Introduction

When, to explain who they are, several people or families who live in a village call themselves "villagers," or "people who live in such-and-such a village," they speak of the simple, palpable facts of their everyday life. But when they call themselves "Israel," and mean by that the same group of which the Hebrew Scriptures or "Old Testament" speaks, they claim for themselves a standing and a status that the simple facts of daily life do not, and cannot, validate. They compare themselves to some other social group and allege that they are like that other group or continue it or embody it in the here and now. In so doing, they evoke in explaining who they are what we may call a metaphor. For the statement, "we are Israel," means to allege, "we are like that Israel of old" of which the Scriptures speak. The same is so when Christian residents of a given locale call themselves "the Church," or "the body of Christ." Then they speak of what is not seen, though very real. In both of these cases, the claim that "we" are "Israel," or "we" are "the body of Christ," forms instances of metaphors invoked to explain the character and standing of a social entity. Social metaphors, therefore, refer to the things with which a group of people compare themselves in accounting for their society together. These two instances, "Israel" and "Church," therefore supply familiar examples of how people invoke a metaphor in identifying the social entity that they constitute. Why insist on regarding as metaphors these ways in which people imagine themselves together? The reason is that what we examine are ways of comparing the abstract to the concrete, the unknown and inconceivable to the known and the palpable and the understood.

When people explain to themselves the character and calling of the social entity that they compose and the life they lead together, they may produce for themselves an encompassing picture, which I call a
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system if three necessary components are present: an account of a worldview, a prescription of a corresponding way of life, and a definition of the social entity that finds definition in the one and description in the other. Those components sustain one another in explaining the whole of a social order, hence constituting the theoretical account of a system. Systems defined in this way work out a cogent picture, for those who make them up. That picture comprises how things are correctly to be sorted out and fitted together, explains why things are done in one way rather than in some other, and defines who they are that act and understand matters in this particular way. When, as is common, people invoke God as the foundation for their worldview, maintaining that their way of life corresponds to what God wants of them and projecting their social entity in a particular relationship to God, then we have a religious system.

What about the notion of a Judaism, which constitutes the third important building block of this study? When a religious system appeals as an important part of its authoritative literature or canon to the Hebrew Scriptures of ancient Israel, or “Old Testament,” we have a Judaism. That usage, a Judaism, is unfamiliar but critical. When people use the word “Judaism,” they use it only in the singular, and they assume that the word refers to a single religion, or religious tradition, extending (if not from creation) from Sinai to the present. Along these same lines, people assume that we all know what we mean when we refer to “Israel.” Instead, in this book I refer not only to a Judaism but, more commonly, to a Judaic system. And the premise of this inquiry is that when people say “Israel,” they may mean, “an Israel,” a species of a genus, Israel. That is to say, I define in categories not broadly understood the genus of which I speak, a religion, as well as the species of that genus, a Judaism. So too, I treat “Israel” as an unknown entity, to be defined inductively by a search for the meanings imputed to that entity or word in a literature of a quite specific and concrete character. A Judaism always applies to the social entity that forms the third necessary component of its system, the title “Israel,” and this is a book, in particular, about how a particular Judaism conceived of its “Israel.”

We may now put together the conception of a Judaism, or a Judaic system, and the idea of a metaphor for a social entity and in that way grasp what is at issue in this book – (a) Judaism and its social metaphors. For any Judaism the fundamental act of metaphorization is the comparison of the Jews of the here and now with the “Israel” of which the received Scriptures common to all Judaisms speak. Treating the social entity – two or more persons – as other than they are in the present or as more than a (mere) given means that the group
perceives itself, its life together, as something else than what it appears to be. And that supererogatory act of imagination constitutes the metaphorical reading of the social entity. Prior to all the specific metaphors we shall survey comes that act of metaphorization. For no facticity or givenness explains why people should treat the fact that, as a social entity, they form a group that bears specific definition beyond everyday traits (e.g., of location or individual composition) as extraordinary. Why, after all, should it be natural or self-evident that the social group forms more than an "us"—more than "our village," "our household," or perhaps people like "us" in other villages or other households? These, the hardest social facts, stand on their own. Any meaning imputed to the group beyond these statements of the "us" of the here and now by definition constitutes an act of metaphorization of two or more persons, treating them as a group and explaining what and who, as a group, they are. So much for (a) Judaism and its social metaphors. But which Judaism?

Here we deal with only one Judaism, the Judaism of the dual Torah, written and oral, that took shape in late antiquity.¹ We know about that system from the holy books of Judaism produced between the second and the seventh centuries C.E. The Judaism of the dual Torah was hardly the only Judaic system, or Judaism, that over time Jews have worked out for themselves. The Essene community of Qumran presented a quite different Judaic system that was equally cogent and well crafted, and the authorship of the Pentateuch in ca. 450 B.C.E. produced a still more encompassing Judaic system. These two systems in antiquity have counterparts in modern times, each claiming to be "just" Judaism: Reform, or Orthodoxy, or Zionism, or Reconstructionism each has a definition of a way of life, its distinctive worldview, and its own account of who, and what, is (an) "Israel." Like all Judaisms, the Judaism of the dual Torahs called its social entity "Israel," and invested "Israel" with a full and encompassing statement of definition of the social entity—group, class, caste, family, nation, and the like—that that Judaism proposed to address.

I call that Judaism "the Judaism of the dual Torah" because its principal symbolic statement invoked the myth that at Sinai God revealed the Torah, or revelation, in written and oral forms. The one in writing is today contained in the Hebrew Scriptures. The one formulated and transmitted orally, commonly called Oral Torah, was originally memorized but is now written down, according to this Judaism, in the Mishnah, a philosophical law code brought to closure at ca. 200 C.E., to which the (Babylonian) Talmud forms the authoritative commentary; in fact, the memorized Torah in late antiquity encompassed a variety of writings. These writings form the sole
evidence on the basis of which we may describe the Judaism of the dual Torah. They fall into two parts: those centered upon the Mishnah, and those that amplify Scripture. (In a moment we shall divide them chronologically.) Those dealing with the Mishnah included the Tosefta, a corpus of supplements to statements in the Mishnah, organized around the framework of the Mishnah, and expressed in the language and cadences of the Mishnah; the Talmud of the Land of Israel, called the Yerushalmi, a systematic commentary to thirty-nine tractates of the sixty-two tractates of the Mishnah, brought to closure at ca. 400 C.E., and, finally, the Bavli, or Talmud of Babylonia, of ca. 600 C.E., which comments on thirty-seven tractates of the Mishnah (and not the same ones addressed in the Yerushalmi). Among the commentaries to the written Torah that came to closure in this same period were three that cite the Mishnah and imitate its language and cadences and may have reached their conclusion by ca. 300 C.E. – Sifra to Leviticus, Sifré to Numbers, and Sifré to Deuteronomy – and three that took shape in the period of the formation of the Yerushalmi – Genesis Rabbah, ca. 400, Leviticus Rabbah, ca. 450 C.E., and Pesiqta deRab Kahana, organized around synagogue lections for various special holy days, ca. 500 C.E. While these documents do not encompass the entirety of the writings included within the framework of the sector of the Torah called "oral," they do form the heart of the matter. Using this corpus of writings, I shall conduct an inquiry into how the word "Israel" functioned, the type of entities deemed to constitute an "Israel," and the circumstances in which a given mode of thinking about "Israel" served or did not serve.

The writings of the dual Torah fall into two groups, each with its own plan and program. The first begins with the Mishnah, a philosophical law book brought to closure at ca. 200 C.E., later on called the first statement of the oral Torah. In its wake, the Mishnah drew tractate Abot, ca. 250 C.E., a statement concluded a generation after the Mishnah on the standing of the authorities of the Mishnah; Tosefta, ca. 300 C.E., a compilation of supplements of various kinds to the statements in the Mishnah; and three systematic exegeses of books of Scripture or the written Torah – Sifra to Leviticus, Sifré to Numbers, and Sifré to Deuteronomy – of indeterminate date but possibly concluded by 300 C.E. These books overall form one stage in the unfolding of the Judaism of the dual Torah, which emphasized issues of sanctification of the life of Israel, the people, in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., in which, it was commonly held, Israel's sanctification came to full realization in the bloody rites of sacrifice to God on high. I call this system a Judaism without Christianity, because the issues found ur-
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The second set of writings begins with the Talmud of the Land of Israel, or Yerushalmi, generally supposed to have come to a conclusion at ca. 400 C.E.; Genesis Rabbah, assigned to about the next half century; Leviticus Rabbah, ca. 450 C.E.; Pesiqa deRab Kahana, ca. 450–500 C.E; and, finally, the Talmud of Babylonia or Bavli, assigned to the late sixth or early seventh century, ca. 600 C.E. The two Talmuds systematically interpret passages of the Mishnah, and the other documents, as is clear, do the same for books of the written Torah. Some other treatments of biblical books important in synagogue liturgy, particularly the Five Scrolls – Lamentations Rabbati, Esther Rabbah, and the like – are supposed to have reached closure at this time as well. This second set of writings introduces, alongside the paramount issue of Israel's sanctification, the matter of Israel's salvation, with doctrines of history, on the one side, and the Messiah, on the other, given prominence in the larger systemic statement. I call this stage a Judaism despite Christianity, because it lays points of stress and emphasis that, in retrospect, appear to respond to, and to counter, the challenge of Christianity. From the beginning of the legalization of Christianity in the early fourth century, to the establishment of Christianity at the end of that same century, Jews in the Land of Israel found themselves facing a challenge that, prior to Constantine, they had found no compelling reason to consider. The specific crisis came when the Christians pointed to the success of the Church in the politics of the Roman state as evidence that Jesus Christ was king of the world, and that his claim to be Messiah and King of Israel had now found vindication. When the Emperor Julian in 361–3 C.E. apostasized and renewed state patronage of paganism, he permitted the Jews to begin to rebuild the Temple, part of his large plan of humiliating Christianity. His prompt death on an Iranian battlefield supplied further evidence for heaven's choice of the Church and the truth of the Church's allegations concerning the standing and authority of Jesus as the Christ. The Judaic documents that reached closure in the century after these events attended to questions of salvation, such as the doctrine of history and of the Messiah, and the authority of the sages' reading of Scripture as against the Christians' interpretation, that had earlier not enjoyed extensive consideration. In all, this second Judaism met the challenge of the events of the fourth century. The Judaic system of the dual Torah, expressed in its main outlines in the Yerushalmi and associated compilations of biblical exegeses concerning Genesis, Leviticus, and some other scriptural books, culminated in the Bavli, which emerged as the
authoritative document of the Judaism of the dual Torah from then to now.

Before we proceed, let us take up and dismiss a minor problem. In today's world the word "Israel" commonly is made to refer to the State of Israel, and the word "Israeli" to a citizen of that nation. "Israel" also may refer to a particular place, namely, the State of Israel or the Land of Israel. But that narrow and particularly political, "enlandized" meaning is new, beginning, as it does, in 1948. Long prior to that time, and even today, there has been a second and distinct meaning, "Israel" as "all Jews everywhere," the people of Israel. This "Israel" defined as "the Jewish people," sometimes capitalized as "the Jewish People," identifies "Israel" with a transnational "community." It is a very important meaning of the word, for Scripture's many references to "Israel," as in "the Guardian of Israel does not slumber or sleep," then are taken to refer to that people or People. Throughout the liturgy of the synagogue, "Israel" always refers to the people, wherever they live, and not to the State of Israel today. The fact that these two meanings, the one particular to a state, the other general to a scattered group, contradict one another alerts us to a problem. It is that a single word may stand for two things. As we shall see in the pages of this book, it may stand for many more. Indeed, thinking about "Israel" leads us deep into the generative processes of the system at hand. In their reflection on that to which "Israel" is to be compared and contrasted, in their selection of a particular set of comparisons from a repertoire of metaphors available from Scripture, in their mode of thought on the matter, whether philosophical and abstract, whether political and concrete, the framers of the Judaic systems before us portray in this detail the character and conscience of their entire systems.

I want to find out how people bring to concrete and vivid expression their thought about the social entity that in their minds they imagine that they constitute, along with their families and others of like opinion and life pattern. When they speak of "Israel," to what sort of social group do they refer, and how do they think about that group? The answer can help solve a much larger issue, the way in which systems take shape, the relationship, in the formation of systems, between circumstance and context, contents and convictions. What we address, therefore, in this study is a striking example of how people explain to themselves who they are as a social entity. For religion is a powerful force in human society and culture, and is realized not only or mainly in theology; religion works through the social entity that embodies that religion. Religions form churches or peoples or nations or communities or other entities that, in the
concrete, constitute the “us,” as against “the nations” or merely “them.” And religions carefully explain, in deeds and in words, who that “us” is – and they do it every day. If we wish to know how that “we” or “us” attains concrete definition within the larger religious worldview and way of life of a particular religious system, we do well therefore to invoke the case of Judaic systems or Judaisms, because in nearly all known Judaisms the “us” of “Israel” forms an indicative and critical element.

NOTES

1 At no point in this book do I address issues that pertain to the world beyond late antiquity, defined as the age from the first to the seventh centuries C.E. I have dealt with the Judaic systems of modern times in my Death and Birth of Judaism (New York: Basic Books, 1987), and with the foundations of the paradigm of Judaic systems in my Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: Exile and Return in the History of Judaism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987). These are quite separate problems, which do not impinge upon this book in any way.
CHAPTER 1

Imagining Society, Re-visioning “Israel”

1. Imagining Society

We do not experience but only imagine “society,” because “society” viewed whole is something too abstract and remote from everyday life to afford a concrete encounter. We know individual people. But we generalize and so in our minds conceive, or imagine, that the concrete persons we encounter represent or form part of that abstraction, society. Thus we make sense of the world beyond the here and the now of everyday life. We move from what we know, the concrete and immediate, to what we do not know. Whatever lies beyond our experience, encompassing all modes of abstraction and all conceptions of not merely event but process, demands to be set into relationship with what we already know. Connections that we make, abstractions that we perceive only in their concrete manifestations, processes that we can imagine but not identify— not the blow but power, not the caress but love— these form the raw material of mind. Accordingly, when we name and treat as real and concrete what are in fact abstractions and intangible processes, we impose upon ourselves the need to compare the abstract to the concrete. We therefore think in a process of analogy, contrast, comparison, and metaphor about something that, to begin with, we ourselves have identified and so made up in our minds.

Take a group, for example. When two or more persons perceive themselves to bear traits in common and to constitute a group on account of those indicative traits, they face a range of choices in thinking about the classification and character of that social entity that they imagine they compose. It can be immediate, but it does not have to be. A family, a village, a neighborhood, a town— these form part of felt experience; we can walk in the streets,
recognize relationship with persons we know and our relationship to whom we can name, and trace the outer limits of the settled area. But when people identify with others they have not met and may never meet, the process of the search for appropriate metaphors to take the place of absent experience in the everyday world begins. In thinking about such abstractions as social entities, people appeal to comparisons between the concrete things they know and the abstract things they seek to explain and express for themselves.

When we speak of such large abstractions as society, or people, or nation – for instance, use the word “family” to mean a social entity or aggregate of persons beyond the one in which we grew up and to which we bear blood relationships, or call a friend or a political ally a “brother” – we move onward from the concrete to the abstract. That metaphorical mode of thought permits us to speak about things though we cannot point in diurnal encounter to the concrete experience of those things. A principal abstraction therefore constitutes a social entity that transcends the concrete experience and pragmatic knowledge of two or more people together. How we think about those abstractions that in the most general and indeterminate terms we may call “social entities” – the result of generalization from the here and now to the out-there, the outcome of a process of imagination, fantasy, and reflection, or the results of that intellectual process – lends substance to our perception, through now-real and concrete expectation, of the hitherto unknown and unfelt but merely imagined. In these processes of thought we resort to metaphor so as to treat as a thing what originates out of process or abstraction. That is how reflection and imagination about the commonalities of specific things form an exercise in metaphorical thought.

How does a religious system serve as a mode of the nurture of metaphors for interpreting our social experience of the concrete? We recall the difference between caress, the concrete, and love, the abstraction. How we move from the immediate to the general forms the problem of reflection and, through reflection, generalization. People are used to thinking of philosophy and also of science as modes of rigorous generalization. But religion, no less than philosophy and science, also forms a principal mode of profound thought about process and abstraction, mediating between immediate encounter and the abstract and generalizing theology. For religion gives concrete definition to what lies beyond immediate experience, as much as to what is formed of concrete encounter. For example, religion has the power of transforming cells of like-minded
persons into believers, and believers into a Church or the saved or holy people or a supernatural family or (as is most common) even a social entity that is altogether sui generis. Religion as a mode of thought competes with philosophy and science because all three exercise that same power of turning ineffable abstraction, intangible relationship, or a process beyond palpable perception into a thing we can define and identify. Religion exercises this power, whether it addresses God in heaven or speaks of humanity in the home, street, and town; identifies a building as holy; defines a properly performed gesture as sanctifying; or declares two or three individuals to form a society, a holy entity, for instance, that is the embodiment here and now of God's people or God's own person or body.

Among the many supernatural works of enchantment accomplished by religion, the one studied here is the capacity of religion to transform individuals and families into a corporate body, imputing relationships other than those natural to location or family genealogy. Religion can name and treat as real the otherwise-random confluence, in belief and behavior, of isolated groups of people, to persuade those families that they form part of something larger than their limited congeries, even though no one in those families has ever seen, or can ever encompass in a single vision, the entirety of that something more, that entire nation or mystical body. In simple terms, religions speak of social entities made up of their devotees. These they turn from concrete entity in the here and now into abstractions merely represented, in the here and now, by the present exemplar. The social entity turns into a symbol for something more. So the social group (defined presently) is transformed from what the world sees to what the eye of faith perceives, becoming, in the case of Judaism, an "Israel."

Thinking about the social entity in particular demands metaphorical thinking because a social group that does not rest, for its being, upon constant and palpable interaction exists mainly in the abstract. It is as an abstraction that is (merely) exemplified by the group near at hand, the one that does consist of individuals who do interact. When people think about that abstraction – about the Church or the Israel or "the nation of Islam" of which they form a part – they invoke a variety of concrete metaphors. Whatever metaphors they use, they are engaged in a transaction of a symbolic character, in which they propose to express their sense not by reference to what they can see and touch, but to what, in the things they can see and touch, corresponds to that social entity.