

# WHO ARE THE JEWISH PEOPLE?

By Bill Bjoraker

**NOTE:** This article was transcribed from an orally delivered presentation. It may therefore reflect a spoken quality. Those involved in reaching the Jewish people with the Gospel of Messiah Yeshua are helped greatly by the best understanding possible of the Jewish character, culture and worldview. This article describes how the history of the Jewish people has shaped them to be the unique people they are today.

Who are the Jewish people? This lecture will describe the Jewish ethnic or national character, the “Jewish corporate personality”, or the “Jewish Mind”, variously so called. I will not present here the tenets of Judaism as a religion. Rather, I will describe from an anthropological perspective the nature and character of the Jewish people. Who are these people through whom the Bible came to the world? What are their characteristics? What is their culture and worldview? And why are they who they are? I’ll start with a few quotes. Each of these offer insight into who the Jewish people are. Think about them. Then as you conclude this essay, it will be a good exercise to come back and discuss just what insights about the Jewish people you can glean from each of these quotes.

*“Behold a people that shall live apart and shall not be reckoned among the nations.” –Numbers 23:9*

*“All things are mortal but the Jew. All other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?”*

–Mark Twain

*“The Jews are a people with an excess of history but a lack of geography.” (unknown origin)*

*"The Jewish people excel in making a virtue out of a necessity."* (unknown origin)

*"The Jews are like all other people, only more so."* (unknown origin)

*"The world has by now discovered that it is impossible to destroy the Jews."* –Benjamin Disraeli, British Prime Minister under Queen Victoria

*"Christianity is faith; Judaism is fate."* (unknown origin)

*"Only he who cries out for the Jews may sing Gregorian chants."* –Dietrich Bonhoeffer

*"How odd of God to choose the Jews,  
But not so odd as those who choose  
The Jewish God and spurn the Jews."* –Paul Carlson

*"Were we to set the peoples of the world in a series ranging from those who have had the least exposure to outside influences to those who had the most, the Jews would undoubtedly rank highest in variety, intensity, and duration of such experience."* –Rafael Patai, anthropologist

I want to give you a way of grasping, in a short time, the whole of Jewish history, with an understanding of how that history has shaped them, in a "mind-easy" way. I will use a scheme I have borrowed from the work of Jewish anthropologist, Raphael Patai,

from his book entitled **The Jewish Mind** (1977, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York). **This book is a seminal work, and a must read book if you really want to understand the Jewish people.** Patai is one of my major sources for the lecture I now present to you.

As any nicely formulated scheme of history will be, this scheme of six periods is somewhat contrived. It has, however, the advantage of helping you "get a handle", in an introductory and helpful way, on Jewish history and how that history has shaped them as a people. It gives you a skeleton upon which to flesh out more of Jewish history at a later time. The rabbis always used memory aids. Here is one for you: remember that six is the biblical number for "Man", or "humanity" (Adam and Eve were created on the sixth day). Since the Jews are an example people to the world, six as the number of man will help you remember these six periods of Jewish history and formation.

In their long, 4000-year history since Abraham the Jews have had at least six major encounters with surrounding Gentile cultures, each of which has shaped their identity, or group mind, "the Jewish Mind." These cultural processes explain the unity of the Jewish people yet the great diversity within the international Jewish community as it exists today. They have made the Jewish people unique to every other people. Each period has three elements in common: 1) Adoption of a new language, 2) Involvement in new realms of cultural activity, and 3) Lasting effects on the Jewish mind and a lasting legacy to the human race.

**1) Israel and Canaan.** The first encounter was with the Land of Canaan and its gentile peoples, lasting from 2000 BC, the call of Abraham, to 586 BC, the fall of Jerusalem. This period covers the ancient Jewish people from the patriarchs' first sojournings in the land, through their forging as a people in Egypt, their first settlement of the land until their first exile from that land. It is the era of the patriarchs, the captivity in Egypt, the Exodus, the conquest of the land under Joshua the son of Nun, the judges,

the kings, the split into two kingdoms, the fall of the Northern Kingdom, and finally the fall of the Southern Kingdom and the Exile to Babylon.

Let's start from the beginning. The Jews descended from Shem, one of the three sons of Noah; thus they are Shemites (Semites). Genesis 14:15 calls its protagonist "Abram the Hebrew". The word "ivri", "Hebrew," likely comes from the name Eber, one of the descendants of Shem, listed in what's known as the "Table of Nations" of Genesis 10. "Ivri" also means "one who crosses over." Abraham crossed over the rivers and deserts from Ur of the Chaldeans, crossed the Syrian desert and came into the land of Canaan. But when he came over, he did not speak Hebrew but Aramaic, the language of the Chaldeans. After three generations, Abraham's descendants began to absorb the language of Canaan, and some of them married Canaanite women. Then all of Jacob's family went down to Egypt, preceded by Joseph, who was sent by God to prepare the way. Egypt was where they were incubated toward their birth as a nation. They had married Canaanite wives, who taught their children their own Canaanite tongue. Then during their 400 years in Egypt, this amalgamated with their ancestral Aramaic and morphed into Hebrew.

After they entered the land of Canaan, they gave up nomadic existence for an agricultural, peasant, sedentary existence. Their literary culture also changed as they began to absorb literary forms from the surrounding peoples. We see Canaanite influence in names like "Leviathan" (e.g. Job 41:1, Psalms 7;14), and in images like Yahweh riding upon the clouds in Psalm 68:4 which was used earlier in Ugaritic mythic poems about Baal and Anath. They absorbed and accommodated to religious activity from Canaan: fertility cults, worship of the Baalim and the Ashtoroth, even human sacrifice. The conquerors were themselves conquered by the culture of the conquered people. Not all cultural activity is good. Israel's involvement in pagan practices and idolatry eventually brought God's judgment and exile from the land.

At this point they had the three elements of a nation: land, law, and language. They had the land of Canaan promised to them, the law given to them at Sinai, and the language of Hebrew had developed uniquely among them.

The lasting effects of this first period, and their gifts to the world, were the Hebrew language and Scriptures, which were largely, though not completely, formed by the end of this period. The post-exilic literature was yet to be written and the canon was yet to be settled and redacted.

A book you must read if you're interested in the Jewish people is [The Gifts of the Jews](#) by Thomas Cahill (1998, Nan A. Talese, Doubleday, New York). Cahill is not an evangelical believer, but he has great insights into the Jewish people. One of the lasting gifts from the Jews to the world from this period was their view of time. Before them, all the peoples of the world had a cyclical, rather than linear, view of time. Time was like a snake catching its tail. Abraham, due to God's revelation, was the first one to break out of that cycle. A long quote from Cahill:

*“So, ‘wayyelekh Avram” (Abraham went”)- two of the boldest words in all literature. They signal a complete departure from everything that has gone before in the long evolution of culture and sensibility. Out of Sumer, civilized repository of the predictable, comes a man who does not know where he is going, but goes forth into the unknown wilderness under the prompting of his God. Out of Mesopotamia, home of canny, self-serving merchants who use their gods to ensure prosperity and favor, comes a wealthy caravan with no material goal. Out of ancient humanity, which from the dim beginnings of its consciousness has read its eternal verities in the stars, comes a party traveling by no known compass. Out of the human race, which knows in its bones that all its strivings must end in death, comes a leader who says he has been given an impossible*

*promise. Out of mortal imagination comes a dream of something new, something better, something yet to happen, something in the future.*

*If we had lived in the second millennium BC, the millennium of Abraham, we could have canvassed all the nations of the earth, and what would they have said of Abraham's journey? In most of Africa and Europe, where prehistoric animism was the norm, and artists were still carving and painting on stone the heavenly symbols of the great wheel of life and death, they would have laughed and Abraham's madness and pointed to the heavens, where the life of earth had been plotted from all eternity. "His wife is barren as winter," they would say. "A man cannot escape his fate." The Egyptians would have shaken their heads in disbelief. "There is none born wise," they would have said, repeating the advice of their most cherished wise men. "Copy the forefathers, teach him what has been said in the past and you will set a good example." The early Greeks might have told Abraham the story of Prometheus, whose quest for the fire of the gods ended in personal disaster. "Do not overreach, they would advise. Come to resignation." In India, he would have been told that time is black, irrational, and merciless. "Do not set yourself to the task of accomplishing something in time, which is only the dominion of suffering, and which only returns again and again." In China, the now anonymous sages whose thoughts would eventually influence the I Ching would caution that there is no purpose in journeys or any kind of earthly striving. "The great thing is to abolish time by escaping from the law of change." The ancestors of the Maya in America would point to their circular calendars, which like those of the Chinese repeat the pattern of years in unvarying succession, and would explain that everything that has been comes around again, and that each man's fate is fixed. On every*

*continent, in every society, Abraham would have been given the same advice that wise men as diverse as Heraclitus, Lao Tzu, and Siddharta would one day give their followers: “Do not journey, but sit. Compose yourself by the river of life. Meditate on its ceaseless and meaningless flow, on all that is past or passing or to come, until you have absorbed the pattern and have come to peace with the great wheel and with your own death and the death of all things in the corruptible sphere.” (pp.63-64).*

That was Abraham’s world. But he said, “No. God has called me, and I’m going answer his call.” In answering God’s Voice, and beginning the journey, he left the world of “the Wheel” behind. Out of that response came the Western view of linear time with all its values: that time has a beginning and an end, that it’s going somewhere, that progress is possible, that we have unique destinies, because the One and Only High God, the Creator of all things so planned it that way. This is a major contribution Abraham and the Jewish people bequeathed to the world through the Hebrew Scriptures.

**2) Hebrews and Hellenes.** The second encounter was with “the Hellenes”, that is the Greeks, from 300 BC to AD 100. This was the period following the conquests of Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic cultural sweep he initiated. During this period the Jewish people adopted the Greek language which vied with Aramaic as the diaspora language of the Jews. Greek civilization penetrated Jewish life, Greek cities sprung up in the land of Israel, notably the “Decapolis” cities of the Galilee mentioned in the Gospels. Herod the Great, a convinced Hellenizer, built in the Greek architectural style in Jerusalem. The Greek “polis” was an attractive ideal. Due to the First Commandment, “*You shall not make graven images...*”, the Jews had resisted visual and

representational art forms. Some Jewish use of graphic symbols in synagogue decoration emerged at this time due to Hellenistic influence.

Alexandria, Egypt, held the greatest concentration of Jews at this time. Philo of Alexandria (“Philo Judaeus”), was the greatest Jewish scholar of this period. He lived in Alexandria, studied Greek philosophy and wrote about Jewish subjects. Influenced by Greek thought, he developed the allegorical method of interpretation and commentary on the Torah. The lure of Greek wisdom and culture was very strong for the Jews, and it was the first of the historic gentile cultural encounters whose study was approved by the rabbis. The Jewish people absorbed from the Greeks the value of systematizing doctrines. Doctrinal formulation had been foreign to the Jewish mind, which liked the concrete and shunned the abstract. The body of theological doctrine systematized by the Pharisees was a major result. Though many Greek cultural forms were adopted, the core and content of the thinking remained Jewish.

This Intertestamental period included the time of the finishing of the Second Jewish Temple by Herod, and the coming of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah. It is the time of “the Maccabees”, or the Hasmoneans. This zealous Judean priestly family revolted against the Syrian Seleucid ruler Antiochus Epiphanes IV. Antiochus sought to outlaw the Jewish religion and destroy the Jewish people. His troops desecrated the Temple, by offering a pig on the altar and erecting a statue of Zeus in the Holy Place. Mattathias, the head of the Hasmonean clan and his sons, the most flamboyant of which was “Judah the Macabi” (Hebrew for “hammer”), led a victorious guerilla resistance movement against the invading Hellenized Seleucid invaders. They rededicated the Temple in 164 B.C., thus beginning the Jewish feast of Hanuka, which entered into Jewish tradition at this time.

After the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 the rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai called a great council at Yavneh on the coast of Israel, near Jaffa. The remnants of the Pharisaic party met there to regroup. There the Old Testament canon was established as it exists today.

The apocryphal books accepted by the Roman Catholic church were written during this period also. It also was beginning of rabbinic Judaism. Most forms of Judaism with us today had their origin here. This is the religion of those Jews who didn't accept Jesus as the Messiah. Thus, the parting of the ways between the early Messianic Jews and those who did not embrace Jesus happened during this period and shaped the Jewish mind very significantly. Messianic Judaism is the true heir and continuation of Biblical Judaism. Rabbinic Judaism represents an aberration from the Way.

A lasting gift to the world by the Jewish people in this period was the "Septuagint" (from the Greek for "70"), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, done by seventy scholars in Alexandria. This was hugely influential in terms of God's mission to the world, because it allowed most of the literate peoples of the known world to understand the Scriptures in their own language. The Bible in Greek!

**3) Hebrew Arabesque.** The third encounter was with the Arab and Muslim world, from AD 700 to 1400. Mohammed lived from 570-634, and Islam emerged out of the deserts of Arabia. The Muslim hordes conquered most of North Africa and the Middle East and set up Islamic caliphates, kingdoms. The Jews were in Diaspora at the time, scattered throughout this area, living under Muslim rule. While Europe was going through its "dark ages" (which, by the way, is a very Eurocentric term), the Arab world was not dark, but experiencing a flowering of culture and civilization with many literary and scientific developments.

The Jewish people today are divided into two broad categories: Ashkenazi and Sephardi. *Ashkenaz* is the Hebrew word for Germany, and the Ashkenazi are those who dispersed northward into Europe and Russia. They look northern or eastern European, having lighter features. *Sepharad* is the word for Spain, and the Sephardi are those who stayed in the Middle East, North Africa, or Spain, which was under Muslim rule for quite

a while. They're usually darker in complexion, like the Arabs. This division became recognizable during this period.

The Jews lived in the Arab and Muslim world as second-class citizens, called "dhimmis", but they were usually better off than those in were those in "Christian" Europe. They adopted Arabic and also Spanish and Ladino in Moorish Spain, the latter being a mixture of Hebrew and Spanish written in Hebrew script. This was known as "the Golden Age of Sephardic Jewry", especially in Spain and Morocco.

This was the period of the great Expulsion of all Jews from Spain during the Inquisition. As American school children we learned, "In fourteen-hundred and ninety-two Columbus sailed the ocean blue." Well that same Christian King and Queen who sent out Columbus, Ferdinand and Isabella, in that same year also expelled all Jews and Muslims from Spain. This was the period when the "Marranos" or "Conversos" emerged. These were Jewish people who outwardly converted to Catholicism to save their lives, but inwardly and secretly remained Jews. Many immigrated to Latin America. To this day, many Latinos discover that their great grandmother left them a menorah or Sabbath candlesticks, and upon research find that they come from Marrano stock.

The Jews entered into many of the cultural activities of the Arab world. One of the greatest Jewish figures of this time was the great rabbi Moses Maimonides, "the Rambam" (1135-1204). He was a physician in the royal court and had the best of the medical knowledge of his day. The Jewish people were so competent and intelligent that many of the Muslim caliphates employed them as physicians, translators, or advisors. They entered into the best of the knowledge and culture of the time and branched out into science, medicine, secular poetry, music, mathematics, and linguistics. From the tenth to the twelfth centuries, the Arabic language was the primary vehicle for Jewish contributions in the sciences, such as medicine, astronomy. This is the era in which a newly positive attitude toward science was implanted in the Jewish mind.

The Arabic people have great love for their language, almost a love affair with it. Sometimes they write it in a big circle. You have seen some of the Arabic calligraphy art work. And when they talk they love to wax eloquent and can talk circles around you in discussions. In this period, the Jews adopted this same attitude toward Hebrew and began a love relationship with Hebrew the way the Arabs loved Arabic. Coming out of this era were thousands of Hebrew poems, and not just religious poems, but poems about romantic love, nature, wine, and secular themes.

Another development during this time was Kabbalistic mysticism. Arab traders and Jewish merchants had contact with India, and influence from Hinduism was coming into the Arab world. The Jewish people picked that up and developed the Kabbalah, which has a lot of Hindu thinking in it but with Hebrew/Jewish terminology and veneer. The mystic Abraham Abulafia (1240-1291), was a major figure in the development of the Kabbalah. The book called "The Zohar" is the major Kabbalistic text. This was not a positive development because it represented a syncretism with Hindu and non-Biblical, non-Hebraic thought.

There's been a modern resurgence of Kabbalah among Jewish people in the West, since people in the materialistic West are more and more hungry for spiritual experience.

**4) The Renaissance Jews.** The fourth encounter was in Italy and with the astonishing Italian Renaissance (1400-1700). According to Patai, Italian Jewry is the oldest in Europe among the still existing Jewish communities. Jews first settled in Rome in the second century B.C. There had been many expulsions from the city states of Italy during the medieval period. The Jews were persecuted during the Middle Ages, and if not expelled, were forced into their own areas. The word "ghetto" so often associated with Jewish people, is an Italian word. Many Marranos and Sephardic Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition migrated into Italy.

Jewish people seem to be present, and often to be at the vortex of, the most significant historical-cultural movements. And so it was in the Renaissance. Here for the first time, the Jewish people fully entered into the totality of an alien culture. Italy was the point of brilliance, the hot spot of civilization, and the Jewish people have always been attracted to that because of their giftedness. So they began to use the Italian language. They participated in all the cultural activities, including the vices, of the secular Renaissance world: not only medicine and science and literature but also sports and the vices- gambling and alcohol.

The significance of this period in the formation of the Jewish mind is that it was then that the balance of Jewish involvement shifted from the age-old continuity of religious, Jewish, talmudic learning, to predominantly secular and humanistic cultural pursuits. They were times of a relative reduction of persecution of the Jews, and the consequent social mixing between Jews and Christians meant for a weakening of Jewish religious observance.

**5) Jewish Dionysians: The Hasidim.** The fifth major encounter of the Jewish people with their gentile environment was set in Eastern Europe, especially Poland. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, four-fifths of all Jewish people lived in central and Eastern Europe and the Ukraine. These Askenazis were not as cultured and sophisticated as the Sephardis of the Arab period. Two of the gods of Greek mythology were Dionysus, called Bacchus in Latin, and Apollo. Dionysus was the god of wine and represented the sensual tradition of drinking, revelry, orgies, ecstasy, and emotional expression. Apollo represented the rigid, strict, disciplined, ascetic, rationalistic tradition. Patai, in the tradition of Nietzsche and followed by anthropologist Ruth Benedict, uses these two gods as a typology for two poles of cultural religious expression. For centuries the Jewish tradition was primarily Apollonian, the study of not only the Tanach (Old Testament) but the Mishna, Gemara, and Talmud, volumes upon volumes of Jewish law and religious tradition.

Enter upon the scene a charismatic Jewish leader named Israel Ba'al Shem Tov (1699-1760), usually known by the acrostic of his name, the "BeShT." He reacted against this arid Talmudic, "Apollonian" tradition, and taught that what God wanted was not asceticism and mortification of the flesh, but devotion, enthusiasm, and passion. He founded the Hasidic movement, the Jewish equivalent of Pentecostals or charismatics. They represent a "Dionysian" reaction movement within Judaism. They emphasized the immanence of God and the joy of His presence. They sought ecstatic experience with God, which they expressed in fervent devotion, by dancing and singing enthusiastically. This movement took place primarily in Eastern Europe, and the language they developed was Yiddish, a mixture of German and Hebrew written in Hebrew script. The Jews of Eastern Europe in Russia spoke this language for centuries, and it has continued to this day. Most of the older Ashkenazi immigrants to modern Israel speak Yiddish.

During this fifth encounter the Jews absorbed elements of Polish folk religion from the society around them, which added to their mysticism. They believed in the "divine spark" inherent in man, and assimilated elements of Kabbalistic thought. Dynasties of Hasidic "Rebbs" were established, and most of these communities lived very separatistic lives, in ghettos, with their black clothes, the men with the long "payess" side curls, women with shaved head and wigs.

There was an opposing movement within the Orthodox community, however, called the "Mitnagdim" (the opposers), who thought that all this experience orientation was displacing Torah study.

The "ChaBaD" movement (an acrostic from the Hebrew words for Wisdom, Understanding and Knowledge) is the most well known branch of the Hasidim in the West today. You will find a Chabad office in most major cities in the America today. In the mid 1990s, their leader, The Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, of the Brooklyn

Lubachitcher Hasidim, was believed by his devotees to be the Messiah. Then he died and didn't rise from the dead. Some of his devoted followers still believe he will.

You may have seen photos of orthodox Jews dancing around the Torah, or at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. This image comes out of the Hasidic movement, and has largely mainstreamed in Orthodox Judaism of today. This emphasis on joy, enthusiasm, and spiritual experience with God is a lasting legacy of this encounter.

**6) The Enlightenment: Triumph and Tragedy.** The sixth and final encounter of our scheme was with the European Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is called the "Haskalah in Hebrew. It was both a triumph and a tragedy for the Jewish people. The triumph is as follows. Throughout their long Diaspora history, they were denied citizenship, persecuted, expelled from the cities of Europe and killed. They suffered under pogroms, crusades, and inquisitions. That was because in Christendom the church and state were fused, and one had to be baptized into the Catholic Church in order to be part of society. Because the Jews refused to be baptized they were a rejected, outcast, exiled, made to be scapegoats, and a pariah people living in ghettos on the borders of society. They were not allowed to own land or join professional guilds. One of the only occupations open to them was money lending, thus the stereotype of Jewish money-grubbing moneylenders.

But with the 18th-century Enlightenment and all of its new political thinking—Locke, human rights, social contract, the American Revolution, the French Revolution—the Jews were finally emancipated, set free from their pariah status and accepted as full citizens of the new European nation states. Napoleon even met with the rabbis of the Jewish community in Paris to grant them equal rights and citizenship. They could now own land, hold professions, and be considered equal to everyone else. This was the triumph. This triumph was reversed however under the Nazi reign and the Holocaust. But until then, it was a triumph for the Jewish people. It is known as "Emancipation."

One effect of this was the burst of Jewish creative intellectual activity in virtually all fields. For centuries the Jewish people had been habituated to the study of Scripture and tradition. They were called “the people of the book,” not only because of *The Book* (the Bible) but books in general. It was as if, suddenly this pent-up energy and love of learning burst forth out of the dam of only religious studies and into all fields of study. They transferred their love of study to the natural sciences, the developing social sciences, and the humanities, and they excelled. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> and to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the cumulative influence of three Jewish thinkers basically created the plausibility structure for the 20<sup>th</sup> century- Marx, Freud, and Einstein.

But now, the tragedy of the Enlightenment was this- that it brought about privatization, fragmentation, and assimilation. Let me explain. The essential Jewish core that had been with them from the time of Moses and their formation as a people until this time had consisted of two beliefs and two duties. The beliefs were that 1) YHWH is the One True God, and 2) Israel is His covenant people. The duties were 1) to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and 2) to love your neighbor as yourself. Now, during the Enlightenment this core suffered major erosion. Society was becoming secularized, Christianity was declining and becoming increasingly nominal and privatized. This process was mirrored in Judaism, which also became increasingly nominal and privatized. This was an opportunity for the Jewish people, who due to their religion had been marginalized in Christendom, to find greater integration with gentile society.

Greater division and fragmentation occurred among the Jewish people. There was division and hostility between those who wanted to embrace the Enlightenment and those who wanted to remain traditional Jews. Many Jews were so enamored with the brilliance of Enlightenment culture and philosophy that they didn't want to identify as Jews any more. By the time of the Holocaust the German Jews wanted to think of themselves first as Germans and second as Jews. They loved German culture and thought of themselves as the best Germans. Thus they began to be assimilated. Moses

Mendelsohn, the leader of the Reform Jewish movement in Germany, expressed the thought of many 'maskilim" (Haskalah Jews), *"To be a Jew at home, and a man abroad!"*

Reform Judaism sought to adapt to, and accommodate modernity. The popular novels by Chaim Potok, The Chosen, (also a motion picture) and My Name is Asher Lev, illustrate well the conflict and struggle of traditional Jews impacted by modernity, and the forces of assimilation working on the Jewish people. I highly recommend Potok's works. The effects of this era are very much still in process today, at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The new languages were simply the national languages of each country: English, French, German, etc. Again, the lasting effects were the terrible shrinkage of the Jewish core, the shattering of their unity, privatization, fragmentation, and assimilation.

**The Trend of Jewish History.** The overall trend of Jewish history throughout the millennia is a gradual loosening of Jewish religious and cultural ethnocentricity:

- The Hellenic Jews had more in common with the Greek pagans than the Israelites did with the Canaanites.
- The Arabized Sephardic Jews had more in common with Arab culture than the Hellenic Jews had with the Greek.
- The Jews during the Renaissance were more imbued with the Renaissance spirit than the Sephardic Jews were with Arab and Spanish culture.
- The Hasidim absorbed more Gentile religious elements than any of their ancestors had.

-And during the Enlightenment the essential Jewish core experienced its greatest shrinkage as the age-old cultural continuum of Talmudic learning broke up, and the European Enlightenment added to the indifference or hostility toward religion. Mirroring a reductionist, nominal Christianity, the Jews gradually accepted a reductionist, nominal Judaism. Unforeseen damaging consequences were to follow. An honest observer in the

first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, might predict that the Jewish people as a people were on the way to total assimilation and disappearance from history.

But this was not to be the end of the story. God will not allow the Jewish people to lose their identity. Despite the ravages of modernity on Jewish identity, God in his sovereign purposes, has not and will not allow the Jewish people to assimilate and disappear. As the apostle Paul said, *“Has God rejected His people? God forbid!”* (Romans 11:1). Ezekiel 20, a very important and remarkable chapter, gives us a panoramic overview of Israel’s history from the Egyptian period to the end of this age. We understand from this chapter that God will move to thwart the attempted assimilation of Jewish people. During the Babylonian Exile, this word came from God to Ezekiel the prophet,

*“And shall I be inquired of by you, O House of Israel? As I live”, declares the LORD GOD, “I will not be inquired of by you. And what you have in mind will never happen. And when you say, ‘We want to be like the nations, like the peoples of the world, who serve wood and stone’, As I live”, declares the LORD GOD, surely with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm and with wrath outpoured, I shall be king over you. And I will bring you from the nations and gather you from the countries where you have been scattered... .”* (Ezekiel 20:31-34)

This prophecy was **not** fulfilled in the return from the Babylonian Exile, contrary to what most Bible commentaries will tell you. We know this because this prophecy was given to the Jewish people when they were in Babylon. And to them, there, God says, *“...and I shall bring you into the wilderness of the peoples, and there I shall enter into judgment with you face to face.”* (Ezekiel 20:35). God says He will bring them from where they are, Babylon, out into *“the wilderness of the peoples.”* This can only refer to

the great worldwide Diaspora of the last 2, 500 years. A very small minority of the Jewish people returned to Israel after the Exile. Most stayed in Babylon or migrated to other countries. And then of course after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD by the Romans, nearly all the Jewish people who survived were back out into *“the wilderness of the peoples.”*

I understand this as describing what happened in the Holocaust. When German Jews were in danger of complete assimilation into the European melting pot, God by sovereign force. *“with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm”* plucked them out of Europe and brought them back to the land of Israel. God used the wickedness of Satan, Hitler, and the Nazis, and the complex of forces that resulted from their disobedience and unbelief that caused them to be in Europe, to thwart their assimilation and bring them back into the land of Israel.

History shows that whenever the Jews sought to lose their identity in the melting pots of the nations, God sovereignly acted to prevent it. He will not allow them to evade His irrevocable covenant purposes (Romans 11:28-29). Out of the ashes of the Holocaust, when world sympathy for a Jewish homeland was high, the UN voted for the establishment of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948. Since then, Jewish people from the “four corners of the earth” have been returning to Zion.

Usually anti-Semitism reminded them that they were Jews. During the Communist period in Russia the Jews were nearly assimilated. They were forbidden to study Judaism or even the Hebrew language. But Russian anti-Semitism reminded them that they were Jews, because they were persecuted as Jews. With the coming of Glasnost and Gorbachev and the collapse of Communism, over four million Russian Jews immigrated to Israel.

According to Ezekiel 36, there is a two stage restoration of the Jewish people, first back to the Land, in unbelief (Ezekiel 36:1-24). Then, God will give them *“a new heart and new spirit”* and *“put His Spirit in them”* (36:26-27). This can only mean

regeneration through faith in Jesus the Jewish Messiah. Both the physical restoration to the land, and the spiritual restoration to God through the Messiah are presently underway as we speak. New Jewish immigrants continue to return to Israel, and the Messianic Jewish movement in Israel is growing. The people of God should look for and pray for the fulfillment of the promise, *“All Israel shall be saved,”* (Romans 11:26). English poet Robert Browning, writing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was very prescient,

*“The Lord will have mercy on Jacob yet  
And again in his borders see Israel set.  
When Judah beholds Jerusalem,  
The stranger seed shall be joined to them.  
To Jacob’s house shall the gentiles cleave,  
So the prophet says, and his sons believe.*

**Jewish Ethnic Character.** We looked at the six major encounters of the Jewish people with the Gentile world that have formed the Jewish mind. But we haven’t looked at their product, that is- the Jewish ethnic character. What are the national characteristics of the Jewish people today? There are four elements that are characteristic of nearly all Jewish people, despite their great diversity.

1) **Jewish Intelligence.** They make up .04% percent of humanity but have received 15% of Nobel prizes. Rafael Patai states that wherever IQ tests have been administered, Jewish people always, as a group, get higher scores. There are environmental and hereditary factors for this. Throughout their long history, the Jewish people have had the biblical values of strong family, love of children, and love of learning. Over centuries those values have helped preserve the best in them. Children were provided much stimulation and learning. A Jewish friend, who is now a Messianic Jewish author, told me that her parents would always say, “Get a good education. It is

the one thing they cannot take from you.” Also, the extreme adversity due to persecution over the centuries, and exposure to so many cultures, cause the Jewish group mind to be flexed and stimulated, kind of like when a muscle is worked it gets stronger. We could say the “intellectual muscles” of the Jewish people were extremely well exercised over the centuries, trying to survive by their wits. This likely had a positive effect on their group intelligence.

Furthermore, throughout Christian history in Europe, where did the best minds of Christendom end up? Monasteries and convents. They didn’t pass on their genes, because they didn’t get married. Where did the best minds of the Jewish people end up? With the best match they could get, the neighboring rabbi’s daughter married the other neighboring rabbi’s son. The genes of intelligence were passed on, generation after generation. After hundreds of years the level of Jewish intelligence rose but the level of Gentile Christian intelligence declined! That’s a debatable theory, based on natural selection theory, but it is worth consideration. It may well be an explanatory factor in the generally high Jewish intelligence.

2) **Jewish Special Talents.** Jewish people have been especially talented verbally: communication, linguistics, the legal profession, etc. Most of the older Jewish people in Israel speak five or six languages. Most Jews today, except for American Jews, speak two or three languages. Some of the greatest journalists of history have been Jews; Theodore Herzl, the visionary founder of the modern state of Israel, was a journalist. The founding fathers of American cinema were almost all Jewish. Universal Pictures, Paramount Pictures, Fox Film Corporation, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Warner Brothers were all founded by a group of Jewish immigrants, fresh off the boat from Eastern Europe. Samuel Goldwyn’s real name before Americanization was Schmueel Gelbfisz. Louis B Mayer’s was Lazar Meir.

The people working in the entertainment industry in Hollywood today are still predominantly Jewish. Think of Stephen Spielberg, and his partners in “Dreamworks,

SKG” (Spielberg, Kateszenberg and Geffen). All are Jewish. Think of actors and performers like George Burns, The Marx Brothers, Kirk Douglas, Barbra Streisand, Dustin Hoffman, Neil Diamond, Bob Dylan, who are Jewish, and many others.

Jewish people excel in music, often because for a long time in places in Europe it was one of the only arts open to them, and in business and finance, again because it was thrust upon them. The most influential social, economic and political thinker of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (for better or for worse)- Karl Marx, the formulator of our knowledge of the physical world, who discovered the theory of relativity- Albert Einstein, and the dominant theorist of the inner life of the mind- Sigmund Freud, were all Jewish. Marx, who wished he weren't Jewish, was the father of Communism. Freud, who hated his father's "weak" Jewish religion, was the father of modern psychology. And Einstein, who accepted his Jewish identity, is the father of modern physics.

3) **Jewish Self-Rejection.** I do not want to exaggerate this phenomenon. It is most likely a minority of Jewish people that are characterized by this, but it is real. A lot of people think Jewish people are arrogant and proud, and many of them are, like Gentiles. Some of them may seem to you aloof or "clannish" if you're a Gentile. But if you get to know Jewish people, you find that many of them feel a lot of inferiority and conflict with their identity. Marx and Freud typify this. After centuries of anti-Semitism, many Jewish people internalized the negative Gentile stereotype of the Jew, and some began to believe that perhaps it is true- "The Gentiles are right; there is something wrong with us." Consequently, many of them wish they weren't Jewish, suffering the results of rejection, turned inward. In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye says, "*The Chosen People? God, why don't you choose someone else for a while?*" Or Groucho Marx's quip, "*I would never join a club that would accept me as a member.*" Because of this background of rejection, Jewish people especially respond to genuine love and acceptance. This is they key to their hearts more than argumentation.

4) **Central Values.** Though these have eroded since the Enlightenment, they are still strong: **family, education, and charity.** To illustrate Jewish family values, think of the “Jewish mother” stereotype- that she loves her son so much, believes her son is the greatest, and is so protective. Being careful not to be irreverent, a joke illustrates this: “How do we know that Jesus was a Jew? He stayed at home until he was 30, he took up the family business, he thought his mother was a virgin, and she thought he was God”. Another joke to illustrate their value of education: “In the Roman Catholic view a person is a fetus until he is born. In the Jewish view he is a fetus until he graduates from medical school.” They value higher education and high achievement. They are not called the “People of the Book” for nothing. Finally charity: “love your neighbor as yourself.” Jewish people have always been great humanitarians and philanthropists, and when they make money in the West they often give much to charity.

**Who is a Jew?** This is a question still debated in Israel today. Under the “Law of Return”, by which immigrants are accepted as Jewish and receive citizenship- If your mother is Jewish, you’re Jewish. But is being a Jew solely an issue of ethnicity? No, there are Jewish people from every culture. There are fair haired Swedish Jews. There are black skinned Ethiopian Jews. Is it an issue solely of religion? No, because there are atheist Jews, Buddhist Jews, etc. Is it a matter of biology? No, there are Jewish people of every race. You can be born Gentile and convert to Judaism. And there are some people born of Jewish parents who don’t identify as Jews, who marry gentiles, and refuse to raise their children as Jewish.

Thus, a combination of any of these factors may be enough to define who is a Jew, but not any one factor alone can comprise Jewish identity. Perhaps, in the end,

*“He is a Jew who considers himself one and so is considered by the Jewish community”*—(David Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of the modern State of Israel).

That seems a rather weak definition, no? . Messianic Jews today are rejected as Jews by Rabbinic Judaism, and much of the mainstream Jewish community. So acceptance by the Jewish community cannot be a sole criterion of Jewish identity. There is no one center, or institution that has the authority to arbitrate who is a Jew. Ultimately, it is God-given. He is the authoritative arbiter of Jewish identity. But consider this one,

*“He or she is a Jew who will have Jewish grandchildren.”*

(unknown origin)

If someone values his or her Jewish identity enough that he or she teaches his or her children to be Jews well enough that they will teach their children to be Jews; if they so value the inculcating of Jewish identity strongly enough that they will have Jewish grandchildren, they are Jewish. I think that sums it up pretty well.

*\* And now that we have finished, go back and discuss each of the quotes about the Jewish people from the beginning of this lecture, and see what insights you gain.*

### **Summary of the Six Eras, and the Three Cultural Activities in Common in Each**

#### 1) Israel and Canaan

- 1) Language- Hebrew
- 2) Learning- Literary and agricultural techniques, religious syncretism
- 3) Legacy- The Hebrew Scriptures

2) Hebrews and Hellenes

- 1) Language- Greek
- 2) Learning- Systemization of doctrine
- 3) Legacy- The Septuagint

3) Hebrew Arabesque

- 1) Language- Arabic, Spanish, Ladino
- 2) Learning- Sciences, language arts
- 3) Legacy- First branching out into secular fields, Kabbalah

4) The Renaissance Jews

- 1) Language- Italian
- 2) Learning- Medicine, liberal arts
- 3) Legacy- Balance of cultural activity shifted to the secular

5) Jewish Dionysians: The Hasidim

- 1) Language- Yiddish
- 2) Learning- Experiential religion
- 3) Legacy- Folk religion

6) The Enlightenment: Triumph and Tragedy

- 1) Language- Languages of the nation states of their emancipation
- 2) Learning- Excelled in many fields of modern thought
- 3) Legacy- Cultural and scientific achievements, with Jewish disunity and assimilation, Holocaust, revival of the Hebrew language, and rebirth of the State of Israel.

