Judaism and Its Social Metaphors
Judaism and Its Social Metaphors
Israel in the History of Jewish Thought

JACOB NEUSNER

Brown University
For

ANDREW GREELEY

whose profound grasp of the nature of religion
and deep understanding of the activity of religion in society
have enlightened an entire generation.

A tribute to his remarkable union of scholarship,
inlet, imagination, and perception

in the the quest for
what it means for us to be
“in our image, after our likeness”
all together and all at once.
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Preface

In this book I ask a small question about a large subject: How does a religious system bring to concrete and vivid expression a definition of those who live within that system – how does it characterize its members as a distinctive sort of social entity? In the authoritative writings of every Judaism known in history, the term “Israel” is critical. What a Judaism means by the term entails the sort of social group it associates with “Israel” and the way it imagines and portrays “Israel.” An investigation of both aspects can provide insight into the solution of a much broader issue – the relationship, in the formation of a religious system, between circumstance and context, social facts and the social imagination.

By religious system I mean a cogent composition of three things: a worldview, a way of life, and an address to a defined entity. A religious system addresses a group of people with an account of a worldview, a way of life, and a theory about the social entity constituted by the group of people at hand. The ethos, ethics, and social theory all together raise a fundamental and urgent question and then answer that question with a cogent and (to the system's framers) self-evidently valid statement. This study considers how a Judaic system (or “a Judaism”) explained the social entity to which that system addressed itself, how in context it gave an account of what an “Israel” is. For in any Judaism, the social entity will be called “Israel,” and hence any Judaism will encompass in its cogent statement a clear account of what an “Israel” is.

The relevance of this study hardly requires spelling out. Every morning's headlines bring new testimony to the definitive position of the issue at hand. The question of who, and what, is (an) “Israel” today troubles the peace of Israel, the Jewish state, and the definition of who is a Jew continues to preoccupy the Judaic authorities of the
diaspora as well. But the matter of "Israel" – what sort of social entity "Israel" is, who an “Israel” is, to what genus we refer when we speak of the species, “Israel” – enjoys more than merely current relevance. In point of fact the category, “Israel,” and its definition define a shibboleth of the history of Judaism. The identification of “Israel” has preoccupied thinkers of all Judaisms from the beginning to the present. The making of Judaic systems commenced with the formation of the Pentateuch in the aftermath of the destruction of the first Temple of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. From that time to the present day the definition of "Israel" – who belongs, who does not, and to what sort of social entity do “Israelites” adhere in forming (an) “Israel” – has formed a remarkably pervasive theme in all Judaisms. When we take up the systemic treatment by a Judaism of the category “Israel,” we address one critical and indicative issue of the Judaic system under study. The centrality of thought on “Israel” for all Judaisms from then to now may be assessed not only in the encounter with the record of the past.

For all Judaisms – systems comprising a way of life and a worldview addressed to a particular social entity – have always faced the problem of defining that social entity, which all have called “Israel.” Each Judaism, of course, provided its own definition of what an Israel is, as well as of who an Israelite, that is, in modern language, a Jew is. The urgency of confronting the question invariably derived from the requirement, facing all Judaisms, to specify a theory of “Israel” that explained who belonged, and who did not belong. But that explanation formed a critical component of the systemic definition to begin with. So to say that the issue of "Israel" settles who is in and who is out is to make a redundant statement out of the fact that the systemic definition states the generative principle of a system in the limited terms of its social component. That is why, when we know who and what a system construes an Israel to be, we find our way deep into the thought processes of the system at its deepest generative levels. Given the diversity of Judaisms past and present, we cannot find it astonishing that the name for the social entity constituted by Jews, the name “Israel,” has carried a variety of meanings, and, as we shall soon understand, each of these served not as concrete description of real people living in the here and now, a merely factual statement of how things are, but as a metaphor. The metaphor might take genealogical or political or supernatural or taxonomical or hierarchical or ontological or epistemological character, as systems varied. An “Israel” in a given system might enjoy no counterpart among social entities here on earth; sui generis, “Israel” then framed its own (of necessity, unintelligible) metaphor.
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This social entity, this Israel, therefore may constitute a family of a particular order – that is, all Jews descend from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel. Then we invoke the metaphor of family. Or, it may be held, Israel constitutes a people or a nation, in which case to be “Israel” is to be part of a political unit of one kind or another, comparable with other such social groups based on, or in, a shared political being, and that will dictate thought on the nature of Israel, whether or not the Jews at a given time and place constituted a political entity at all. We find, furthermore, the claim that the social entity at hand simply is not like any other, a genus unto itself. “Israel” as “unique” has no counterpart among the nations: on one side of the social equation of humanity are all the nations all together; on the other side, Israel, all alone. These and other metaphors serve as the vehicles for the social thought of the Judaic systems, or Judaisms, of the ages. These abstract observations have now to be made concrete for a Judaism.

Everyday conversation with my beloved colleague, Professor Calvin Goldscheider, Program in Judaic Studies and Department of Sociology, Brown University, was essential for this project. He asked tough questions and also provided thoughtful definitions and points of clarification of theory. His influence on Chapter 1 is evident in every line. Talks from day to day with Professor William Scott Green, University of Rochester, proved equally productive, particularly in the design of the whole. I found benefit in the warnings of my colleague, Professor Wendell S. Dietrich, not to stray into theological pastures sown with weeds. The sustaining friendship of Professor Ernest S. Frerichs illuminates this, as it does every other, work of mine. My graduate student, now Professor Paul Virgil Flesher, Northwestern University, provided not only a good hearing for ideas but also thoughtful responses and valued criticism. Those colleagues who read Chapter 11 and commented on it are mentioned in the appropriate passages.

Providence, Rhode Island  JACOB NEUSNER
Abbreviations

A.Z.  Abodah Zarah
Ar.   Arakhin
B.B.  Baba Batra
B.M.  Baba Mesia
B.Q.  Baba Qamma
Ber.  Berakhot
Bes.  Besah
Bik.  Bikurim
Chron. Chronicles
Col.   Colossians
Dem.  Demai
Deut. Deuteronomy
Ed.   Eduyot
Er.   Erubin
Est.  Esther
Ex.   Exodus
Ez.   Ezekiel
Gal.  Galatians
Gen.  Genesis
Gen. R. Genesis Rabbah
Git.  Gittin
Hab.  Habakkuk
Hal.  Halah
Hor.  Horayot
Hos.  Hosea
Is.   Isaiah
Jer.  Jeremiah
Josh.  Joshua
Ket.  Ketubot
Kgs.  Kings
Lam.  Lamentations
Lev.  Leviticus
Lev. R. Leviticus Rabbah
M.   Mishnah tractate
M.Q.  Moed Qatan
M.S.  Maaser Sheni
Mak.  Makkot
Mal.  Malachi
Men.  Menahot
Mic.  Micah
Ned.  Nedarim
Neg.  Negaim
Nid.  Niddah
Num.  Numbers
Ob.  Obadiah
Pes.  Pesahim
Prov. Proverbs
Ps.  Psalms
Qid.  Qiddushin
R.  Rabbi; or Rabbah (as in Gen. R.)
Rom. Romans
Sam.  Samuel
Shab.  Shabbat
Sheb.  Shebi‘it
Sheq.  Sheqalim
Song  Song of Songs; Song of Solomon
Sot.  Sotah
Suk.  Sukkah
T.  Tosefta tractate
Ta.  Taanit
Ter.  Terumot
Uqs.  Uqṣin
Y.  Yerushalmi
Yad.  Yadayim
Yeb.  Yeboth
Zeb.  Zebaim
Zech. Zechariah