

---

# THE JEWISH CONTRIBUTION TO CIVILIZATION



## *Reassessing an Idea*



*Edited by*

JEREMY COHEN

*and*

RICHARD I. COHEN

---

Oxford · Portland, Oregon

**The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization**

**2008**

---

## *Discourses of Civilization: The Shifting Course of a Modern Jewish Motif*

DAVID N. MYERS

---

THE task of this chapter is not to shed light on the genre of 'Jewish contributions to civilization'. Others in this volume will probe the contexts in which the genre crops up, and trace the contours of a *shalshelet hakabalab* ('chain of tradition') that links figures such as Joseph Jacobs, Cecil Roth, Louis Finkelstein, and Thomas Cahill. Rather, the goal is to revisit the very idea of 'civilization' itself—particularly the way it has figured in modern Jewish collective self-perception, as well as in more recent debates over cultural values far beyond the Jewish context. In the first instance, we must ask: Does the term 'civilization' fit the diverse forms of Jewish culture? Or, in related fashion, when and why did modern Jews start to apply this standard to themselves? The answers to these questions may serve as a historical backdrop to a query of more immediate concern: Does the current discourse of civilization serve a useful function? Does it clarify or obscure, unite or divide?

A tentative response to these questions will come at the end of this chapter. However, to frame our discussion, some brief preliminary remarks are in order about the idea of 'civilization' in its present and past forms. Subsequently, the chapter will seek to analyse a number of distinct moments over the past two centuries in which we notice the criterion of 'civilization' informing and defining Jewish self-perception. Each of these moments reflects a different Jewish *mise en scène*, a different status and set of aspirations for Jews relative to their surroundings.

The first of these moments occurs in the early nineteenth century, when Jews in western Europe aimed to reach, through concerted self-cultivation and as an instrument of social integration, a high standard of civilization. The second moment, occurring later in the nineteenth century, is marked by the attempt of west European Jews to introduce the standard of civilization to other Jews (namely, the Jews of the 'Orient') rather than seek to attain this standard themselves (for they already believed themselves to possess it). The

third moment, symbolized by Mordecai Kaplan's well-known book *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934), witnesses the equation of Jewish peoplehood and civilization, an impulse at once unsurprising in an age alive with Jewish national sentiments and yet surprising in an age rife with talk of 'the decline of civilization'.

These three moments hardly constitute an exhaustive list. But, by tracing them, we can gain a more nuanced sense of the importance and varied uses of the term 'civilization' in modern Jewish history. In the process, we might also be able to gain a new angle on the uneasy and yet often successful accommodation of the Jews to the modern West.

### ON 'CIVILIZATION'

A new discourse of 'civilization' is upon us, stimulated in great measure by Samuel Huntington's best-selling book *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996).<sup>1</sup> The premiss of such a clash received extraordinary validation on 11 September 2001, in the wake of which the two major irreconcilable rivals, the West and Islam, were revealed. Since then, it often seems that the more we speak of this chasm, the more it exists—as rhetoric and deed become locked in a dangerously self-fulfilling relationship.

But if we look more carefully, the fixity of the two main civilizational foils becomes suspect. Is it possible, for example, to speak meaningfully of a single Western civilization, one that unites Germany and America a mere sixty years after the Holocaust? Conversely, can we reduce the entire Muslim world—from Morocco to Malaysia, Sunni to Shia—to a single voice?

Samuel Huntington was himself aware of the dangers of such an overstated and unnuanced 'cultural bifurcation', and thus proposed seven or eight world civilizations—rather than two main competitors—as the axes around which international relations and crises would revolve in a post-cold war era. He mentions incidentally the idea of a Jewish civilization in a footnote, but clearly doesn't regard it as a factor of any significance in the domain of greatest concern to him, international affairs. That said, for all of his analysis of a 'multicivilizational' world, Huntington invariably succumbs to the tendency to divide the world into two large camps, 'the West and the rest'.<sup>2</sup>

This tendency reinforces another point that Huntington elsewhere tries to challenge: the notion that civilizations are defined by rigid cultural borders.<sup>3</sup> On one hand, he states unequivocally that 'civilizations have no clear-cut boundaries and no precise beginnings and endings'—in short,

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 33.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 43.

no identifiably fixed properties. On the other hand, he describes Islam as 'a different civilization whose people are convinced of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power'.<sup>4</sup>

The point of this digression is to offer a rather obvious cautionary note. The term 'civilization', in contemporary discourse, often connotes a degree of fixity that belies the fluidity of political and cultural identities in our globalized, interdependent world. Moreover, the term, in its present-day usage, has moved a good distance from its original meaning. We do not need to undertake a full *Begriffsgeschichte* here. Others, including Lucien Febvre, Emile Benveniste, Philippe Bénéton, and Adam Kuper, have performed the task well.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on both Febvre and Benveniste, Bénéton notes that the term *civilisation* first surfaced in France in 1757 to indicate a 'more refined and civilized' state of individual and societal existence. Soon after, the term was employed to connote the antithesis of barbarism, or, in Bénéton's words, 'the collective movement that allowed humanity to leave behind barbarism for a state of civilized society'.<sup>6</sup>

In the nineteenth century two important developments occurred that altered the term's meaning. First, 'the immense empire of "La Civilisation"', as Adam Kuper calls it, 'was divided into autonomous provinces'.<sup>7</sup> Hence, the notion of a singular state of civilization—the opposite of barbarism—gave way to the idea of multiple civilizations. And secondly, a distinction began to emerge—later to develop into a well-known enmity—between French *civilisation* and German *Kultur*. The former implied an external, abstract or mechanical entity, and the latter an inner, intuitive, and spiritual entity—a juxtaposition that calls to mind Ferdinand Tönnies's renowned distinction between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*. This rift between *Kultur* and *civilisation* would linger throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, deepening in response to the oscillating political hostilities between Germany and France.<sup>8</sup>

And yet, there were those who thought the opposition entirely overdrawn. Fernand Braudel insisted that 'it is delusory to wish in the German

<sup>4</sup> Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, 217. This point, particularly focused on the loss of Islam's military and cultural superiority over the West, informs two recent books by Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (New York, 2002) and *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> See, *inter alia*, Lucien Febvre, *Civilisation: Le Mot et l'idée* (Paris, 1930); Émile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris, 1966); Philippe Bénéton, *Histoire de mots: Culture et civilisation* (Paris, 1975); and most recently, Adam Kuper, *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999). Mention should also be made of Norbert Elias's study *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edward Jephcott (New York, 1978).

<sup>6</sup> Bénéton, *Histoire de mots*, 32. See also Kuper, *Culture*, 25.

<sup>7</sup> Kuper, *Culture*, 25.

<sup>8</sup> Bénéton, *Histoire de mots*, 55–9, 73–6, 87–91.

way to separate *culture* from its foundation *civilization*'.<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding his somewhat undermining jab at 'the German way', Braudel saw more points of commonality than difference between the two terms. Likewise, Freud averred in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) that 'I scorn to distinguish between culture and civilisation'—a point perhaps unwittingly absorbed by his English translator, who rendered the title of his *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (1930) as *Civilization and its Discontents*.<sup>10</sup> This apparent conflation of culture and civilization is important for our purposes because Jews in modern Europe have frequently navigated between the poles marked off by these two terms—between the particularistic and bounded matter of culture and the universalistic aims and thrust of civilization. Indeed, we notice this conflation in the first of our key moments, a period marked by the constant mediation of Enlightenment and Romanticist sensibilities in the early nineteenth century.

### THE INWARD GAZE

The story of German Jewry's romance with the ideal of *Bildung* is well known. One of its great narrators, George Mosse, delivered an encomium in *German Jews beyond Judaism* (1985) in which he demonstrated that the ideal of *Bildung* was a powerful force in shaping the aspirations of German Jews as they sought admission to a new Enlightened society.<sup>11</sup> And yet, those aspirations rarely bore the name of 'civilization' in this period. Ironically, they more often operated under the banner of *Kultur*. But what was signalled when German Jews used the term *Kultur*—and surely *Bildung*—was the kind of rational and progressive sensibility, steadfastly opposed to barbarism, that signified 'civilization' in its earlier French setting.

The point is that the imperative of civilization was deeply felt, if not always articulated, by German Jewish intellectuals in the late Aufklärung period. After all, it was in this era that Jews began to internalize the claims of non-Jews, including their friends (like Christian Wilhelm Dohm and Henri Grégoire), that they were in need of self-improvement. Moses Mendelssohn resisted this impulse, but his disciples were less reluctant. For example, Wessely's *Divrei shalom ve'emet* (Words of Peace and Truth, 1782) is a clarion call for Jewish cultural and intellectual edification, especially

<sup>9</sup> Fernand Braudel, *On History* (*Écrits sur l'histoire*), trans. Sarah Matthews (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980), 205, quoted in Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, 41.

<sup>10</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York, 1928), 5–6; id., *Civilization and its Discontents*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York, 1962; based on 1st edn, Vienna, 1930).

<sup>11</sup> George L. Mosse, *German Jews beyond Judaism* (Bloomington, Ind., 1985). For critical perspectives on this work and view, see Klaus L. Berghahn, *The German-Jewish Dialogue Reconsidered: A Symposium in Honor of George L. Mosse* (New York, 1996).

through acquisition of *torat ha'adam* (human-derived knowledge). The need was urgent since, Wessely noted, 'there is one people in the world alone who are not sufficiently concerned with "human knowledge"—the Jews'.<sup>12</sup>

The sense of Jewish deficiency, both collective and individual, was hardly restricted to Wessely or his fellow *maskilim*. It continued into the early nineteenth century, as the more universal and optimistic aspects of the Aufklärung project yielded to darker and more exclusivist notions of a German *Volk*. Those who presided over the transition, figures like Herder and Fichte, saw the lifeblood of the nation in *Kultur*. Curiously, German Jews, though often deemed foreign to the German nation, held dearly to—and in the process, transvalued—the idea of *Kultur*. Thus, the first organized circle of university-trained Jewish scholars called itself Verein für Kultur und Wissenschaft der Juden. For this circle, *Kultur* was not simply or even primarily the repository of the national soul; it was a means of collective elevation beyond a state of depravity. In addressing his colleagues, Eduard Gans, the Verein's first president, declared:

It is well enough known and not strange to the members gathered here or to any of those absent that about fifty years ago the light of better culture (*Kultur*) went out from Berlin to the German Jews . . . The bad mixture of a half oriental, half medieval life was dissolved; the dawn of a better education dispelled a completely alien culture; the previous assertion of a harsh total isolation gave way to inclination in a more universal direction.<sup>13</sup>

Gans's use of the term *Kultur* had less in common with the nationalistic inflections present in his day than with the ideal of 'civilization', both as antidote to barbarism and as standard of proper comportment. Nonetheless, his use of *Kultur*-cum-civilization represented at once an internal demand for Jewish self-improvement and an external panegyric on behalf of Jewish social integration. As such, it helps trace the distinctive and liminal status of Jews in Germany, who absorbed a key organizing principle of German national identity without gaining the full political benefits (e.g. citizenship) that usually accompanied it.

This first generation of university-trained Jewish scholars in Germany exemplified well the desire of Jews to attain the high water mark of civilization. The Jews, Immanuel Wolf wrote in the first issue of the *Zeitschrift für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* (1822), 'must raise themselves . . . to the level of a science (*Wissenschaft*), for this is the attitude of the European world'.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (eds), *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (New York, 1995), 71.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Michael A. Meyer, *The Origins of the Modern Jew: Jewish Identity and European Culture in Germany* (Detroit, 1967), 167.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz (eds), *The Jew in the Modern World*, 220.

Here *Wissenschaft*, like the more universal variant of *Kultur* we have discussed, evokes the sweep and teleology of civilization, but of 'civilization' *avant la lettre*. So when does the actual language of civilization first emerge in this German Jewish moment?

The fact of the matter is that I am not altogether certain. We might turn to Leopold Zunz, who perhaps best embodies the mediation of Enlightenment and Romanticist sensibilities among German Jewish scholars of this era. In 1818 (at the ripe age of 24), Zunz wrote a sweeping programmatic article, 'Etwas über die rabbinische Literatur', in which he took stock of the decline of Israel, the loss of her creative capacities, and the accompanying 'shades of barbarism'. In his own day, those 'shades' had begun to recede, replaced by the bright light of *Bildung*.<sup>15</sup>

Although he describes qualities often attributed to it, Zunz does not, as far as I can tell, employ the term 'civilization' in 1818. He does use it, though, in an 1830 review of Abbé Luigi Chiarini's *Théorie du judaïsme*. The Italian Polish cleric's attack on the Talmud as a repository of anti-Christian blasphemy demonstrated to Zunz that the question of the Jew's place in society was far from resolved. Indeed, Chiarini served as a reminder of 'the not fully ripened fruit of a developing *civilization*' in Europe.<sup>16</sup>

We run the risk of making too much of the appearance of our favoured word in Zunz's review. But its eventual arrival on the scene does allow us to set in relief those key terms—*Bildung*, *Wissenschaft*, and especially the putative rival of 'civilization', *Kultur*—frequently employed by German Jews in the early nineteenth century to convey a state of enlightened social comportment, intellectual attainment, and rational progress. These terms were used for a pair of purposes: intracommunally, to prompt Jews to rise above their own lack of civilization and extracommunally, to highlight the civic and cultural virtues of the Jews as they sought integration into European society. These tasks point, in turn, to a unique blend of collective insecurity and enduring group pride among west European Jews in the nineteenth century. In fact, it was this mix that compelled European Jews to make repeated appeals to the bar of civilization, while simultaneously proclaiming their attainment of it.

### THE OUTWARD GAZE

These countervailing impulses played a significant role, I suspect, in the literary genre that stands at the centre of this volume. Presumably, they also

<sup>15</sup> Leopold Zunz, 'Etwas über die rabbinische Literatur', in Zunz, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin, 1919), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Leopold Zunz, 'Beleuchtung der *Théorie du judaïsme* des Abbé Chiarini', in Zunz, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin, 1919), 271.

figured in the mid-nineteenth-century efforts of German Jews, especially Reformers, to proclaim the unique religious 'mission of Israel' to the non-Jews.<sup>17</sup> The claim of a unique Jewish mission or contribution to civilization reflected, in part, the internalization of negative non-Jewish perceptions of Jews, followed by the projection outward of a newly idealized standard of civilization. Such a psychological process is different from the more self-assertive 'reversing of the gaze' that Susannah Heschel observes in Abraham Geiger, whereby Geiger projects the non-Jew's negative stereotype of the Jew back onto the non-Jew.<sup>18</sup> And it is different from (though clearly related to) the phenomenon that stands at the heart of the second moment that I would like to discuss—namely, that moment in which one Jewish group projected an ideal of civilization, not onto itself nor out to the broader world, but rather onto another, more distant Jewish group. In the first moment, we noticed that early nineteenth-century German Jews sought to assume the standard of civilization for themselves as a way of earning full admission to European society. In the second moment, Jews in western and central Europe profess their civilization but simultaneously express concern about the lack of civilization of other Jews—predictably, those in the 'East' (understood as both the Middle East and eastern Europe). I am thinking here of groups like the Alliance Israélite Universelle (founded in 1860) and the early twentieth-century Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden. While clearly manifesting a sense of fraternal compassion, they were also acting to affirm and validate their own status at home.

The distinction that such groups drew between themselves and other Jews was by no means new. Aron Rodrigue has identified precursors to the 'full-fledged Europeanising "civilising mission," aimed at transforming Sephardi and Eastern Jewries' that took root in the later half of the twentieth century. He notes, for examples, a Central Consistory report from 1842 that called for 'a mission to improve through moralisation' the debilitated state of the Jews of Algeria. And he traces the extent to which the European Jewish press, in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, turned its attention to the Jews of the East with a mix of 'Western superiority and a deeply internalized perception of Jewish unity'.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, the sense of superiority harboured by one Jewish group towards another is not a nineteenth-century invention. On the contrary, it

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of this phenomenon, see Michael A. Meyer, *Response of Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York, 1988), 137–8.

<sup>18</sup> Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago, 1998), 1–22.

<sup>19</sup> See Rodrigue's comment to Eli Bar-Chen, 'Two Communities with a Sense of Mission: The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden', in Michael Brenner, Vicki Caron, and Uri R. Kaufmann (eds), *Jewish Emancipation Reconsidered: The French and German Models* (Tübingen, 2003), 121, 123, 127.



has been a recurrent theme in the relationship between Sephardim and Ashkenazim, among other Jewish groups. We are reminded of this sensibility by the eighteenth-century Isaac de Pinto, who proclaimed in his *Apologie pour la nation juive* (1762) that a 'Portuguese Jew of Bordeaux and a German Jew of Metz appear two beings of a different nature!' To push the point further, he clarified his view that the latter was beset with a 'human nature debased and degraded'.<sup>20</sup>

De Pinto's cutting distinction between Portuguese (i.e. Sephardi) and German (i.e. Ashkenazi) Jews was recognized by the French National Assembly, which granted rights of citizenship *first* to Sephardim on January 1790 and nine months later to the entirety of French Jewry. Over the course of the nineteenth century, this distinction lost much of its force within the French Jewish community. But it was replaced by a newly drawn boundary between Jews of the West (Europe) and Jews of the East (Middle East). A clear articulation of this distinction comes in the opening charge of the Alliance Israélite Universelle from 1860:

If you believe that a great number of your coreligionists, overcome by twenty centuries of misery, of insults and prohibitions, can find again their dignity as men, win the dignity of citizens;

If you believe that one should moralize those who have been corrupted, and not condemn them, enlighten those who have been blinded, and not abandon them, raise those who have been exhausted, and not rest with pitying them . . .

If you believe in all these things, Jews of all the world, come hear our appeal . . .<sup>21</sup>

This charge was squarely in line with the larger French project of a *mission civilisatrice* to the less civilized world—an enterprise marked by that familiar colonial mix of altruism and condescension. Thus, we read in an Alliance document from 1863 that 'the children of Israel will pursue, in the distant corners of Africa and Asia, the civilizing mission that divine Providence has entrusted to them'.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, the Alliance's sense of mission was a reflection of French Jewry's desire to export to Jews of the 'Orient' what it had itself internalized in the era of emancipation—most significantly, 'regeneration', as the Abbé Grégoire famously prescribed in 1789. Now projecting regeneration onto others, the French Jews of the Alliance fixed their attention on the realm of education as the most effective and appropriate vehicle of change.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz (eds), *The Jew in the Modern World*, 306–7. We should recall that de Pinto's distinction was made in response to Voltaire's assertion that 'the Jewish nation is the most singular that the world has ever seen . . . and the most contemptible of all' (ibid. 304). See the discussion now in Ronald Schechter, *Obstinate Hebrews: Representations of Jews in France, 1715–1815* (Berkeley, 2003), 112–15.

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Rodrigue, 'Two Communities with a Sense of Mission', p. xi.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 23.

As Rodrigue has shown in his seminal work on the Alliance, the language of 'regeneration', of a 'civilizing mission', indeed of 'civilization' itself, abounds in the organization's manifestos and memoranda. And, as he further shows, this language is picked up by local Jewish allies of the Alliance on the ground in the Middle East. Thus, the wealthy Jewish banker from Istanbul, Abraham de Camondo, insisted in 1864 that 'only instruction [could] open the path of progress' to those Jews of the East 'so backward in civilization'.<sup>23</sup> Even those who had not yet become part of the Alliance orbit made recourse to the resonant language of the day. For example, in 1867 the advocates of a new-style Jewish school in Adrianople in Turkey called on the Alliance to provide the school with teachers, declaring that they were 'convinced of the necessity of giving a good French education to our students in order to introduce them to European civilization'.<sup>24</sup>

More examples of this language and sense of mission could be adduced, but the point should be clear enough. There is in this second historical moment, marked most saliently by the Alliance Israélite Universelle, a projection (or perhaps deflection) of the civilizing imperative. Whereas once this imperative was directed at German or French Jews themselves, it was now directed at Eastern Jews situated at a remove from the cradle of European civilization (though of course more proximate to the cradle of ancient civilization).

### THE KAPLANIAN SENSE OF 'CIVILIZATION'

The third and final moment that I would like to explore offers yet another twist on the relationship between Jews and the concept of civilization. It does not proclaim the explicit acknowledgement of the Jewish contribution to civilization, though it is closer in time to the well-known endeavours in this vein of Cecil Roth (*The Jewish Contribution to Civilization*, 1940) and Louis Finkelstein (*The Jews: Their History, Culture, and Religion*, 1949). Rather, in this moment Judaism, or Jewishness, is equated with civilization.

Of course, this moment immediately recalls the life project of Mordecai Kaplan, who published in 1934 *Judaism as a Civilization*, a text that became the intellectual foundation of the emerging Reconstructionist movement (as its subtitle already anticipates—*Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*). There was in Kaplan's manifesto a degree of daring that derived from his American upbringing (might we call it a sort of Jewish 'manifest destiny' in his pushing of boundaries?). Hence, he aggressively advances the claim that the Jewish people constitute a holistic, or what he later called an 'organ-

<sup>23</sup> 'Two Communities with a Sense of Mission', 48.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 51.

ismic', civilization.<sup>25</sup> Much less pronounced here are the insecurity and apologia that marked the previous two moments discussed. And with good reason, for the cultural landscape of Kaplan's America was much less marred with antisemitism than that of Europe.

Indeed, Kaplan's new system was manifestly American. He was well aware that the term 'civilization' had lost the lustre of high cultural attainment it possessed in the nineteenth century. Rather, it had come to symbolize decline and cast a dark pall over European intellectual culture, at least from the end of the First World War. The chief prophet of doom was Oswald Spengler, who asserted in *The Decline of the West* (1918–22) that civilization followed culture sequentially, 'like death following life, rigidity following expansion . . . [and] petrifying world-city following mother-earth'.<sup>26</sup> Kaplan utterly rejected this Spenglerian understanding of civilization, and instead infused the term with new meaning for his developing project of Jewish renewal.

At the same time, Kaplan, unlike his European Jewish predecessors, did not present civilization as either the means to or the embodiment of enlightened cultural comportment. On the firmer ground of America, he was aggressive in advancing a strong form of groupness that would have appeared unseemly or detrimental to Jewish interests in nineteenth-century western Europe. As he avers in the introduction to *Judaism as a Civilization*, 'The rediscovery of Judaism as a civilization I owe to the convergence of various social and cultural influences, many of which I, no doubt, would have missed, had I not been brought up in an American environment.'<sup>27</sup> And the contours of this revived concept were sweeping. It was nothing less than 'that nexus of a history, literature, language, social organization, folk sanctions, standards of conduct, social and spiritual ideals, esthetic values, which in their totality form a civilization'.<sup>28</sup>

It is essential to add that Kaplan was writing in a post-emancipatory age when national conceptions of Jewish identity abounded. He himself admitted that 'Ahad Ha-am with his neo-rationalist and cultural approach to Jewish values', as well as 'Zionism with its realistic attitude toward the relation of the Jewish people to Palestine furnished the initial impulse to my thinking.'<sup>29</sup> Indeed, America and Zionism, combining audacity and innovation, prompted Kaplan to rethink the definition of Jewish group identity.

<sup>25</sup> See Kaplan's preface to *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (Philadelphia, 1967; repr. 1981), p. xi.

<sup>26</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York, 1926), 24.

<sup>27</sup> Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, p. xvi.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 178.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

The relative security of his legal and social status allowed him to direct his attention inward to the Jewish collective. In *Judaism as a Civilization* there is little appeal to the non-Jewish world for validation. Neither is there a claim to Judaism's unique world mission.<sup>30</sup> Kaplan is rather intent on redressing a state of spiritual and cultural crisis within the Jewish world. In his diagnosis, the root cause of this crisis lay not in the Jew's otherness, but ironically in the absence of otherness in an open and free society like the United States.

This decidedly American dilemma—so distinct from the challenges facing Jews in Europe or Palestine in 1934—could not be resolved by the decidedly American (and American Jewish) idiom, religion. As Kaplan observed, 'the Jew's religion is but one element in his life that is challenged by the present environment'.<sup>31</sup> To invigorate a Jewish existence that had become moribund meant far more than adhering to one or another religious denomination; it meant retrieving the 'differentia' of Jewish life (land, language, social norms, folk ways, and above all, culture) that had been discarded as part of the social compact of Enlightenment. In this way, and only in this way, could Judaism fulfil itself as a civilization.

## CONCLUSION

In light of this aim, it is understandable why Mordecai Kaplan would have had little interest in proclaiming Jewish contributions to world civilization.<sup>32</sup> Unlike those whom we examined earlier, he did not see civilization as either a pure and unblemished state or a high water mark to be attained. Rather, he was concerned to stitch together the tattered fabric of an extant civilization. In this regard, his anxiety was quite different from that of the early nineteenth-century German Jewish adepts of *Wissenschaft* or of the late nineteenth-century purveyors of a Jewish *mission civilisatrice*. He did not seek the approbation of the non-Jewish world. Nor did he attempt to mend the ways of distant co-religionists. He sought reform of his own Jewish world for its own sake.

But Kaplan, for all of his American-bred confidence, did have his own deep anxieties about the Jewish future—indeed, about the ability of Jews to endure the challenges of modernity. 'Civilization' was part of the solution to the problem for Kaplan; it signified the holistic entity that must be revived in order for a vibrant Jewish collective to survive and flourish. While distinct from others examined before, Kaplan's use of the term nonetheless allows us to follow its snaking course among various cohorts of modern Jews, noting

<sup>30</sup> 'Judaism is but one of a number of unique national civilizations guiding humanity toward its spiritual destiny' (p. 180).

<sup>31</sup> *Judaism as a Civilization*, 177.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 181.

when, where, and how it served as a balm to soothe anxiety and insecurity over the Jewish condition.

Tracing this current gives us new insight into the tenuous balance between collective insecurity and group pride that deeply informs the modern Jewish condition in Europe. At the same time, it returns us to the question of the term's present-day utility. Our post-cold war world is marked by vast political, economic, and social reconfigurations—globalization, European unification, American superpower, mass terror, revived anti-semitism. Does the term 'civilization' make any sense in this context, either for the Jews or for any other group?

The impetus to rely on 'civilization' in the Jewish case is, at first glance, understandable. How better to grasp the vast temporal and spatial reaches of the Jewish historical experience? As Mordecai Kaplan intuited, 'civilization' might offer an attractive alternative to the age-old definitional question of whether the Jews are a religion, nation, people, or ethnicity. And yet, for all its allures, the term does induce serious reservations. For example, in a post-Enlightenment and post-Holocaust world, do Jews still need to prove that they represent the antithesis of barbarism and savagery, as invocation of the term 'civilization' invariably entailed in the nineteenth century? In fact, is it possible at all, to rephrase Adorno's famous aphorism about poetry, to write about civilization after Auschwitz? Even if it is, we must be mindful of the fact that the term 'civilization', with its rather grandiose pretensions, can privilege and canonize a thin stratum of high cultural activity and production. By contrast, civilization's perennial foil, culture (with which it earlier overlapped), may well be a more supple and versatile terminological tool—bespeaking a wider range of practices, products, and social strata.

This point relates to a final reservation about 'civilization' that is particularly germane today (and of which both Mordecai Kaplan and Samuel Huntington were aware). Namely, the term implies a singular, great, but rigid entity, when in fact enduring world cultures survive precisely because of their permeable and dynamic borders, ever changing in interaction with others, as in the case of the culture of the Jews. Similarly, it is important to note, as has a recent scholarly collection, that there are and have always been multiple cultures operating within the apparently singular Jewish collective.<sup>33</sup> This may be discomfiting to those in search of a monolithic Jewish civilization. But the presence of diversity within the Jewish collective can serve as a valuable lesson to all of those who believe that the world is perched on the brink of an unavoidable clash between seemingly essential civilizations.

<sup>33</sup> See David Biale (ed.), *Cultures of the Jews: A New History* (New York, 2002).