–2003)



ing conversionary practice—all this despite modern Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion’s (1886–1973 C.E.), suggestion that “A Jew is anyone who considers himself such!”

The Operating Definition of Judaism in The Jewish Experience

Thus, attempting to define either *Judaism* or the *Jewish people* is a tricky enterprise at best. It is, however, a place to begin, as we explore a complex and complicated history, recognizing, even at the outset, that we simply cannot divorce the religion of Judaism from the people who continue to be its living embodiment. What follows, then, is this author’s

working definition of Judaism, which will serve as the frame of reference around which this book is organized, and which we now unpack:

***JUDAISM** is the evolving cultural expressions of the people originally known as Hebrews or Israelites over the course of the generations, in response to their (and others’) changing perceptions of themselves, their historical journeys, their stories and ideas, their celebrations, and their understandings of their relationship with their God.*

Sociologically Speaking . . .

First, sociologically, any group, however defined, expresses its collective identity through its behaviors

BOX 1.2

Definitions of Judaism

“Just as antisemitism drives the weak, the cowardly and the materialistic Jew into Christianity, so its pressure has strengthened my own Judaism powerfully within me.”

Theodor Herzl (1860–1904),
the “Father” of modern political Zionism

“For the Jews the advantage of Hebrew over other languages is that it is the natural garment of Judaism.”

Ahad Ha’am (Asher Zvi Hirsch Ginsberg, 1856–1927),
Hebrew essayist and pre-State Zionist thinker

“The Jew, by virtue of his origin, will always belong to Judaism, even if he or his ancestors have changed their faith . . . Judaism is an historical religion.”

Moses Hess (1812–1875), secular Jewish
philosopher and one of the founders of socialism

“Unity of God, unity of the universe and unity of mankind are the spirit which moves Judaism.”

Uri Zvi Greenberg (1896–1981),
Israeli poet and journalist

“Judaism is a nation and a creed at one and the same time.”

Joseph Gedaliah Klausner (1874–1958),
scholar of Jewish religion, history, and modern Hebrew literature

“The division of Judaism into ‘Orthodox,’ ‘Conservative,’ ‘Reform,’ etc. is artificial. For all Jews have one and the same Torah, given by the one and same G–d, though there are more observant Jews and less observant Jews. To tag on a label does not, of course, change the reality of Jewish essence.”

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994),
Lubavitcher Hasidic Rabbi

“Where Jewish education is neglected, the whole content of Judaism is reduced to merely an awareness of antisemitism. Judaism ceases then to be a civilization, and becomes a complex.”

Rabbi Mordecai Menahem Kaplan (1881–1983),
essayist, scholar, and founder of Reconstructionist Judaism

www.jewish-wisdom.com



Fig. 1.1 An American Jewish family celebrating a bar mitzvah. Central to the coming-of-age celebration is the opportunity for the bar mitzvah to read a portion of the Torah scroll appropriate to the Sabbath. Photo: © SuperStock RF/SuperStock

(that is, its cultural *expressions* [note this emphasis on the plural]), bracketed by both its ideas and its stories or myths. Over time, those behaviors change, buffeted about by both internal and external threats to its survival and adapting itself to changing historical circumstances; new, different, and challenging reinterpretations of its own existence; and the like. Historical groups that have long survived—and the Jews certainly count themselves among them, following an historical trajectory close to six thousand years of continually identified existence—are those that continue to successfully negotiate and renegotiate both the internal and external understandings of what it means to be a member of the group.⁴

Second, *all* manner of group behavior constitutes the group's culture, from so-called high culture and ennobling behaviors (religion, the arts, literature) to “low culture” and disgracing behaviors

(violations of moral and ethical norms in defiance of group ideals). And the Jews are no exception to the latter, to be sure, from those patriarchs of the Hebrew Bible who lied to protect themselves (e.g., Abraham informing Avimelech, the king of Gerar, that Sarah was his sister rather than his wife in *Bereshith*/Genesis 20) to those who deceived and manipulated those even within their same family (e.g., Jacob's deception of his father, Isaac, in his quest for the latter's blessing in *Bereshith*/Genesis 27 or his manipulation of his older brother, Esau, exchanging food for birthright in *Bereshith*/Genesis 25) to those who maintained themselves within the criminal elements of society, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and some who do so even today (e.g., gangster Meyer “Little Man” Lansky [1902–1983 C.E.]⁵). Thus, to tell the story of the “cultures of the Jews”—to use historian David



Fig. 1.2 Moses receiving the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai According to the Jewish religious tradition, Moses received directly from God not only the *Aseret Ha-Dibrot* (Ten Commandments) but the whole of the Jewish interpretative tradition as well, *Torah sheb'al peh* (Oral Tradition).

Photo: Scala/Art Resource, N.Y.

Biale's felicitous phrase⁶—is to attempt to tell the *whole* story of the Jews, without blinders, to include both the best and the worst in this migratory trek of several thousand years, especially through Europe, North and South America, and the Middle East.

The Importance of the Literary Tradition

Third, important in sustaining Jewish group survival have been both the stories that the Jews have told to themselves about themselves (those contained not only in the Torah/Hebrew Bible but in the Talmuds and other literatures as well) and those told to others about themselves and their relationship to Jews. Such stories (and myths) are powerful psychological tools, not only in times of stress and threat but in times of celebration as well. Added to these stories are the *ideas* that the founders of Judaism have crafted, that the Jewish people have embraced and that later generations have enlarged and reinterpreted in response to changing historical

circumstances (e.g., the Sabbath, the so-called Ten Commandments, the interface between religion and ethics).

Significantly, at least for the last two thousand years, the Jews have valued literature and literacy, and the values reflected therein, in the production not only of their sacred Torah/Hebrew Bible but of their ancillary texts as well. Prior to this, it is our scholarly understanding that the stories, laws, poems, hymns, psalms, and the like were, at a minimum, at least a thousand years if not longer in their original Israelite formulations and tellings and retellings. Three thousand years at the very least from the original dreams to their contemporary manifestations; a long, if somewhat uneven, journey to be sure!

The Two Calendars of Jewish Life

Fourth, Israelite/Jewish identity as it behaviorally manifests itself is best perceived and understood when viewed through the dual prismatic lenses of

two calendars, referred to in this book as “Cycles of Time” (chapter 6) and “Cycles of Life” (chapter 7). The former refers to those Jewish celebratory events marked annually—with the exception of the Sabbath, marked weekly. The latter refers to those celebrations that “mark the moments” of the life’s journey common to all humanity—birth, growth, maturation, decay, and death—but which are uniquely expressed, in seemingly unique ways, by Jews. And, like the stories and the ideas, these celebrations, too, have changed over time—sometimes quite dramatically—not only in response to the “slings and arrows of outrageous misfortune,”

à la Shakespeare (e.g., Yom Hashoah/Day of the Holocaust, 27th of Nisan), but to positive moments as well (e.g., Yom Ha’atzmaut/Israel Independence Day, 5th of Iyar [May 14, 1948]; bat mitzvah, the coming of age of a young Jewish girl beginning at age twelve).

The Centrality of the God of Israel

Fifth, the interwoven story of the Jews and Judaism cannot fully be told without reference to the God of Israel already present in the first sentence of the Hebrew Bible (*Bereshith*/Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning of creating, God with [the use of] the heavens and the earth . . .”),⁷ and even more fully present at Sinai with not only those Israelites already there but the generations yet to be born, entering into a covenantal relationship for all time (*Devarim*/Deuteronomy 29:14-15). This singular incorporeal creator God, vitally concerned with the affairs of humanity and, most particularly and especially Israelite humanity, remains a distinctive contribution of the Jewish people to the civilizing and humanizing of humanity, along with such concepts as the euphemistically labeled “Ten Commandments” and the Sabbath itself.

Judaism, Jewish People, and God

Thus, when all is said and done, the history or story of “Judaism” cannot be disconnected from either “the Jewish People” or “God” however each element of this tripartite entity is understood, both historically and contemporarily. Together they constitute a seamless garment, embroidered over countless generations by countless persons in countless locales. At the same time, this garment is always unfinished, as each generation of Jews continues to add its own distinctive features, changing that which was previously created to fit the moment and knowing only too well that the next generation of Jews will repeat this threefold tradition of preservation, adaptation, and innovation. Thus, throughout this book, the



Fig. 1.3 *Sefer Evronot* (The Jewish calendar) Jehuda ben Schemuel Reutlingen Mehler, Germany, 1649. This page from the *Sefer Evronot* (Ibronot), a book on calculating the calendar, depicts wheels that the reader could cut out and rotate to compute dates and Jewish calendar cycles. Photo: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, N.Y.



Fig. 1.4 Prayers in the Western Wall Prayers have been placed in the Western Wall in Jerusalem, the remaining site of the Second Temple and traditional Judaism's holiest shrine. Photo courtesy Creative Commons, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A_prayer_to_God_in_the_Western_Wall_in_Jerusalem.jpg

concept of “cycles” best describes not only the journeys of the Jews (“cycles of history”), but the evolving nature of Jewish philosophical and theological ideas (“cycles of thought” and “cycles of belief”), the record of these ideas (“cycles of texts”), Jewish behaviors (“cycles of time” and “cycles of life”), and the Jewish present (“cycles of the here and now”).

The Plan of This Book

Chapter 2, “Cycles of History: The Judaic Journey,” tells the story of the Israelites prior to the inauguration of the monarchy under Samuel and Saul, from the migratory and settled periods of Judah and Israel to the destruction of the First and Second Temples (586 B.C.E. and 70 C.E.) to their two-thousand-year wandering primarily throughout the European continent and into the modern period, with the re-creation of the Third Jewish Commonwealth on May 14, 1948, and now the twenty-first century. It is a journey filled with peaks and valleys, successes and failures, creations and destructions, but eclipsed by the seeming indestructibility not only of the Jewish

People but of the Judaic religion as well.⁸ It is also of necessity an all-too-brief history, globally attempting to tell a broad story while elaborating somewhat on many, many topics worthy of such elaborations, but not on all of them.

Chapter 3, “Cycles of Texts: Building the Foundation,” addresses a singularly important fact of the Judaic journey: its emphasis on intellectual development and textual learning as the central building blocks of both communal and religiously defined development and identity. We may articulate its essential understanding of itself as a Judaic religious tradition as “biblically based but not biblically confined.” Beginning with the Hebrew Bible—itsself canonized in the year 90 C.E.



Fig. 1.5 Knesset sculpture celebrating Jewish history Opposite the main entrance of the Knesset, Israel's governing legislative body, is this chandelier made by Benno Elkan. It is 5 meters high and 4 meters broad and shows 29 reliefs of Jewish history. Photo courtesy Creative Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Knesset_Benno_Elkan.jpeg



Fig. 1.6 The Aleppo Codex The Aleppo Codex is a medieval manuscript of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh), associated with Rabbi Aaron Ben Asher. The Masoretic scholars wrote it in the early tenth century, probably in Tiberias, Israel. It is in book form and contains the vowel points and grammar points (nikkudot) that specify the pronunciation of the ancient Hebrew letters to preserve the chanting tradition. It is perhaps the most historically important Hebrew manuscript in existence. Photo courtesy of Creative Commons: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aleppo_Codex_\(Deut\).jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aleppo_Codex_(Deut).jpg)

in the city of Yavneh under the Pharisaic Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai (who, it is believed, died shortly thereafter)—one moves quickly into the legal compendium known as the *Mishnah* (“Repetition” or “Second Teaching” after the Torah or Hebrew Bible) of Palestine redacted in the year 220 c.e. under the leadership of Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi (135–220 c.e.) (“the Prince”; or recognized geopolitical leader). From there one moves to the Talmuds of both Palestine (redacted in 350 c.e.) and Babylonia (redacted in 700 c.e.), themselves expanded commentaries and conversations regarding all the possible permutations of a developing

legal tradition in both communities. Then it’s on to the various Codes of Jewish Law (e.g., *Shulchan Aruch*, “Set” or “Prepared Table,” originally published by Joseph Karo [1488–1575 c.e.] in the sixteenth century) and to the vast literature of communal and rabbinic questions and answers known as *Responsa*. Finally comes the kabalistic or mystical literatures of Judaism (e.g., the *Zohar* or “Book of Splendor,” originally published by Moses de Leon [1250–1305 c.e.] in the thirteenth century). So vast is the literary enterprise of Judaism that no one person has ever mastered it all, leaving specialists to focus their quest for knowledge, in the main, on only one or more parts of this huge corpus. To provide you, the reader, with at the very least an introductory taste of each, brief representative selections are also included.



Fig. 1.7 The Center for Jewish History, New York The Center for Jewish History is located in New York City. It is home to five Jewish institutions dedicated to history, culture, and art: The American Jewish Historical Society, The American Sephardi Federation, The Leo Baeck Institute, Yeshiva University Museum, and The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (www.cjh.org). Photo courtesy Creative Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Center_for_Jewish_History_NYC.jpg

Chapter 4, “Cycles of Thought: Judaic Philosophy,” and **chapter 5**, “Cycles of Belief: Judaic Theology,” essentially follow a chronological approach, fully understanding that the *ideational*



content of Judaism always builds on the work of previous generations, with the following important caveat: This distinction between “philosophy” and “theology” is, from a Judaic vantage point, a false dichotomy. Those intellectual challenges, both internal and external, with which the authors of the Torah/Hebrew Bible and subsequent literatures wrestled, and also reflected in their own individual writings, can best be subsumed beneath the following overarching categories: (1) God and God’s relationship both to humanity in general and Jewish humanity in particular, (2) Torah in both its ritual-ceremonial aspects and its moral-ethical aspects, and (3) Israel the people in its relationship to itself and to the larger, non-Israelite/non-Hebrew/non-Jewish communities. It is, therefore, only in the so-called modern period where we see the development of a “Jewish Philosophy” concerned with the very same issues addressed by the larger world of philosophers as distinct from so-called Jewish religious concerns (e.g., the nature and composition of the universe versus the election of Israel). As we reverse direction and go back into history, however, we see a true interweaving of all such ideas under this more general notion of “Jewish concerns.” And, while the common myths that the development of

Jewish thought has been independent of the larger worlds outside the various ghetto walls, solid historical analyses continue to confirm and reconfirm cultural interaction at every step of the journey, sometimes public, sometimes private, sometimes well-known, sometimes little known.⁹

Chapter 6, “Cycles of Time: The Judaic Calendar,” and **chapter 7**, “Cycles of Life: The Life-Cycle Journey,” reflect, both separately and together, “life on the ground,” as it were. For intellectual ideas, no matter how controversial or stimulating they may be, tend to attract only limited numbers both within any given group, and usually less so those outside the group. Thus, from an anthropological and ethnographic perspective, if one truly wants to learn who the Jews *are*, one needs to look most closely at what the Jews *do*, no matter how broad or narrow the diversity of such behaviors. Therefore, self-identifying Jews in the twenty-first century, as in every century prior, govern themselves as both individuals and as communities by not one but two calendars: one that marks holy days (or holidays), festivals, and fast days, and another that marks the moments of the journey of life itself, from birth to death. Yet such an examination of even these two calendars—unique to this people—are not without problems and difficulties, for there are and have been those Jews who see and understand themselves positively to be Jews but limit their active behaviors to certain aspects of Jewish life, and who, throughout this long journey, have never been “written out,” as it were, of the community. For example, there are committed Zionist Jews who, while living abroad, stand fully with the State of Israel, defend it politically, participate in fundraising in support of its many and varied institutions, enrich themselves and their families with all manner of Israeli culture, and visit as often as possible, but who remain noticeably absent from religious life. There are other Jews who fully embrace the religious calendar in its totality but understand Zionism as a secular political enterprise divorced from the religion of Judaism, and who have never set foot in Israel and never intend



Fig. 1.8 Purim street scene, Jerusalem On a Jerusalem street, the festival of Purim is played out. This festival is associated with the celebration of the Book of Esther in the Torah/Hebrew Bible. Photo courtesy Creative Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jerusalem_Purim_street_scene.jpg



Fig. 1.9 Jewish town on the West Bank, Israel Communities such as these remain a contentious issue in Israeli politics as they are often located in predominantly Arab population centers. Photo courtesy Creative Commons: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:YishuvEliShomron.jpg>

to do so until the physical advent of the messiah. The vast majority of Jews, however, are of course to be found somewhere in the middle; and all Jews, no matter their individual or collective understanding, do tend to draw on the historical wellspring of religious Judaism for moments of birth, coming of age, marriage, and death.

Chapter 8, “Cycles of the Here and Now: The Twenty-first-Century Moment and Beyond,” concretizes the classical French expression *Plus ça change, plus c’est mème chose* (“The more things change, the more they stay the same!”) by reexamining three central issues of concern in modern Jewish life: survival of this minority people, anti-semitism against this same people, and the latter’s sixty-year redirected focus from western Europe and the Holocaust to the State of Israel and its neighbors. Though the specifics change every time the topics themselves are addressed (e.g., success-

ful integration and assimilation of America’s Jews coupled with questionably dwindling numbers; less antisemitism in certain locales, increased antisemitism in others; periods of “cold peace” in the Middle East coupled with “hot wars”), the concerns of the Jews themselves do not. How these three cross-currents continue to play themselves out reinforces not only the cyclical nature of the Judaic experience and Judaic journey but, equally, reminds the Jews themselves of the insight of the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes that, in truth, “there is nothing new under the sun” (1:9).

Chapter 9, “Conclusion: The Future of Judaism and the Jewish People?” is, in all truth and honesty, pure speculation. Futurology is far from an exact science, though some Jews and some Christians and some others have been reading the prophets of the Hebrew Bible as predictors of tomorrows for better than two thousand years. (Such unfortu-



Fig. 1.10 Man and child on Jerusalem street, 1898

This touching scene reveals part of life in nineteenth-century Jerusalem. Photo courtesy Creative Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jerusalem_quiet_street_with_donkey_1898.jpg



Fig. 1.11 Contemporary street party, 2009 This celebration in Jerusalem shows a party on Dorot Rishonim (literally, “First Generations,” i.e., Founders) Street. Photo courtesy Creative Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jerusalem,_Dorot_Rishonim,_street_party_03.jpg

nates, however, find themselves constantly having to *revise* their own predictions of events by confessing to incorrectly reading those very texts that led to their assessments in the first place, and, even more unfortunately, attributing to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and their associates events and happenings of which they, most assuredly, had no knowledge whatsoever.) Then too, such all-too-easy speculations possess the potential to be both right *and*

wrong, but if one is foolishly willing to extend one’s own thinking beyond the period of one’s own predictable lifespan, who knows? One could be wrong or one could be right, and only tomorrow’s reader will know for sure, the author only a memory.

Enjoy the journey you are now about to undertake as you learn about one of the world’s oldest surviving and thriving religious communities!

IN REVIEW

In this chapter, we have presented you, the reader, with the definition of Judaism that frames this entire text. In so doing, we have “unpacked” this definition by making a number of observations. We have also provided you with a brief summary description of each of the following chapters as you begin your own “Jewish experience.” Welcome to my world!

KEY TERMS

Babylonian Talmud

bar/bat mitzvah

Brit Milah

Christianity

confirmation

consecration

conversion

covenant

culture

First Jewish Commonwealth

First Temple

Hebrew Bible

Hebrews

Israelites

Jews

Judaism

Middle East

Mishnah

mitzvot

Palestinian Talmud

patriarchs

rabbis

Reform Judaism

religion

Responsa

Second Jewish Commonwealth

Second Temple

Shabbat

Ten Commandments

Third Jewish Commonwealth

Torah

Yom Ha'atzmaut

Yom Hashoah

Zohar

Questions for Review, Study, and Discussion

1. Compare and contrast the various definitions of *religion* as presented in Box 1.1. Which do you like/dislike? Why? Try your hand at writing your own definition of religion. Does *Judaism* fit in with any of them? Does Christianity?
2. Compare and contrast the various definitions of *Judaism* as presented in Box 1.2 with that presented in this chapter. Which do you like/dislike? Why? Try your hand at writing your own definition of *Judaism*.

Suggested Readings

- Biale, David. *Cultures of the Jewish: A New History*. New York: Schocken Books, 2002.
- Konner, Melvin. *Unsettled: An Anthropology of the Jews*. New York: Penguin, 2004.
- Seltzer, Robert. *Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History*. New York: Prentice Hall, 2003.