

Revue européenne
des sciences sociales

European Journal of Social Sciences

Revue européenne des sciences sociales

European Journal of Social Sciences

XLIV-135 | 2006

Citoyenneté et démocratie providentielle

The jewish experience in the contemporary scene. The transformations of the Nation-State and the development of new Inter-Civilizational relations

S.N. Eisenstadt



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ress/268>

DOI: 10.4000/ress.268

ISSN: 1663-4446

Publisher

Librairie Droz

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 August 2006

Number of pages: 157-169

ISBN: 9-782-600-01108-2

ISSN: 0048-8046

Electronic reference

S.N. Eisenstadt, « The jewish experience in the contemporary scene. The transformations of the Nation-State and the development of new Inter-Civilizational relations », *Revue européenne des sciences sociales* [Online], XLIV-135 | 2006, Online since 13 October 2009, connection on 01 May 2019.
URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ress/268> ; DOI : 10.4000/ress.268

S.N. EISENSTADT*

**THE JEWISH EXPERIENCE
IN THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE**
**The transformations of the Nation-State
and the development
of new Inter-Civilizational relations**

I

The Jewish experience on the contemporary scene evinces some very important new characteristics which take it not only beyond the «traditional», historical Jewish experience as well as beyond such experience as it crystallized in the classical period of the modern nation state. The most important of these new characteristics are: the nature of heterogeneity of Jewish communities in its relation to the basic ideological and institutional frameworks of the major civilizations in which Jews live; and the transformation of the «classical» model of European modern nation state. These new developments are rooted in internal changes in developments in the Jewish communities; in the emergence of new types of institutional settings in which these communities live; and in the transformation of the broader ideological and institutional civilizational and inter-relations.

II

Heterogeneity in Jewish history is as old as the Exile – and even before that. Jewish communities in the Christian and the Muslim worlds have known different physical settings, economic activities and varieties of «protected» political status for the past 1,500 years. Local customs and cultures varied widely, but there was always the common bond of the different Jewish traditions. With minor exceptions, they shared the same basic premises about the nature of this tradition and of their collective identity. This began with a very strong emphasis on Halakhah (the Law), as the basis of Jewish collective existence. The Halakhah, with its prayer, ritual and study, and its purely legal aspects provided the institutional framework for Jewish cultural continuity, and the framework for all elements of Jewish collective identity. The most important of these elements was based upon a strong historical consciousness; an equally strong sense of primordial kinship – symbolically expressed in the descent from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; a religious-cultural identity; and lastly, at that time only latently, political identity. There naturally developed among these communities a certain variety of cultural content

* Professeur, Department of Sociology and the Truman Research Institute, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem And The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute (Israël); miriamb@vanleer.org

and activity. Thus, for instance, in some communities there was a greater emphasis on the study of philosophy; in others, the Kabbalah was more central. There were also, of course, varying degrees in the influence of the local cultures, but the basic elements were common to most Jewish communities. But this heterogeneity was, on the whole, set within a common framework. This constellation of identity and tradition contained a certain response to the basic dilemmas of Jewish existence and self-conception. One such dilemma, that of the universal *vs.* the particularist elements in Jewish culture, was solved by the postponement of the universalist elements through open dialogue and encounter with other nations. Jewish existence remained particularist, albeit in the name of a universalist orientation which could not be realized in the pre-medieval and medieval exile in which the Jews were living. The universal orientation was possible only in a latent sense, as a focus for theological disputes, or as a dream. This was connected, of course, with the solution to another dilemma, that of present reality *vs.* eschatological hopes. Again, the eschatological orientations, whether universalist or particularist, were deferred to some unknown future. This was closely related to the fact that temporal Jewish reality was even to some extent apolitical, while the eschatological element in Judaism always had a strong political element.

III

The contemporary picture is different. The dispersion of the Jews is probably greater than ever before. Immigration to the new continents widened the geographical spread, and the resettlement in the Land of Israel was another important factor. However, greater physical or economic diversity are not the only new developments on the contemporary situation. Most important is the development of a new type of pluralism and heterogeneity in the socio-cultural life of Jewish communities – both in their cultural contents and in the components in the Jewish identity which are continuously being reconstructed by the Jewish communities. Throughout the various Jewish communities, there is great variety in the customs and organization of Jewish life and the identification with world Jewry. In the Western world, there are many different Jewish religious groups: Orthodox, Reform, Conservative in the United States; Orthodox, Reform and Liberal in Europe. In addition, many Jews are not affiliated with any of these religious frameworks; others are active in Jewish cultural and communal activities, and others are entirely passive in relation to their Jewishness. In Israel, too, there has developed a great heterogeneity in the symbols or patterns of Jewish identity and communal organizations. This heterogeneity is manifest in the numerous ways of articulating patterns of Jewish life and identity. First, a situation developed in which the simple correlation assumed as natural, especially in the nineteenth century in Western Europe, between shedding traditional ways of life and giving up elements of Jewish identity, no longer held. Many Jews were continuously changing their ways of life, and most of them in the Diaspora did not lead lives primarily or fully Jewish, but they might not want to lose their Jewish identity. They attempted to reformulate this identity, even if it was no longer the only exclusive and perhaps not even the predominant one, and to find social space for what seemed to them distinctly Jewish activities.

Second, and closely related to this, has been the continuous restructuring of the components and symbols of this identity. Here two processes were continuously taking place. The first process was that, in addition to shedding certain of these components and symbols, continuous attempts were made to reconstruct and recombine them in different ways. The second process entailed, in most cases, both the reformulation and recombination of most of the attachments to a religious tradition, together with more primordial ones, with some elements of «peoplehood», and a reemphasis on the political component in this tradition; that is, those components seen earlier, through the nineteenth century, as antithetical to the incorporation of Jews in the modern societies. Of special importance in this context was the crystallization in its fullest way after the Second World War, of a new or at least hitherto dominant element in this collective experience, of the full crystallization of legitimate collective Jewish political activity within the political framework of the respective societies. The pinnacle of this development is, of course, to the establishment of the state of Israel and the continuous and continuously reconstitutive relations between it and all the Jewish communities of the Diaspora.

This process of reformulation and reconstitution of different components of Jewish identity naturally, in most Jewish communities, was very closely related to a parallel process in the selection of different elements of Jewish tradition. Here, too, was continuous search and exploration, about which we know systematically relatively little. The most interesting aspect of this process is that, contrary to the previous conception, no simple relation could be found between attachment to different Jewish customs and traditions, commitment to Jewish identity, and participation in the more general arenas of life in their host societies. Even within the orthodox circles, seemingly the ones in which the older components should always go together, the picture is very complex. Thus even the upsurge of orthodoxy and neo-orthodoxy was connected to a growing participation in the arenas of life of the general society, such as higher education and other occupational spheres, which would have been an anathema or at least alien to the older, Eastern European traditionalists. It also was connected to a growing participation in some political Jewish activities of the new kind. The picture is even more complex among the non-orthodox. Among them there often developed a tendency to return to certain traditions or customs that had religious origins, and which have become symbols of collective identity, such as candle lighting on Hannuka and the Sabbath, or celebration of those aspects of the tradition related to the most primordial facts of life: circumcision (which is obviously the choice of the parents), bar mitzvah, marriage, funerals. These different patterns of reconstruction of religious symbols were not necessarily related to a return to orthodoxy, to the acceptance of the Halakhah as the basic framework of Jewish life, although such a process was taking place to some extent among sectors of Jewish communities. Therefore, no simple relation between such «contents» and the nature of Jewish identity and commitment developed among various Jewish communities.

Yet another new element, connected with Jewish civilizational activities or aspirations, became predominant. In many cases, Jews who were searching for the expression of their Jewish identity tended to combine this search with those, above all universalist themes that, as it were, were «repressed» in the Medieval patterns and that, in the early assimilationist period, were taken beyond the scope

of Jewish communal activity and which were not connected with such activities. In some cases the older semi-assimilationist, «ethical» (liberal, socialist, or nationalist) attitudes persisted. In most cases, however, these attitudes more and more were connected with the development of a more positive Jewish collective identity and commitment. In many cases the emphasis on these themes became closely related to activities in Jewish communal activities, institutions and organizations. These themes were seen as constructive, positive components of the general setting of contemporary societies, and often they were promulgated in connection with the state of Israel.

Moreover, these activities take place not only in the private spaces of the Jews, but also in the more central public and political arenas. Such activities are conducted mostly in the languages of their respective countries of residence (English, French, Spanish, and the like) and in the terms of the intellectual discourse of these societies. At the same time, however, they often are presented both as expressing the different dimensions of Jewish identity and as a legitimate part of the general society.

Different Jewish communities or sectors differ today as to how they go about this task. There are different emphases on various components of collective Jewish identity, of the Jewish cultural repertoire, and nowhere is there a full distinctive crystallization of some new combination of the elements. Rather in every Jewish community or sector there continuously develop processes of experimentation with the different elements of Jewish identity; no community has settled for a «solution» or end point; and all communities are in a constant state of flux. One very central and crucial aspect of this flux of course is the continuous drifting away of large sectors of the Jewish communities from any Jewish organizational framework and attachment to any Jewish traditions or symbols. The connecting elements, however, are the very acts of experimentation, the continuous search, and the mutual awareness within these different Jewish communities that they share common heritage and this common search, the details of which are greatly influenced in each community by the specific circumstances in which their members live.

The great heterogeneity in the selection of different components of Jewish identity and tradition has been closely connected with the different modes of the different Jewish communities' modern historical experience, especially of their encounter with the modernities of their host civilization. This growing heterogeneity of Jewish ways of life, perhaps in a somewhat paradoxical way, seems to fit well with what often is designated as trends to a postmodern society. In this society many of the clear boundaries of collectivities, national and ethnic entities of social classes and sectors, and their relatively homogeneous styles of life that characterized early modernity seemed to have been somewhat blurred, giving rise to a more variegated pluralism. At the same time, the very blurring of many of these boundaries poses new challenges before the Jews.

Thus while there is no simple answer to the question «Who is a Jew?» and «What does it mean to be a Jew», it is the questioning itself which unites the Jewish world today, even including the Orthodox communities. These developments were closely connected with the development of specific Jewish organizations, with new ventures in Jewish education and communal activities and a growing political activity of such international Jewish organizations as the World Jewish

Congress. Second, participation in general arenas of American (and to a smaller extent European) life was continuously growing, with many Jews moving into various occupations and economic sectors that hitherto on the whole had been closed to them, to become more and more active in political life, on the local, state, and national level.

IV

These far-reaching transformations in the organization and activities of the Jewish people in the various communities of the Diaspora, especially in the United States and in the beginning, at least to a smaller degree, in Western Europe, were connected with parallel change in the formulation by large sectors of Jewish communities of the problematic of Jewish collective existence. This change went beyond the premises of the European nineteenth- and twentieth-century experience in general and classical Zionist ideology in particular, the very ideology that shaped the revolutionary and ideological premises of Israel and guided and shaped much of the Israeli perception of and attitude to the Diaspora. This problematic was formulated, even if intermittently and not always in a fully articulated way, not in terms of the dilemma between assimilation and the maintenance of a collective Jewish life in a purely Jewish environment, whether the closed one of orthodoxy, or in principle the open ones of the Zionist variety, or as one minority nation in a state composed of many such nations, with one nation being the majority. Instead, among most contemporary Jewish communities in the Diaspora, especially of course only among those who cared about this at all, a continuous search developed to find different ways of expressing Jewish collective identity and Jewish peoplehood, stressing the political and the civilizational dimensions of this identity, while being full and equal members of their respective national or political collectivities. This problematic developed in different modes in different Jewish communities, according to their different historical experience, but the basic assumption that Jews, in different modern or «postmodern» societies, can search for different ways of expressing their collective identity and for incorporation into these societies seemed to be common to most of them. Basically, despite many misgivings and fears about the ultimate lack of viability of Jewish life in the Diaspora and even though existence in the Diaspora continued to constitute a problem in Jewish collective consciousness, the formulation of such problematic, within most sectors of Jewish society in the Diaspora, took the possibility of such free collective existence more or less for granted, and concentrated on finding different ways of expressing Jewish identity. Despite all contrary trends, those among the Jews concerned with such matters seemingly were able to find in the new setting and the countries in which they lived not only possibilities of maintaining Jewish collective identity and activities based on primordial, political, and civilizational orientations but also combining such activities with full participation in their societies. It indeed does seem that the majority of American, and more and more also among European, Jews, and especially those who actively upheld their Jewishness, refused to see any basic contradiction between their American (or English, French, and so on) identity and their Jewishness and refused to see in anti-Semitism (some even tried to deny its very existence) a basic threat to their incorporation as Jews in that society.

Yet, at the same time, among many of the Jewish leaders and intellectuals a growing concern developed about the possible assimilation or drifting away of Jews through ecological dispersion and intermarriage and a concomitantly there developed growing interest in strengthening Jewish educational institutions as a way to strengthen their attachment to the Jewish inheritance. But this concern is firmly set within the framework of the Jewish existence in the Diaspora, even if many of their activities and attachments to a very high degree are oriented also to Israel. For others, perhaps ultimately a majority, this concern may go together with a de facto acceptance of growing assimilation or rather drifting away from the Jewish fold.

Thus, a rather paradoxical situation indeed has developed, most clearly observed with respect to the Jews in the United States; namely, those very processes that enabled the intensification of Jewish activities and organizations also could move for a relatively fast and smooth assimilation or drifting away. This could happen just because such assimilation could take place without demands for changing religion or even denying one's Jewishness. Such drifting away also may be reinforced by the fact that the various Jewish communities were traveling on different historical roads, they did not necessarily have the same types of historical experience. All these processes, on the one hand, open up the possibility of growing creativity in the construction of different modes of Jewish experience. On the other hand, they enhance the possibility of large sectors of Jewish population drifting away from the Jewish fold. At the same time, these developments also could enhance the possibility of exposure of many sectors of Jewish society to a seemingly unexpected outburst of primordial components of the identity in many sectors of their host societies. Above all, the challenges have sharpened the problem of whether it would be possible in the contemporary period to crystallize some new patterns not only of Jewish communal life and activities but also of Jewish civilization. This problem has become very acute given the great heterogeneity in patterns of Jewish life, the growing dissociation between different components of Jewish collective life: customs, different forms of Jewish communal organization, components of Jewish identity, and the promulgation of different themes of Jewish civilization, the changing patterns of the Western civilizations, and the multiple modes of interaction of Jewish communities with the societies in which they live. All these developments have crystallized fully only since the mid-1960s. The major Jewish Communities – in Israel, North America and Western Europe, and nowadays in Eastern Europe– began at this time to reconstruct, on the basis of the above-mentioned developments, their internal activities and self-conceptions, their interrelations, as well as their relations to the societies within which they live.

V

Several processes are of crucial importance in explaining the differences between the classical, modern and contemporary patterns of Jewish life and the contemporary Jewish scene. First, the tragedy of the Holocaust dashed the hopes of Jews who dreamed of participating in the larger society on an individual basis, or mainly as a religious denomination, without reference to broader collective

Jewish identity. The second development, which began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but flowered more recently, was the construction of the great centre of Jewish life in the U.S. In this connection one must remember one factor which has not been fully appreciated in the analysis of American Jewish history – that the American nation is based upon a political ideology, rather than historical primordial symbols, that its major consensus is based, to use R. Bellah's expression, on «civil religion». Because of this it was potentially more open to collective political expressions of ethnic and religious subgroups than were 19th and early 20th century European nation-states. I say «potentially», because these possibilities are also fraught with latent tensions and hostility. The third development is the weakening of the old closed homogeneous society of the European nation-state, which did not allow for legitimate secondary collectivities based on a combination of primordial, political and religious identities.

The weakening on the contemporary scene of the classic European nation-state with its strong emphasis on the historical and primordial components of collective consciousness and identity necessarily added new dimensions to the heterogeneity of contemporary Jewish life. This weakening also posed new challenges for the reconstruction of Jewish life. It opened up the possibility both of new modes of reaffirmation of Jewish collective consciousness and cultural and social activities and the continuous weakening of such consciousness in the constitution of the collective consciousness of many Western societies, both in the United States and lately also in Europe,

It is a moot question to what extent all these tendencies make invalid the basic Zionist tenets about the inevitability in such circumstances of demographic decline, assimilation or in more extreme cases, of anti-Semitic persecution and perhaps destruction in this conflict. It is of great interest that this is the period when the vision of the Holocaust has become continuously more central in the collective memory of contemporary Jewry.

Last, but certainly not least, is the establishment of the State of Israel, offering the possibility of full autonomous articulation of Jewish political life. This has become the lodestone of the political dimension of Jewish identity in all Jewish communities, linking them with one another and with the State of Israel, and rallying them around the cause of Soviet Jewry.

VI

Within this entire panorama of Jewish communities a new crucial element emerges, namely the State of Israel which has in many ways changed the entire nature of Jewish existence.

Israel has obviously become the major symbol and focus of Jewish identity, of its primordial and political-communal sentiment, its hope and dreams, with pride in its achievements and criticism of its failing. On the other hand, it has not become – as foreseen in classical Zionist ideology – the sole centre of Jewish creativity and cultural renaissance. The cultural renaissance that developed in Israel was but one of many, albeit the most central one.

At the same time the distinct mode of crystallization of Jewish collective life in Israel played a very special role in the crystallization of new patterns of Jewish

collective activity and identity, not only in Israel but also beyond it. First of all, it was instrumental in the revival of the political dimension of Jewish existence and the orientation to the state of Israel, which could be found in almost all Jewish communities and their sectors and constituted a central pivot of this dimension. Thus, for instance, in a country like France, with its relatively long tradition of assimilation and of the emphasis of Jewish identity as a religious community, this attitude has found its expression in such events as Raymond Aron's polemic against de Gaulle during the Six-Day War, the chief rabbi's sermon during the Yom Kippur War, and later on in the 1970s the growing political engagement of large parts of the Jewish community in connection with French policies toward Israel, an engagement intensified by the influence in the French community of younger generations, as well as of North African Jews, who became very active in Jewish activities and organizations.

The articulation of this political dimension in relation to the state of Israel was no less far-reaching in other Jewish communities. The English community has a much longer tradition of such activity, especially through the Board of Deputies and the fact that for many years London was the headquarters of the World Zionist Organization. Such activity was particularly visible in the United States, in the activities of such bodies as the Board of Presidents of the major Jewish organizations; the United Jewish Appeal; the various Jewish political lobbies, and the like, and latterly in the intensified worldwide activities of the World Jewish Congress. Activities related to Soviet Jewry became a major focus of such activities, in addition to those related to the state of Israel.

Significantly enough, the old controversies around Zionism, around the viability of the Zionist vision, which abounded within the Jewish communities in Europe and also in the United States, from the very beginning of Zionist and Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel, have almost entirely abated. The tragic experience of the Holocaust, the fact that Palestine, and later Israel, was initially at least the only place which readily accepted the Jewish refugees from Europe and Asia, the very fact of the successful establishment of the state of Israel, have made most of these controversies meaningless. When some groups, as for instance the American Council for Judaism in the United States, attempted, in the late 1940s or early 1950s, to continue in this vein, they found but little resonance within the Jewish communities. In so far as controversies developed, as they did especially from the early 1970s, they became focused on questions pertaining to the degree to which Israel did indeed live up to the various ideals which were expected from it; on the degree of support to be given to it and lately around the right of Jews to dissent publicly from the policies of the Israeli government.

In many Jewish communities, especially in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, Israel constituted a central, in the beginning a very new and potent, component of their Jewish «civil religion». Activities on behalf or in connection with the state of Israel often opened up for large parts of Jewish leadership channels of participation in the political activities of their own countries, even if with the passing of time many of these leaders began to take these activities and those connected with Israel for granted. Yet these activities continued to be symbols of Jewish solidarity and attachment. But this very centrality, not unlike that of Eretz Israel in the period of the Second Temple and later on the period of the great mishnaic and Talmudic centers, greatly weakened its potentially revolutionary impact

on these communities. Israel no longer was seen according to a pristine Zionist vision, as the only place in which it is possible to reconstruct their life as modern Jews. Nor was it seen, as presumed in classical Zionist ideology, as the sole center of Jewish creativity, the only place in which new types of social, educational, and cultural activities and creativity of the Jewish people could develop. The creative impulse of many Jewish communities did not necessarily focus on life in Israel, and the pattern of Jewish renaissance developed in Israel was but one pattern of such creativity, even if a central one, at least until the early 1980s.

The central place of Israel in the constitution of the boundaries of Jewish collective identity came very forcefully to the fore after the 1988 election in Israel when several religious parties were making strong demands, as a condition for joining the coalition, to shape the «Who is a Jew» clause in the Law of Return (the law that opens Israel to every Jew) in a strictly halakhic direction. Such a change would delegitimize conversions and marriages performed by Conservative and Reform rabbis. It was natural that this proposal would arouse the ire of large parts of American Jewish organizations, who put great pressure on the prime-minister elect, Yitzhak Shamir, not to accede to this demand. This was the only time that the official American Jewish organizations *directly* interceded in Israeli politics, claiming that in this case not only Israeli problems were at stake.

The state of Israel also provided a geographic center, a symbol of common heritage and common solidarity for large parts of the Jewish people indeed the only or major pivot common to all or most of the Jewish people. It also provided a central – not always easy, simple, indeed often a very ambivalent – focus of collective Jewish identity.

Many Jews search in Israel for the manifestation of those dimensions of Jewish existence and themes of Jewish civilization with which they strongly identify, not only those of political and military strength and collective identity, but also those of social justice, full religious fulfillment, or for some great civilizational vision, as well as those of «simple» communal-familial Jewish solidarity. The demands made on Israel from such points of view were often utopian, exaggerated, unrealistic – very diverse and often contradictory – but all of them attested to the fact that the state of Israel constituted a continuous, central focus of such orientations. Even the ambivalence of criticism against Israel that became more and more vocal from the mid-1970s attested to the relatively central place of Israel in the construction of contemporary collective Jewish identity.

VII

Yet, although Israel continues to be a central component in Jewish identity, the nature and strength of this component seems to have been continuously changing in line with the differences in their respective historical experiences and collective agendas, and ambivalence to Israel seems to have been increasing. The centrality of the state of Israel in the contemporary Jewish experience did not mean that the concrete relations between the Jewish communities in the Diaspora and the state of Israel always have been harmonious or stable. It indeed is a part of the relative fluidity of this experience that such relations also have been changing continuously and these relations began to change in the 1950s and 1960s, when the very

establishment of the state of Israel became a source of pride to the Diaspora communities and probably greatly helped the integration of these communities in their respective countries to a great anxiety about the security of the state at the outbreak of the Six-Day War and great pride in its victory. These relations have been changing since then, giving rise to many potential and actual points of tension, and conflicts, which became intensified from about mid-1970, and especially since the mid-1980s. The criticism of Israel and of the policies of Israeli governments have been increasing lately, highlighting a very basic dilemma in the relations between Israel and the Jewish communities in the Diaspora - a dilemma or problem rooted in their basically different historical experiences, especially in the difference between a Jewish community that constitutes not only a majority in its own land but also is responsible for running a state and the Jewish communities in the Diaspora, which constitute minorities, even if seemingly fully participating minorities in their respective countries. In the first three or four decades after the establishment of the state of Israel, when the internal assurance of Jewish communities in the Diaspora was greatly strengthened by the very existence of Israel, this difference in the basic historical conditions of existence, in their basic respective historical experiences, and hence in their respective agendas, was glossed over. Since the late 1970s the picture changed, highlighting more and more some awareness of these differences and their consequences for the relation between the Jewish communities of the Diaspora and Israel. Thus, in the early 1970s Simone Veil, then French Minister of Education, pointed out to some of these in her speech of acceptance of an honorary doctorate from the Hebrew University.

« Today Judaism's values are integrated in a state; they are integrated in a society, a society which has not existed for more than 2,000 years. And we, of the Diaspora, hope that Israel will remain the defender of these values, of this Humanism. We must clear say that this is certainly more difficult situated in the position of a state, no longer in that obligatory minoritarian position, to continue to carry a flame like this. And I hope as a French woman, but as a French Jewish woman, and a Jewish French woman, that our countries will help each other to continue carrying this flame and that they will ceaselessly defend these values, whatever happens. And I know that for every state this is sometimes difficult, that for every state there is a need to mobilize, that states find themselves confronted with situations which could be « *raison d'Etat* »; but that precisely we have always been proud in a certain way of being above that, of having something more, which has been possibly forced, and today, what I hope is that the miracle of Israel, the miracle of Jerusalem will reproduce itself, and I am sure that this challenge (I am sure of it and do not just hope it) will be your victory and ours ». It was not often easy for many Jews in the Diaspora to accept the fact that Israel has become a « normal » state or at least that in many circumstances it had to behave like any normal state in defense of its interests, and not according to some utopian criteria. With all their seeming self-assurance with respect to their standing in the countries of their residence, many, although certainly not all, Jews in the Diaspora tended to follow the tendencies of large sectors of the media to judge Israel by different higher moral standards than other nations. Such tendencies often became intensified in the 1980, with the Lebanon War, and with the Arab uprising in the West bank. The fact that the double standard used by many media in reporting the different sides or aspects of these events and disputes often fed on latent anti-Semitic tendencies

and focused them on Israel often gave rise to ambivalent reactions on part of the Jews themselves. Some would react strongly against the application of such double standards; others, possibly out of some feeling of insecurity in their own identity or standing in their countries, seemingly would accept such applications. Some of the pronouncements of Jewish leaders in the Diaspora seemed to indicate the Israel should not engage in activities which could embarrass them; which could go counter to the way in which they wanted to portray themselves in their societies. Controversies around Israel shifted from the older views about the viability of the Zionist vision to those about Israel, but not necessarily other Jewish communities in its life and policies, living up to the tenets of this vision. Indeed against the background of this paradoxical change of the place of Israel in the life of Jewish communities various trends also developed of denial of its centrality in Jewish life and ambivalence to it. In a more extreme way this new attitude found expression in public declarations, made by many Jewish leaders, of a strong emphasis on the equality of the Diaspora and Israel in Jewish life and in criticism of Israel for its seeming failure to live up to those ideals or themes perceived by the Jewish communities in the Diaspora as constitutive of their viability as minorities in free societies or for the loss of Jewish creativity in Israel. Thus since the early 1980s, if not earlier, one could hear quite often the accusation or claim that many patterns of creativity, in which Jews in the Diaspora excel – be it high academic achievement, manifest in the winning of Nobel Prizes, in economic entrepreneurship, and the like – find no counterpart in Israel, above all in that Israel which underwent all the processes of change attendant on the disintegration of the initial mold of Israeli society. True enough those making these claims seem to forget or to be unaware of the fact that all these successes of the Jews in the – above all free – Diasporas have been contingent on the Jews being a minority. Members of this minority were able to find their ways into, lately quite central, arenas or niches without having to take care, as a collectivity, of the basic infrastructure of their respective societies. In Israel, of course, the construction of this infrastructure has made major claims on the creative impulses of the leading sectors of Israeli society. It is only a few of the Jewish leaders in the Diaspora, for instance, Stuart Eizenstadt (in a speech before the American Jewish Israeli Relations Institute in Jerusalem) who would admit that however good and even secure the position of the Jewish communities in the Diaspora is, they do not and cannot (in contrast to the situation in Israel) control their own collective destiny. But the very fact that such criticism is voiced continuously signals a marked change in the Israel-Diaspora relations, the development of different collective agendas in Israel and in the Jewish communities in the Diaspora.

VIII

Another crucial component in changing the experiences of contemporary Jewish communities have been the changing intercivilizational frameworks, relations and encounters, especially the relations and encounters between the countries and communities which develop within the frameworks of the monotheistic civilizations. These encounters indeed have changed greatly since medieval times and the beginnings of incorporation of Jews into the modern civilizations from the late

eighteenth century up to the Second World War. The major change lies in the seeming abatement of the older hostile relations between the Jewish civilization and people and their host civilizations and societies, with the development of so-called postmodern tendencies, and decline of the nation-state, and the growing tolerance in Western societies of cultural and social heterogeneity, and with the widespread, at least official delegitimation of anti-Semitism after the Holocaust. This growing tolerance can be found not only in the wider acceptance of Jews as citizens of full standing but also in many attempts at interfaith-meetings between different Christian churches and organizations and Jewish groups. But there is another side to these developments. Such occurrences as the dispute about the convent in Auschwitz; the renegation of the Archbishop of Krakow on the agreement with Jewish representatives to remove it, and the sharp words with strong anti-Semitic overtones of the Cardinal Primate of Poland with respect to this debate indicate that such growing tolerance may be only skin deep. The changing basis of political identity in the open societies has not eliminated anti-Semitism and Jewish-Gentile tensions, even if their form has greatly changed. The resurgence of strong, «traditional» anti-Semitism in Russia and many Eastern European countries after the downfall or reform of the communist regimes within them; by the growth of many manifestations of anti-Semitism in Western countries in the late 1980s, as well as by the very strong propensity of many sectors of European societies, as well as of the more official organs of the European community to react very strongly to Israel's stance with respect to the Palestinian problem, a reaction far beyond that to similar activities by other states or communities – all these attest to the continuity of anti-Semitic tendencies – even if often in highly transformed ways. In this respect the relations between Jews and Gentiles – both within their respective societies and in the international arena – and the possibility of different forms of Jewish self-expression in these frameworks, continued to be a very important test of the inner strength of Western societies. The opponents of the pluralistic, open aspect of Western heritage objected to any expression of Jewish collective identity, and consequently to the State of Israel and Zionism. The centrality of Israel in the Jewish contemporary experience caused these tensions to be transposed to the international sphere. The hostile relations between Israel and most of its neighboring states are seemingly of a different, new nature: mostly conflicts between national states and movements. But it has become evident that these relations, as well as the multiple reactions to the Israeli-Arab conflict throughout the Western and Muslim world, bear many of the seeds of the historical ambivalent, hostile relations between the Jewish people, their civilization, and their host civilizations. Lately these relations have become closely interwoven with the upsurge of a rather new type often very virulent anti-Semitism both in the West, as well as in Arab countries – an anti-Semitism often promulgated by intellectual «leftist» groups and opinion leaders – connected with more popular outbursts¹. The combination of all these developments, evident in the upsurge of anti-Israeli outbursts during the UN Conference in Durban and of the new anti-Semitism in Europe, and in the strong anti-Israeli stance of many –

¹ See P. Ignascu and B. Kosmin (eds.), *A New Antisemitism?*, Profile Books, London, 2003.

especially leftist European intellectuals and movements and the more violent Arab antisemitism – may cast some doubt whether indeed the older hostile components in the relations between Jews and the civilizations and societies to which they interact, have entirely disappeared, only forty years after the Holocaust. Indeed all these strongly attest to the strengthening and reconstitution of these «older» civilizational themes. The Jews may be also caught in «the war of civilizations» which seemed to burgeon in Europe after September 11, 2002. At the same time the relatively strong reactions of many official or «semi»-official bodies in the European Union, the UN, against anti-Semitic tendencies, as well as the central place give in many countries to the memory of the Holocaust attest to important changes in these inter-civilizational relations – without obliterating many of the older components. The transformation of Jewish collectivities in the framework of modern and postmodern civilization, each with different chances for survival and seemingly with a growing chance for assimilation through drifting away. It is still too difficult to estimate the chances of such development, the realization of such possibilities. On the one hand, the differences in the historical experiences of different Jewish communities may increase the dissociation among them and the possibility of actualizing each of these tendencies. On the other hand, it seems that the chances of realizing such possibilities are mitigated, but not necessarily made impossible, both by the continuous interrelations among the various Jewish communities, and by their continuous and variegated encounters with the broader environment, whether with their «host» societies or with the Muslim world and Arab states in the Middle East. There is no easy solution to these problems – they remain an essential feature of the contemporary Jewish situation but also, paradoxically, one of the foci of its solidarity and a potential reservoir of strength. These potentialities will be maximalized not by trying to find formulae and prescriptions acceptable to all Jewish communities, but rather by opening up channels of communication between them, beyond the routine political and organizational ones, channels of continuous advice, dialogue and mutual exploration of the common past, present and future. The combination of all these developments, within the various Jewish communities and in their relations with other societies, will provide the answer or answers about the fate of Jewish civilization in the modern era, and will tell which of the various tendencies pointed out here, or their combinations, will become predominant. Only the future can tell.