

What is Jewish culture?

There are a myriad of ways to adapt culture to reflect Jewish life and values

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Judaism, understood as the creative culture of a living Jewish people, raises a number of important questions.

How can we recognize Jewish culture? Are there essential elements defining either “Jewish” or “culture”? Can we find distinctive, even unique features that identify Jewish culture?

If Judaism is culture, what, in short, makes Jewish culture Jewish, and Jewish culture, culture? In our co-edited anthology, *The Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization, Volume 10: 1973-2005*, we argue in favor of a deliberately pluralist view of Jewish culture and correspondingly expansive portrait of Jewish peoplehood. One must look neither for essential elements of Jewishness nor for critical features of culture. Instead, we propose that Jews take culture and make it Jewish in various ways: through language, production, references, reception, uses. Using these criteria, we explore diverse texts reflecting a broad understanding of culture, including high and low, elite and popular, folk and mass.

In the last 50 years, Judaism has increasingly crossed boundaries of language, place and states – becoming transnational in scope. While Jews living in Israel and the United States have come to dominate the production of Jewish culture, this has accompanied an openness to new sources. The voices of Jewish women have acquired prominence and influence, contributing to the complexity of Jewish culture and challenging older modes of Judaism. Indeed, we prefer to speak of transnational Jewish cultures, given the extensive migrations occurring during these decades.

Heterogeneity characterizes these cultures, with many competing narratives articulated by diverse Jewish segments of societies. These coexisting narratives often clash, producing counter narratives and efforts to marginalize groups with their stories. And yet, eventually, this diversity and even multiculturalism of Judaism functions as a shield from different kinds of cultural seclusion, national radicalization, exclusion of minorities and kinds of negation of the other.

In this respect, Judaism as Jewish culture maintains its role as a universal ethical compass. This ethical aspect of Judaism is especially important today, with the rise of hatred and violence, demonization and exclusion among groups. Searches for identity and origins have acquired a new urgency, stimulating alternative ways of thinking about history and the past. Our work reflects these innovative approaches, integrating visual texts into historical scholarship and exploring the meanings of memory at the intersection of history and fiction.

In Israel, the gradual demise of the vision of the new Hebrew man and decline of some hegemonic ideologies of the Zionist social movement has encouraged a search for both something to be labeled tradition as well as a revival of messianism. Turning toward the past has forced many Jews to confront the Holocaust again and to attempt to decipher its meanings and lessons for themselves as individuals and as a collectivity. At the same time, decline of hegemonic ideologies provided space for the telling, describing and working through of narratives, histories and traumatic experiences of immigration and acclimatization of different groups and sub-cultures in Israeli society: immigrants, Jews descended from Islamic countries, Ethiopia, Russia –

each with its own unique cultures, memories and traditions.

In the United States, greater acceptance of Jews as individuals and declining anti-Semitism promoted active Jewish involvement in shaping American culture. Jews participated not only as Americans but also as Jews, finding broad interest in Jewish life and religion among diverse Americans. In Israel, these trends found expression in an embrace of cosmopolitanism, especially in times where tensions around national security were low. These patterns of inclusion, however, accompanied the rise of anti-Zionism, especially in Europe and South America, which often spilled over into a new anti-Semitism on both the right and left, reviving old stereotypes of Jews as master manipulators of the world’s politics and economy.

GENRES OF Jewish creativity expanded in the late 20th century, influenced by historical events and social changes. Film, an industry in which Jews had worked for decades, increasingly explored specific Jewish issues and pictured Jews as characters. With the transformation of film festivals into a major force in the introduction and dissemination of movies as well as with the consolidation of global cinema, Jewish – especially Israeli – cinema opened to deal with universal subjects and found a cultural and economic base outside its country of origin.

These opportunities provided Israeli cinema with possibilities to disconnect from ethnocentric nationalistic narratives. Children’s literature blossomed, tackling themes that reached audiences of Jewish and non-Jewish children. With the rise of television, popular culture exploded across the globe and turned millions into potential consumers.

Jews adapted many of these new media to express Jewish concerns and influence Jews. Websites, advertising, cartoons and comics – not to mention collectibles and sports – all became sites of Jewish creativity and imagination. Most recently, the Internet



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gives many a chance to experiment, to present themselves, to fashion a video series unconstrained by older norms of censorship. Judaism has flourished here as well, erasing state borders and boundaries of place and even minimizing barriers of language.

The postmodern emphasis on subjectivity stimulated a turn to memoir among Jews throughout the world. Interest in the experience of minorities fueled a willingness of many writers to write in the first person. Often their writings crossed boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, politics and autobiography. This new style of collage was read as expressive not only of individual subjectivity but also of collective experience.

Yet personal truths were often imagined and shaped by literary demands. At times, Jewish versions of universal experiences – whether coping with coming of age, migration, dislocation and death – spoke to broad audiences who sought in the specific accounts ways to understand contemporary society. At other times, Jewish experiences of extreme suffering, such as in Holocaust memoirs, tried to make the inaccessible understandable.

The phenomenon of crossover, blurring distinctions between popular and elite modes of culture, flourished especially in music. Long a genre of Jewish expression, Jewish music expanded, intersecting with popular, folk and technological cultures. Crossover possibilities appeared as well in synagogue compositions that employed techniques associated with folk, popular, rock, and classical modes. Singers and composers

discovered audiences in concert halls and on stage and then were adopted by congregations. Feminism made its mark in *hazzanut* as women entered the ranks of cantors. Rock music proved particularly amenable to national variations.

Although developed and marketed around the globe by the United States, wherever it was adopted by indigenous performers they modified its attributes. In Israel, the main musical-cultural contest was conducted between Mizrahi popular music versus the hegemony of Israeli-Ashkenazi popular music, whether in the form of military groups, songs of Eretz Israel, or Western rock and pop.

Another Jewish way of life centered on an extensive array of popular culture including engagement with leisure activities (sports, games, attending museums, comedy clubs) and the aesthetics of daily life (cooking, fashion, collecting curios, surfing the Internet). These constitute fundamentally new ways of realizing Judaism individually and communally. In addition, popular culture has become an important proving ground for contemporary Jewish life, a locus of burgeoning creativity that is driven less by official agendas than by personal desires.

Yet even as such new cultural forms appeared, traditional modes of Judaism endured. Poetry and prose, religious writing and philosophy, political and social thought, all served as vehicles of Jewish interpretation. In Israel, literature continues to play a central role in supporting pluralist worldviews, which provide space to strains of Zionism and nationalism as well as to universal humanistic positions, and to voices of different cultural minorities.

Performance and visual arts represented areas in which Jews experimented both with new genres as well as continuing past practices.

As Judaism engaged the world, the world reciprocated. All sorts of people discovered Judaism. Jewish mysticism, especially interest in Kabbalah, attracted many people, Jews and gentiles. Jewish mysticism also drew strength from the popularity of new age religions and the possibilities of fusion with such practices as Buddhist meditation. A search for spirituality connected Jews, and at times Judaism, with mystical trends around the world.

Similarly as a new generation rediscovered the Bible, fresh translations and methods for studying it appeared. Jewish modes of interpretation, especially *midrash*, crossed over into the secular academy as did appreciation of the Bible as a literary text.

Judaism has flourished in many expressive forms during the past half century, registering in our own work and in the work of the Posen Foundation. Despite different languages, Jewish cultures synthesize multiple perspectives and viewpoints. Many Jewish works, in fact, bear few if any distinguishing Jewish marks because Jews have often contributed as individuals to the societies of which they are a part.

Instead, these universal works engage in dialogue with more explicit Jewish texts, sometimes sharing common sensibilities and tensions, and other times standing in opposition. The opening of opportunities for Jewish expression to Jews from all backgrounds – women as well as men – and the corresponding expansion of genres of Jewish creativity, signify the blossoming of a democratic Judaism, far less fettered by constraints than in the past. ❖

Nurith Gertz and Deborah Dash Moore have been engaging with the many aspects of Jewish culture for years. The latter's study of urban Judaism in the United States integrates photography as subject and interpretive resource into historical scholarship. The former's research deals with the history of Judaism and Zionism, focusing on the myths, traumas, memories and dreams driving and directing this history.