JUDAISM AS AN EXAMPLE OF COUNTERCULTURE:
HOW THE JEWISH ETHNO-RELIGION HAS SURVIVED FOR MILLENNIA

By

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Abstract

Through a series of five case studies spanning Jewish history from the Bible to Modernity, this paper details the various ways in which Judaism in an example of counterculture within broader global social structures. Looking into Judaism through lenses spanning the lives of key Biblical figures like Avraham, the revolts occurring during the Second Temple, post-Temple Rabbinic Judaism dictated by liturgy and Jewish law, Medieval persecution of Jews, or modern issues of antisemitism, this thesis takes a deep dive into the many ways Judaism could have fizzled out and why it has persevered. Jewish peoplehood is incredibly nuanced, further proven by the fact that the combination of communal ties and faith in God have perpetually spurred the ethno-religion’s survival. The Jewish case is extraordinary and uncommon because its continuation is directly correlated to the idea that other people want to destroy it. The counterintuitive nature of Jewish resistance of assimilation has caused it to be the most premiere example of counterculture.
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Statement of Purpose

I have chosen to write about a subject that is very close to my heart as a Jewish person in America, and as someone who has spent the last four years majoring in Judaic Studies. I am writing this Honors Thesis to explore the contention that Judaism is countercultural—that it goes against the grain of dominant, mainstream cultures and societies—and to explain how that has led to the ethno-religion’s perpetual ability to not only survive, but to thrive.

I decided to write about this topic after taking a class last year which was offered to alumni of my high school. The subject of the class was Judaism’s countercultural nature. Before I took that class, I had never felt that I had possessed the right words to express the feeling of otherness that I have experienced as a Jewish person living in the United States, where the general culture is based upon the Christian calendar and on many Christian values, as well as on a notion of ethnic neutrality, when in fact normative American culture is very English (and “White”) at its core.

I grew up attending Jewish day school and rarely worried about how my cultural observances would be perceived by the people around me. However, after coming to the University of Arizona, to a learning environment where Jews are a minority, I have struggled to find outlets through which I can express the Jewishness of my identity. So too, I have found it difficult to find a balance between my social life among non-Jewish peers and maintaining Jewish holiday observances within a distinctly Jewish way of life. I have found myself in positions where I have been the only Jewish person in a given space and have had to speak out and advocate from a Jewish perspective, at times educating my peers about various Jewish traditions and observances. I have seen inconsistencies between my own and my Jewish peers’ levels of Jewish knowledge and observance, and had peers, both Jewish and non-Jewish, seek out my advice or knowledge because they view me as knowledgeable on the topic of “being Jewish”. The maintenance of Judaism and its traditions is of utmost importance to me which is why I decided to explore the idea that its will to survive comes from its cultural essence as it has developed in conscious distinction from the non-Jewish mainstream.
Introduction

In an 1867 article published by *The National Jewish Post & Observer*, Mark Twain was quoted saying “all things are mortal but the Jews; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?”. Judaism is unique because it is the oldest continuously existing monotheistic religion, but many Jews argue that Judaism is not a religion at all, rather it is a peoplehood, a nation. Judaism is a four thousand year-old ethno-religion whose people have survived on the basis of their ability to know when to resist outside pressures, when acculturate, and to what degree. There is a constant push and pull that has determined, and still determines the degree of Jewish resistance and assimilation. Through my research on the idea of Judaism as countercultural, I have come to define the term as any actions undertaken by a population that go against the grain of precedents set by an encroaching authority and/or the social majority. This is the definition upon which I will argue that Judaism is innately countercultural and that the act of counterculture has led to its survival.

In this paper I will examine how external forces have pushed Judaism to create a system of counterculture. I will do this by analyzing five case studies. The cases will examine Biblical, Second Temple Era, Rabbinic, Medieval, and Modern Judaism. I will argue that from antiquity to the present there have been distinctly Jewish cultural identifiers that exist within Jewish texts and are mirrored in material evidence as well as in Jewish behaviors. By looking at these identifiers I will demonstrate how Jews have developed the identity of *Am Yisrael*¹ as an entity that is comprised of two important parts, an ethnicity, and a religious ideology. These elements, I will show, are intrinsically countercultural; in addition, they make the Jewish people unique because it is not just a people or a religion, but a unique ethno-religion—a combination of two

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¹ The Nation of Israel
distinct aspects that make up Jewish peoplehood. This ethno-religious identity is a resilient force that is directly anchored within Jewish history as an expression of a countercultural self-image that has become a reflexive survival mechanism.

To dissect the ways in which Judaism is countercultural I have broken down my broader definition of counterculture into four thematic categories—Judaism’s cultivation of differences in their religious or cultural practices and how that disruption of political precedents, including challenges to the cultural resiliency of the Jews; Jews’ questioning of the cultural assumptions of another group or groups; and the Jews’ formulation and inculcation of a distinctive way of life through which they practice and hold different values and observances than those of the majority. Through the analysis of pivotal events that are reflected in canonical Jewish texts and other sources I will dissect how the Jewish people have thought and acted in a countercultural manner, and how they have also behaved in consonance with the mainstream yet retaining their particularity. The overarching challenge implicit in these behavioral phenomena is one of finding balance between assimilation and self-preservation, a balance that, as I will show, has greatly contributed to the survival of Jewish peoplehood.

In the pages that follow I am going to examine different examples of Jewish counterculture within broader global civilization through five case studies. The first case study will focus on the *Tanach*\(^2\); it will look at various cases within the Hebrew Bible where the Israelites went out of their way and even put their lives at risk to reject practices of assimilation. In this section I will discuss idolatry as the most significant Israelite concept of a culture that is other, dominant, or threatening. The second section will discuss threats to Am Yisrael during the fall of the First and Second Temples, and the ultimate expulsion of many Judeans to the Diaspora

\(^2\) Tanach is the Hebrew acronym for the bible’s three parts, Torah (the 5 books of Moses), Nevi’im (the books of the prophets), and Ketuvim (the book of writings—including *The Book of Esther, Psalms and Proverbs*).
in 70 CE. The next section will cover the Rabbinic period and discuss the redefinition of Judaism in a post-Temple world outside the Jewish homeland that attended the Rabbis’ interpretation of *Halacha*. The fourth case will highlight Medieval Judaism, including the Jewish experience during the Spanish Inquisition, the Crusades, and the life of Jews in the Ottoman Empire. The fifth case study will explore modernity and how today’s Jewish customs, practices, and culture exist across a spectrum of observances and connections to Jewish peoplehood.
Case Study 1: Biblical Judaism

The *Tanach* is full of cases where biblical figures are faced with the choice to either risking their lives or doing something that goes against their values, laws, and practices (the three of which the Hebrew Bible often presents as coextensive). These cases involve acts by proto-Israelite or Israelite protagonists that exhibit a strong leaning toward countercultural behavior, often through the protagonists’ pushing against the limits of a higher power. Other cases are acts of self-preservation where a biblical figure pretends to be an idolater in order to save his or her own life. Sometimes there are even cases where Am Yisrael acts counter to Israelite culture out of fear, sometimes even questioning God’s existence. There are times when Biblical figures exist in a dichotomy between cultures and resolve this dichotomy by bridging a former cultural affiliation and a new Israelite identity. In every case—even when a biblical figure has to assimilate to a surrounding culture = in order to survive—these stories end with the continuation of ideal, Israelite culture due to, or in spite of the actions that the protagonists take.

The examples that I will discuss in this section are, Abraham and Sarah, Ruth, and Queen Esther. This chapter will analyze these cases by focusing on the four above-mentioned aspects of countercultural thought and action as these are reflected in the story of each individual figure. Because this chapter deals with normative texts, I will be discussing how each of them has shaped Jewish cultural and religious practices.

THE CULTIVATION OF DIFFERENCES THAT DISRUPT POLITICAL PRECEDENTS:

Throughout the *Tanach*, the People of Israel have to find a balance between the political rule of a governing body or other human authority, and the ultimate power and requirements of God’s³ laws. Whether living in Egypt, Persia, or Canaan, the Israelites of the Biblical narratives

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³ Throughout this paper God will be referenced as God without gendered pronouns
encounter authorities that demand respect even while the Israelites represent and practice a system of beliefs that differs from that of the mainstream culture of those who hold political power. This segment of the Book of Bereshit (Genesis) that many Jews today know by its opening phrase, lech lecha, details the story of a man named Avram’s journey to the Land of Canaan. Here, God speaks to Avram, saying, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”

God further promises Avram that He (God) will make a great nation from Avram, and make Avram’s name great, and bless him. This event catalyzes Avram’s journey. The journey requires that Avram leave his father’s land at the whim of a God who makes unprecedented and unconventional promises. Notably, these promises go directly against the grain of an inherently patriarchal middle eastern cultural system. As [scholar X] observes, the culture of ancient Mesopotamia, Avram’s supposed land of origin, was paternalistic. It dictated that a son live on his father’s land, which had been passed from father to son for generations. Indeed, that culture tended to assume the existence of very close-knit ties between men and their familial ancestral lands. The idea of moving somewhere completely new was almost unheard of, but the biblical narrative has it that Avram and his wife, Sarai, did it because a deity spoke to Avram and told him to go. Again, this move went completely against the political and social precedents of ancient Mesopotamia,

As if to push the boundaries of propriety even further, God commands Avram to confirm his loyalty in both verbal and tangible, physical terms. At “ninety-nine years old, God appeared to Avram and said to him, ‘I am El Shaddai. Walk in My ways and be blameless I will establish

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4 translates as a commanding form “go forth”
5 Genesis
6 Gen. 12:1
My covenant between Me and you”⁷. Not only did God directly communicate with Avram; God also commanded him to become circumcised and to circumcise all the males of his household. Further God made promises to him that he would be “exceedingly numerous” and informed him he would be called Avrahem and his wife would be Sarah from that point on. Later, in classic Biblical fashion, God decides to test Avrahem’s loyalty by asking him to make the ultimate sacrifice, literally through the Akeida⁸.

The narrative background to the episode of the Akeida is the following: God makes a covenant with Avraham, at which time God promises Avraham his wife will bear a child and name him Yitzchak (Isaac); then, God sends three strangers whom the reader later finds out are angels; they again tell Avraham that Sarah is to have a child, which Sarah overhears; she laughs at the idea that she will ever bear a child as she is past her child-bearing years and has been barren her entire life. The narrative later reveals that “Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age”⁹. Yitzchak is the only child that Avraham and Sarah have together, and yet, years later, God speaks to Avraham again and tells him to take Yitzchak and “go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.”¹⁰ In other words, God commands Avraham yet again to shatter the central, familial bond that undergirds his own patriarchal society: That between a father and a first-born son, the father’s prospective heir. And, breaking with the cultural conventions of his time and place, Avraham is indeed willing to sacrifice his son.

Child sacrifice was common within some religious cultures of ancient Mesopotamia. To be sure, the practice was not very common, yet the countercultural message of the story of the

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⁷ Gen. 17:1  
⁸ The binding of Isaac/Yitzchak  
⁹ Gen. 21:2  
¹⁰ Gen 22:2
Akeidah is that Avraham’s faith in God was so great that he was willing to do anything—in this case, to surrender his most precious earthly possession as a father and thus as a man—to prove his loyalty to a deeply untraditional Father-deity. Commanding the Akeidah was God’s way of testing Avraham’s loyalty, and Avraham passes the test. God then sends a messenger to inform Avraham that he did well by offering his beloved son, and that he should instead sacrifice a ram.

The idea that Avraham is even willing to sacrifice Yitzchak is crucial to showing his devotion to an intangible deity whom the biblical narrative presents as completely foreign to his own father’s house, and by extension the father’s urban, Mesopotamian culture. In that sense, the Akeidah is Avraham’s ultimate countercultural action. His willingness to follow through displays that he is open to differentiating himself from the majority culture and to follow a fringe practice to prove his loyalty. Every command God made of Avraham was unheard of and violated social and political norms. This violation is not an uncommon thread throughout the Tanach.

In the same vein of Avraham’s commitment to God, the Biblical story of Ruth is a story of intense commitment to another person and to that person’s national deity. It is, by the same token, a story of leaving one’s home and cleaving tightly to a new system of beliefs and practices.

Ruth is the daughter-in-law of Naomi, a Judean woman who had moved to the land of Moab with her family and found Moabite wives for her sons. After her sons die and leave their wives widowed, Naomi seeks to return to Judea and urges Ruth and her other daughter-in-law, Orpah, to return to their land, Moab. Ruth refuses to go; she cleaves tightly to Naomi, telling her “Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried”11. Here Ruth is an

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11 Ruth 1:17-18
example of how one becomes a Judean Israelite: by defying one’s ethnic and cultural norms in order to become an integral part of a Judean family, indeed of the extended Judean family, namely the people, Israel.

For its part, the Biblical story of Esther is a morality tale of how a Judean ought to draw a balance between his or her Judean identity and his or her diasporic identity as part of a broader, predominantly non-Jewish culture.

The Scroll of Esther is unique in that the emphasis of this biblical book is to show how diasporic foreign politics become a threat to the survival of Jewish peoplehood. The events of this story take place in the city of Shushan in the heart of the Persian Empire at a time when the king, Ahasueros (possibly Artaxerxes) has issued an order to find a new queen. The winning candidate is Esther, a resident Judean, who has been adopted by a close relative, Mordechai, who thereby functions as her father-figure throughout the narrative.

The first appearance of Esther in the story itself provides evidence of her countercultural status: She is introduced first as “Hadassah” and second as “Esther”—that is, first via her Hebrew name, and second with her non-Jewish name. Before her selection as the new queen, Esther is sequestered to the palace of Shushan where Ahasueros has gathered young women from throughout the kingdom. Esther catches the king’s eye during the months-long process of finding a new queen and he comes to favor her above the other women in his harem, so he crowns her his queen and holds a banquet in her honor. However, Esther has set herself aside from the other candidates all along, to the point that she gains favor in the king’s eyes, an advantage that she will leverage in the future.

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12 At this point the women being judged are part of the king’s harem
13 Esther did not reveal to anyone who her people were because Mordechai instructed her not to
By cultivating differences and separating herself from the cultural and political mainstream and its norms, as I will discuss below, Esther, like Avraham, Sarah, and Ruth before her, is able to secure her own survival as well as to create integral elements of Jewish traditions that continue to shape Jewish culture in the present.

QUESTIONING OF CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS

As I have discussed in connection to Avraham and Sarah, the trajectory of their story is shaped by the idea of leaving the comfort of the ancient norms of residing on one’s familial ancestral land, observing old religious rituals and remaining beholden to local deities. God asks much of Avraham, and while Avraham often blindly follows what God commands him to do, there are times when what God demands of Avraham, as we have seen, goes against the cultural norms and customs of the Levantine region during the Bronze Era.

Following the pattern of Avraham and Sarah, Ruth’s commitment to the God of Israel, to Naomi, and to Naomi’s people is an ultimate act of countercultural behavior because she completely forsakes her Moabite roots and chooses to become part of Naomi’s people, *Am Yisrael*. For her part, Esther questions the culture that dictates that respectable women should be silent and subservient. She does this when she decides to risk her life and speak to King Ahasuerus about the courtier Haman’s plan to kill all the Jews of the Persian Empire. In sum, Avraham and Sarah, Ruth, and Esther all have to go outside of their comfort zones and not only question but actively challenge prevalent understandings and beliefs in order to maintaining their connection to their Israelite culture.

For our present purposes, the story of Avraham’s biggest test, one of the most pivotal moments in his people’s memory, is worth repeating in some detail, for it showcases his
countercultural belief in a God who is essentially new to him. That test comes when God commands him to sacrifice his son, Isaac. God comes to Avraham and says, “Take your son, your favored one, Yitzchak, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.” Without questioning what God demands of him, Avraham takes Yitzchak, and two servants on the requisite journey. When Yitzchak and Avraham arrive at the site to which God has directed Avraham, Yitzchak asks his father “‘where is the sheep for the burnt offering’.” Then Avraham deceives his firstborn by telling him, “‘It is God who will see to the sheep for this burnt offering, my son.’” Notably, Avraham goes so far as to pick up a knife in preparation to slay his son—all for God—until an Angel of God says to him, “I know you fear God because you have not withheld your favorite son from Me.” After this encounter with the Angel of God, Avraham notices a ram and sacrifices it in place of Yitzchak.

Child sacrifice in ancient Mesopotamia was not commonplace; however, it did occur; there is archeological evidence, for instance, of 11 children who were ritualistically sacrificed in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) between 3,100 and 2,800 BCE. Not only that, but “excavations of ancient Mesopotamia [have] revealed hundreds of sacrificed bodies buried some 500 years later at the famous Royal Cemetery of Ur,” which is, significantly, Avraham’s place of birth according to the biblical text. Avraham does not question God when he sets off for Moriah, and thus seems at first to be following a local cultural norm according to which human sacrifice is acceptable; but then, when God contravenes that same norm by ordering him to replace the

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14 Mount Moriah is in Jerusalem, it is the place upon which the Temples stood
15 Gen. 22:2
16 Gen 22:7-8
17 Gen 22:12
18 Hignett, “Ancient Mesopotamia: Ritual Child Sacrifice Uncovered in Bronze Age Turkey”
sacrifice of Sarah’s firstborn son with an animal sacrifice, Avraham follows God’s orders even though they go against the cultural assumptions with which he has been reared. Indeed, Avraham is aware that he is violating local and regional norms: he leaves his servants behind precisely because he knows that sacrificing a mere animal and not Yitzchak is not a socially acceptable action. And yet, paradoxically, he is also violating mainstream cultural norms in another way: He has so much faith in his newly discovered God, a God who is not specifically tied to Ur, that he is willing to sacrifice Yitzchak anyway.

Ruth questions the cultural assumptions of her upbringing as a Moabite woman when she begs Naomi to allow her to accompany her back to the land of Yehudah (Judah). As her story progresses, Ruth makes sure she does everything she can to be accepted as a member of the people that she has adopted. It is significant that Naomi refers to Ruth as biti, “my daughter,” symbolizing that Ruth has been accepted into the Judean fold just as she accepts the Judean God, Judean customs, and Judean practices, even while still being referred to as “Ruth the Moabite.”

After moving to Bethlehem with Naomi, Ruth decides she will go to the fields to glean grain behind field workers so that she and Naomi will have some staple foods at a time of severe famine. The Israelite custom of allowing unfortunate people to glean fallen grain from behind the reapers is attested to in the book of Leviticus, chapter 19 verse 10: “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest.” The fields in question belong to none other than an in-law of Naomi’s named Boaz. When Boaz finds that Ruth was Naomi’s daughter-in-law, he treats her like family and places her under his protection. In response to his kindness, Ruth “prostrated herself with her face to the ground, and said to him, ‘Why are you so kind as to single me out, when I am a foreigner?’.” Boaz says in reply, “I have been told of all that you did for your mother-in-law
after the death of your husband, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before.”19 In an instant, Ruth’s love for Naomi comes full circle; Boaz knows who she is and what she did for Naomi—how she adopted Naomi’s people and Naomi’s God. Thus, Boaz and Ruth’s relationship grows, and they marry. Ruth has a son, Oved, and her son is the grandfather of King David. Thus concludes the Book of Ruth with the lineage of King David, as if to say that from the countercultural rejection of one’s own ethnicity and native culture, and the concomitant embrace of Israelite identity, comes greatness, God’s highest favor.

Some of the most prominent biblical examples of questioning cultural assumptions come from the Book of Esther. The root of the cultural struggle at the heart of the Esther story is encapsulated in a single act of defiance described near the beginning of the narrative. That act is Mordechai’s refusal to bow to Haman, in clear contravention of imperial decorum and in sharp violation of Haman’s authority. This singular act of protestation—the refusal to commit an act of idolatry—causes the emperor to issue decree of genocide and places Esther in a precarious position.

The narrative makes clear that in the kingdom of Persia, it is forbidden for anyone to approach the king without a prior summons. To violate this norm is punishable by death; and yet, Esther approaches Ahasuerus in order to urge the monarch to annul the decree against her people. Thus, she commits the ultimate act of self-sacrifice. Esther is an extraordinary example of counterculture because she breaks every social taboo to which she is as subject as a queen, a woman, and a Jew in imperial Persia. Through her actions, Esther proves that the weak can become strong. Through her brazen violation of courtly norms, she follows the rebellious

19 Ruth 2:10-11
precedent of Vashti, her precursor, in standing up for herself. But, unlike Vashti, she emerges victorious. Esther’s story, then, is one of diaspora Jews successfully questioning yet not wholly renouncing or abandoning the majority culture that surrounds them, a concept that is relatively rare within the Tanach, yet is a common thread found throughout the history of the Jewish Diaspora.

Specifically, the Book of Esther is an early example of Judeans questioning whether Am Yisrael can live in symbiosis with the dominant culture and retain its uniqueness and its dignity at the same time. Notably, Esther requests that all of the Jews in the city of Shushan spend three days fasting before she approaches the king. She spends those days contemplating the difficulty of her position, perhaps questioning whether she should approach the king at all. In the end, however, she wagers her own life for the opportunity to save her people. On the third day of the fast, after preparing herself spiritually, Esther prepares herself physically: She dons royal garments, approaches the king, and is surprisingly granted the platform to state her purpose. Esther then invites the king and Haman to a feast, to which Ahasueros agrees. At the banquet, Esther unveils Haman’s plan to kill all the Jews of Persia and reveals her own hidden Jewish identity. The text clearly suggests that had Esther not questioned the practice of requiring an invitation to speak to the king, and had she not asked him and Haman to the banquet, Haman’s plot to murder the Jews of Persia would certainly have been carried out. The moral of the biblical tale, then, is that it is thanks in part to Esther’s bravery and her willingness to question the dominant social norms that Judaism survives and yet may remain embedded harmoniously within larger non-Jewish cultures.
THE FORMULATION AND INCULCATION OF A DISTINCTIVE WAY OF LIFE

Everything that Avram knows changes when he becomes Avraham. It is not merely his name that changes, but his significance as well. That name-change is but the pivotal moment that marks the creation of a legacy, one that has persisted until today. God commands Avraham, “you shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.” And indeed, this is the first biblical reference to a ritual practice that the generations of the nation promised to Avraham, Am Yisrael, have performed for millennia.

The Hebrew word for “covenant” is Brit which is also shorthand for the ritual of circumcision, Brit Milah, which typically occurs when a Jewish male infant is 8 days old. The concept of the Brit completely went against the political precedents of Avraham’s time, not because circumcision itself was unknown, but because in the Hebrew Bible the ritual forges a human being’s two-way contract with a deity, a deity who lacks a definitive corporeal form. The concept of an essentially abstract God--albeit one who can send corporeal messengers--was far from the Levantine norm in the Bronze Age. The biblical God in question commands Avraham to not only circumcise himself at the age of ninety-nine, but also to circumcise all the males in his household. It is at this point that God tells Avraham that his wife Sarah is pregnant at the age of 100, that her son will be named Yitzchak, and that God will maintain the covenant with Avraham through that son.

Avraham’s story thus set many cultural precedents that still define Judaism today. The most prominent of these practices is the act of circumcising male infants. This practice continues to serve as a reminder of God’s brit with Avraham, which promised him and his descendants’ prosperity.

20 Gen. 17:12
21 Also referred to as a bris primarily by Jews of Ashkenazi descent
Another cultural precedent concerns the burial of Isaac’s mother. When Sarah dies, Avraham realizes that he needs to acquire burial ground. At the time he is living in the Land of the Hittites. They respect Avraham and his God and tell him that he may choose a plot of land from their holdings and bury Sarah there. Avraham chooses a cave called Me’arat HaMachpelah on the land of a man named Ephron Ben Zohar. When he approaches Ephron to inquire about the cave, Ephron tells Avraham that he would give him the land as a gift, but Avraham protests, replying he will buy the land for 400 shekels. The land thus becomes Avraham’s and stays in the possession of his family. As the reputed burial site for every Israelite patriarch and matriarch (besides Rachel, who is buried along a road according to Genesis 35:20), the Me’arat HaMachpelah continues to resonate in Jewish memory and practice as a site of devotion and pride that provides the people with a sense of rootedness in their ancestral homeland.

Ruth naturalizes into Naomi’s family and system of beliefs to the point that the Tanach presents her as the matriarch of the dynastic line of King David—the Messianic line. The inclusion of the Book of Ruth in the Tanach is itself countercultural because it is the only one of its component texts that is entirely about a post-Abrahamic figure who was not born into the Jewish ethno-religion. The manner in which Ruth expresses her love and commitment toward Naomi is significant. When Naomi tells Ruth to go back to Moab she replies, “do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.” Thus, and more may the LORD do to me if anything but death parts

24 This ties back to when Avraham purchased Me’arat Ha’Machpelah (now known as the Cave of the Patriarchs) as a way of creating a fixed, permanent, eternal possession to stake a genuine claim to a piece of the land.
me from you.” This complex statement is an indirect reminder that Judaism, the culture of which the Tanakh is the cornerstone, is an ethno-religion. That culture counts with a central concept of peoplehood that extends beyond its human protagonists’ shared religious heritage and is rooted firmly in their familial ties. The fact that the Hebrew Bible presents Ruth as the matriarch of the messianic line puts her in a unique position because by transforming herself into a Judean Israelite she had to adopt a hashkafa—a worldview that entails a relationship with the Judean religion and with the God of Israel—that she was not born into. And yet by claiming Naomi’s God as her own, Ruth becomes part of Naomi’s kin-group, the Israelite nation, and vice-versa.

Through her religious transformation and dedication to the people, Israel, Ruth does not cease to be known as “Ruth the Moabite,” although she becomes fully integrated into the Israelite community. In other words, the purely ethnic boundaries of the Israelites hold firm even with her. So too, post-biblical Judaism holds closely the ethno-nationalism of familial descent. Still, there is a place in historical Judaism for people who are not genealogical Israelites to naturalize into Jewish peoplehood. That is because the latter is neither a mere ethnicity nor a mere religion. To put it differently, it is difficult to define Jewish civilization accurately if one does not first recognize that it is not merely a theological system with attendant devotional rituals, that is, Judaism is not like a modern religion. Rather, Jewish civilization—Judaism—is far more complicated because above all else it is the culture of a people, for that people. Ruth traditional Jewish moniker, “Ruth the Moabite” paradoxically marks the dual ethno-national nature of being Jewish, for it breaks the notion that individuals cannot transcend their non-

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25 Ruth 1:16-17
Judean ethnicity and that being a Judean or of the people of *Am Yisrael* means something different than merely being a Judean by birth.

The antagonist in the *Book of Esther* is Haman. He is a problematic character for a multitude of reasons, most prominently his desire to kill all the Jews of Persia after Mordechai refuses to bow to him. Haman is King Achashverosh’s advisor; he is a power-hungry individual who abuses his high standing within the kingdom to deify himself by forcing people to bow to him. Mordechai, Esther’s father figure, is identifiably Jewish not because he is described as pious in any way, but because he understands the implications to Judean identity of engaging in idolatry. Thus, he refuses to bow to Haman, and an irreducible enmity is forged.

Interestingly, the Book of Esther presents an additional juxtaposition of characters and behaviors, namely those of Mordechai and Esther. Mordechai’s defiance of Haman, and by extension of the Persian state, is not performed in the interest of his own survival. Rather, he risks his life by refusing to bow. Esther, on the other hand, follows Mordechai’s instruction to keep her Jewish identity a secret from everyone at the royal household as a means of survival. It therefore seems that Mordechai believes, paradoxically, that it is a good thing to be somewhat integrated into greater society, even if that demands refraining from Jewish practices and remaining outside the community of the Jewish ethno-religion. Esther thus represents a paradoxical absorption of steadfast Jews *into* non-Jewish cultures. Meanwhile, Ruth represents the equally paradoxical absorption of other cultures *by* Jewish culture. In both cases, the cultural boundaries are porous, but hold firm: Esther remains a proud Judean, and Ruth remains “the Moabite” even *as* a Judean.
Case Study 2: Judea During the Second Temple Period

The Second Beit HaMikdash or Second Temple stood from 516 B.C.E. to 70 C.E. This period of Jewish History was tumultuous at best: It was a five-century span in which the Greeks and the Romans each conquered Jerusalem. The era was marked by three major revolts in the Land of Israel.

This chapter will detail the ways in which Am Yisrael practiced countercultural behavior and resisted assimilation under duress in the face of two of the most powerful empires in the history of the world. The revolts in question are the Hasmonean Revolt26 (168-164 B.C.E.), the Great Revolt (66-70 C.E.),27 and the Bar Kochba Revolt (132-135 CE).28 The Hasmonean Revolt was the only successful revolt of the three. In it, the Maccabees fought against the Seleucid Greeks and won. The Great Revolt and the Bar Kochba Revolt both occurred during Roman rule of the region, and neither was successful in pushing the Romans out. Those failures led to the radical expansion of the Jewish Diaspora.

The Greek conquest and subsequent deepening of the Hellenization of Judean society was a product of the Greek Empire’s expansion after Alexander the Great’s initial endeavor to conquer the known world. Radical Hellenization became a key threat to the survival of Jewish peoplehood when the Seleucid Greek monarch, Antiochus “epiphanes,” set laws in place that explicitly outlawed central Judean customs and practices. These laws forced the Judean people to either adopt Greek practices or suffer torture and capital punishment.

Several decades earlier, in 332 B.C.E., Alexander the Great’s forces had conquered the Land of Israel on their way from Egypt to Babylonia. The Hellenization of Judean culture began

26 Also known as the Maccabean Revolt
27 Ancient Jewish History: The Great Revolt, Jewish Virtual Library
28 Bar Kochba Revolt, Encyclopedia Britannica
relatively peacefully then. Shortly after Alexander’s death, however, his empire fractured, and there was a fight for control between two political factions, the Ptolemies and the Seleucids. The geopolitical struggle inaugurated a period in which the previously established symbiosis between the Greek Empire and the People of Israel started to crumble and a radical form of Hellenization became a means of Seleucid regional control. In 201 B.C.E. Antiochus III, the Seleucid ruler, invaded the Judean state and conquered the land. By 198, the Seleucids had gained full control and would remain in power until 168.

The Hasmonean family succeeded in routing the Seleucid forces. Afterwards, the clan’s leaders installed themselves as High Priests in Jerusalem. The Roman Empire’s expansion into the Land started during the Hasmonean dynasty. Initially the move was politically advantageous for the Hasmoneans after the Greeks left, but due to the mistakes of a series of weak leaders from the line of Hasmonean kings, the Parthians invaded Judea in 40 B.C.E. That was when King Herod, who had overthrown the Hasmoneans with Roman support, tightened his alliance with Rome to the point of total subservience. Eventually, Rome removed the Herodian family and ruled Judea directly through appointed procurators. Rome’s eventual seizure and destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple came in the year 70 C.E., after 4 years of fighting between Judean rebels and Roman legions. The Roman siege of Jerusalem starved the residents within the city’s walls and made Judea’s fall inevitable. Even the dogged resistance of Shim’on Bar Kochba’s army a few decades later could not bring about the reconstitution of Judean sovereignty.

THE CULTIVATION OF DIFFERENCES THAT DISRUPT POLITICAL PRECEDENTS

During the Hasmonean rebellion, the Great Revolt, and the Bar Kochba revolt, the groups leading the revolutionary charge each fought hard to disrupt the political precedents set by either
the Greeks or Romans. The foreign powers in play desecrated the Temple and enforced decrees that went against Am Yisrael’s core system of practices, beliefs, and values. The appearance of pagan gods in holy places—notably the Second Temple—the deification of foreign emperors, and the erection of statues of prominent Greek and Roman religious and political figures in the streets of Judean towns and cities made it difficult for the Judeans to go about their lives without constantly interacting with idolatry—a behavior which is forbidden by Biblical law. Humiliation was part of this interaction. For instance, King Antiochus III turned the Jerusalem Temple into a shrine for the Greek God, Zeus; he outlawed circumcision; and forced Judeans to relinquish their identities as part of the Judean peoplehood in exchange for membership in a cosmopolitan, Greek imperial culture in which they were subjects whose main function was to provide tribute to the Greek state. While the Greek Empire held power over Judea, a band of rebels called the Maccabees took up arms and fought back against the Greeks.

The history of the Maccabees and the Greeks was recorded in the Books of the Hasmoneans, but perhaps most famously by a Roman-era Judean historian named Yosef Ben-Mattityahu, known in Rome as Flavius Josephus. According to Josephus, the Maccabees used their power to rally against the Greek military power and against all odds. Despite those odds, they won, which led to the creation of the Hasmonean dynasty and subsequent downfall of the state of Judea at the hands of the Romans in 70 C.E. The Hasmonean Dynasty lasted from 129 to 37 B.C.E. and was the dominant Judean political power until Mark Antony, the Roman general, executed the last Hasmonean as the Roman Empire expanded its power into the Land. The Hasmonean Dynasty bridged the gap between the Greek and the Roman Empires’ respective conquests of the Holy Land. While the Maccabees may have been successful at defeating the Greeks, their victory was short lived, and they were only able to disrupt the Greek political
precedents and the process of Hellenization until the next hegemon appeared, the Roman Empire.

The Great Revolt attempted the same thing that the Maccabees had 200 years prior, but was spectacularly unsuccessful. The people who fought in the Great Revolt were fighting against the encroaching power of Roman culture, with its deification of emperors and its pressure to assimilate subject populations into the Roman Empire or face dire consequences. The Romans took Jerusalem diplomatically at first, but by 66 C.E. they had decided there could no longer be peaceful relations with the restive Judeans. The Roman authorities built realistically rendered and painted statues of their gods and emperors throughout Jerusalem, thus making it extremely difficult for the Judeans to avoid witnessing idolatry and participating in it by default. While the Great Revolt kept the Romans at bay for four years, the siege the Romans placed around Jerusalem eventually starved the inhabitants of the city. This allowed the Roman legions to breach the walls, destroy the Temple, and kill or forcibly expel the Judeans—taking many of them to Rome as slaves.

The Bar Kochba Revolt occurred when the remaining Judeans living in the Holy Land decided to engage in one more, last-ditch effort to fight the Romans. Supporters of a prominent leader called Shimon Bar Kochba gathered in an attempt to fight against the Romans and rebuild the destroyed Temple. Bar Kochba was seen as the Messiah by many who followed him due to his charismatic personality and reputed religious devotion and piety. The partisans also gave Bar Kochba the title Nasi, which was given to the head of the great assembly in Jerusalem.  

Bar Kochba was able to gather an army of around 350,000 Judeans to go to war against the Romans. After several years of local victories against the Roman forces, tides quickly turned,

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29 Kanael, p. 44
and Bar Kochba and his army were annihilated at the fortress town of Betar. The Roman Emperor, Hadrian, then heightened existing restrictions upon Jewish practices. Among other things, “he forbade mention of the name Jerusalem and renamed the holy city, Aelia Capitolina. He also forbade Jews from living there. Hadrian invested every resource he had in defeating Bar Kochba’s army, stopping it from continuing to disrupt Roman political preeminence within Judea.

QUESTIONING OF CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS

The Judeans’ defense of Second Temple Judaism was a countercultural struggle to resist encroaching political and cultural authority. When the Seleucid Empire conquered the Holy Land, Greek hegemony imposed Hellenism upon the Judeans, essentially giving them an ultimatum: either assume Greek culture or be persecuted. When the Roman Empire took over, the Roman rulers were initially less inclined to usurp power from the Hasmoneans entirely. Instead, Rome worked with the political leaders in Judea. But as new emperors rose to power, they were less sympathetic to allowing the Judeans to live as freely-practicing individuals of a sovereign culture. Judean monotheism clashed sharply with the civic cult of the Roman emperors. Eventually, the conflict became absolute. When it was over, Rome banned the Judeans from living in Jerusalem and renamed their homeland in order to de-Judaicize it. From that point until the Middle Ages, a subjugated Judean culture could only subsist in the Galilee and in the expanding Judean Diaspora.

While there were Judeans who embraced Hellenism and its attendant cosmopolitanism—in part to appease the Greeks, in part out of fear, and in part out of a genuine attraction—others

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30 JewishHistory.org, “Bar Kochba”
questioned the ruling authority and chose to fight the Greeks. Led by Matityahu the Hasmonean and his sons, Judeans who rejected radical Hellenization became the principal defenders and inheritors of Judean culture itself. The term Maccabee means “hammer” in Hebrew, but according to ancient Jewish lore it is also an acronym for “mi-chamocha ba’eilim Adonai” meaning “who is like you God?” Josephus describes how the Maccabees defeated the Greeks through perseverance, and how people within the orbit of the Hasmonean family resisted Greek power by participating in guerilla actions and even by becoming martyrs.

One particular instance of a Maccabee putting everything on the line in order to resist Greek culture is the story of Simon the Hasmonean’s wife. Josephus writes of her strong stance in the face of torment and suffering. His telling adopts aspects widely known from martyrdom narratives that “had become popular in the aftermath of the persecution under Antiochus IV and the Maccabean revolt.”

Perhaps one reason that martyrdom narratives punctuate Josephus’ tales of the Hasmoneans is that threats to Am Yisrael immediately preceding the fall of the Second Beit HaMikdash were much higher than those existing when the Maccabees fought the Greeks. The way that Rome conquered Jerusalem was brutal. The Roman military surrounded Jerusalem to enact a total blockade. The latter left residents of the city with no option but to break the siege or starve to death. After years of attempting to force the Judeans to assimilate into Roman society and renege on their religious affiliation, the Romans used military power, torture, and capital punishment to achieve their cultural and political objectives, ultimately forcing the majority of the Judean people out of the Judean homeland and into the Diaspora.

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31 Wilker, p.87
FORMULATION AND INCULCATION OF A DISTINCTIVE WAY OF LIFE

The Jewish response to the Greeks and Romans generated two very different ways shaping a distinct way of life for the People of Israel. The contrast is understandable. While the Hasmoneans defeated the Greeks and established their own political dynasty in the land for several decades, *Am Yisrael* lost the fight with the Romans which, led to a complete overhaul of the culture, especially of the ritual aspects of their ethno-religion. With the Temple destroyed there was no clear path to proceed. The Judeans were no longer allowed to live within the city of Jerusalem, which had previously been the center for all civic, fiscal, and religious rituals and practices. Notably the Temple was the site of the Judeans’ three major pilgrimage festivals. With the physical structure that was the point of connection to God once again destroyed, the people needed to figure out how to keep their faith, culture, and peoplehood alive.

After the Hasmoneans defeated the Greeks, they cleansed and rededicated the *Beit HaMikdash*; they also took over central political power and the priesthood. The story of the festival of Chanukah is the story of the Greeks and the Maccabees. The word Chanukah means “dedication,” as the holiday celebrates the Maccabees’ rededication of the Temple. But the Hasmoneans did more than serve as religious leaders. They reestablished Judean political authority in the Holy Land through the creation of the Hasmonean monarchical line. Some of what the Hasmoneans did was helpful and good to the preservation of Israelite culture, while other aspects were met with disdain by people who knew that the Hasmoneans were not the rightful heirs of the High Priesthood, whose function was to oversee the Temple and the entire state bureaucracy.

The revolts against the Romans, on the other hand, failed. The *Beit HaMikdash* was first turned into a pagan temple; then it was ransacked; the valuable objects within it were carted off
to Rome; and the building itself was burnt and torn down. The last two centuries of the Second Temple Period were extraordinarily difficult for Am Yisrael in terms of their ability to maintain their peoplehood and distinct way of life separate from the idolators around them. And yet, Judeans continued to push back against their oppressors and encroaching, imperialist cultures, exhibiting behavior that is extraordinarily countercultural.
Case Study 3: Transition to Liturgical Tefilah in the Rabbinic Period

The Rabbinic Period, from the first century BCE to the 7th century CE, was a pivotal era within Jewish history and culture. It was the defining period, an era that shaped the practices of Judaism as Jews lived it and even as they live it today. One of the most important distinctions of Halacha\(^{32}\) that Rabbinic sages created within the system of ideas and practices that is known today as Judaism is that God’s law is comprised of two parts, the Written Torah, and the Oral Torah. In this view, the Written Torah consists of the Tanach, while the Oral Torah is a body of divinely revealed wisdom that was originally passed orally from teacher to disciple until Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi (3rd century CE) decided to write and canonize it.

The Oral Torah is unique within the Jewish cannon because it is divided into topical categories rather than chronologically. In order to understand this body of lore and law, some of the most important terms to know are Mishna, Gemara, and Talmud. The Mishna is comprised of 6 sedarim\(^{33}\)—Zera’im (Seed—laws related to agricultural matters), Mo’ed (Holidays—laws about Shabbat and other holidays and festivals), Nashim (Women—laws regarding the relationship between husband and wife from marriage to divorce), Nezikin (Damages—various penal laws, crime, regulations regarding rabbinic courts, etc.), Kodashim (Holy things—laws about sacrifices, Kashrut and ritual slaughter), and Tohorot (Purity—laws regarding ritual purity, and family purity, including laws on menstuation). After the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, Am Yisrael became a people scattered across the globe. With the Temple no longer standing, many of the normative rituals of the Israelite community could no longer be performed. This reality changed the course of the system of practices that had existed for centuries. Diasporic

\(^{32}\) Jewish Law
\(^{33}\) Literally meaning orders
Judaism brought a new set of challenges—how would the usual sacrifices of the Temple and pre-Temple era be replaced? What would Am Yisrael do to ensure its survival?

THE CULTIVATION OF DIFFERENCES THAT DISRUPT POLITICAL PRECEDENTS:

The diasporic practices of Rabbinic Judaism entailed many changes from the Second Temple system. These changes were necessitated by the fact that the people were no longer living mostly amongst their own kind, but rather amongst gentile majorities. Because of this, the Rabbis needed to determine how to live amongst non-Jewish idolaters in lands of idolatry. The Tanach forbids idolatry; but what happens when one’s neighbors are idol worshippers, how will that change the way one operates in one’s day-to-day life?

Seder Nezikin, Masechet Avodah Zarah is the tractate of the Mishna that discusses exactly this theme—the ways a Jewish person should and should not interact with idol worshipers. As time moved on from the destruction of the Second Temple, the lines of idolatry blurred as the old, pagan polytheistic religions became less common, while Christianity grew in influence and demographic weight. It became harder for Jews as a dispersed minority to avoid fraternizing with gentiles. This put a spotlight on existing Jewish laws concerning the question of whether a Jew may engage in trade with an idol worshiper. For the Rabbinic sages of Avodah Zarah, who were forced to go beyond the letter of biblical religious norms, it became important to be aware of the ways in which Am Yisrael associated with gentiles by necessity. The Rabbinic texts in Mishna Avodah Zarah thus dictate permissible and impermissible interactions a member of Am Yisrael can have with a gentile. In this tractate, the rabbis’ discussion of whether it is permissible to engage in business with gentiles hinges on the location of the idol worship, as well as on whether the gentile business establishment is set up as a place where idolatry can occur.
For example, one dictum has it that “In the case of a city in which there is active idol worship, it is permitted to engage in business transactions with gentiles who live outside of the city. If the idol worship is outside the city, it is permitted to engage in business within the city.…”

Here, the Rabbis clearly prohibit buying from and selling to gentiles, but in the case of those gentile establishments that are not adorned with idolatrous images, “commerce is permitted.”. In other words, the tractate establishes the ideal that Israelites maintain a distinct level of awareness of cultural separateness while conducting business with gentiles. That consciousness has become unique to the maintenance of Jewish peoplehood as an ostensibly essential and indelible quality—a consciousness that, to quote the Babylonian Gemara, tractate Sanhedrin 43b-44a, “A myrtle, though it stands among reeds, is still a myrtle, and that is what it is called.”

QUESTIONING OF CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS

During the Rabbinic period, Am Yisrael experienced many growing pains and the people found themselves living amongst The Other. After being forced out of their ancestral land, or becoming a demographic minority in that land, it was very difficult if not impossible for the People of Israel to feel at home without surrendering much of their cultural distinctiveness. The discomfort of experiencing displacement, of being enslaved by Romans and forced to carry out their bidding, or of simply having to move to a new place and live amongst dominant communities of gentiles made life very difficult for Am Yisrael. Many customs and rituals needed to be adapted so that they could occur without the Beit HaMikdash. The rituals and customs of the ethno-religion shifted from being focused around the sacrificial offerings at the
Temple in Jerusalem to becoming daily, weekly, and annually carried out practices, notably including prayer.

By finding their place within the broader confines of gentile societies, the People of Israel continuously questioned the cultural assumptions of the non-Jewish people around them, remaining wary of these neighbors’ influence on their practices as the Judean ethno-religion evolved. New methods of practicing the Jewish way of life greatly contributed to what is known today as Judaism.

The Passover Seder—the ritual meal and liturgy that Jews have performed from late antiquity to the present—is one of the most interesting examples of multivalent Jewish customs because it developed at the point of transition, from ancient sacrificial rituals of the Temple period, to the locally-based practices of diasporic communities, including many ceremonies that rabbinic sages developed specifically to take the place of Temple sacrifices.

The longest part of the Passover Seder is called *Magid*, which is the “telling” of the story of the Israelites’ defiance of Egypt, one of the superpowers of the ancient world, and their resulting Exodus from Egypt. The Hebrew Bible commands Israelites to retell that story every year to each succeeding generation, and thus to remember countercultural defiance and liberation as the bases of Israelite national existence. One part of the liturgy that closely follows or precedes the *Magid* is a piece of Aramaic text called *Vehi She’amda*, which means “and this is what kept [us upright]” (or: “This is what has stood [or: held true]” for us). The prayer concludes that, “in every generation they try to destroy us, and God saves us from their hands.”

Explaining the meaning of this resonant statement reveals much about the countercultural mentality that the rabbis of the Mishnah and both Gemarot forged, and which has become the

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34 Vehi Sheamda, Chabad.org
inheritance of their followers in post-Talmudic generations. The leaders of these generations have thus internalized the knowledge that the Jewish population of the world has always been relatively small compared to majority populations, and therefore has been vulnerable to cultural and physical encroachment. *Vehi she'amda* is one poetic source and indication of that awareness. It is a statement that *Am Yisrael*, the small nation, is in fact not forlorn, and should therefore not submit or give up the identity, practices, and beliefs that comprise its peoplehood. Yet because it does not proclaim total victory and an end to the national exile and dispersion, *Vehi She’amda* implicitly affirms the need for Jews to continue living with vulnerability. Indeed, since entering the era of Rabbinic, diasporic Judaism, *Am Yisrael* has lived with the expectation that they need to find a balance between adapting to dominant cultures and maintaining otherness by continuing to question and push against the cultural assumptions of other nations.

**FORMULATION AND INCULCATION OF A DISTINCTIVE WAY OF LIFE:**

The Jewish liturgy developed from the time of the destruction of the First Temple during the period of Babylonian exile in the 6th century B.C.E. But after the destruction of the Second Temple, *Tefilah*[^35] became the substitute for daily sacrifices. The rabbinic liturgy is thus set up in a way that is intended to keep the Jewish people aware of their place in God’s eyes and in the context of global culture. Two of the original prayers of the standard rabbinic prayerbook are the *Shema*[^36] and the *Amidah*, also known as the *Shmoneh Esreh*. Both of these elements of the liturgy are time-bound. Specifically, the *Amidah* is recited three times a day on mundane days and an additional time on holidays, including *Shabbat*. The number of times that the *Amidah* is

[^35]: Prayer
[^36]: Passages from Deut. 6:4-9, 11:13-21; Num. 15:37-41
[^37]: *Shmoneh Esreh* translates to eighteen because this prayer is made up of 18 blessings
recited corresponds exactly to the three daily sacrifices that Temple priests performed each day while the Temple stood: For normal days there were separate sacrifices made for the morning, afternoon, and evening. For holidays, an additional sacrifice was made.

The canonization of Jewish liturgical prayer came out of necessity following the fall of the Second Temple in 70 CE and the Roman expulsions from Judea. The language of the prayers comes from various sources, primarily biblical texts such as Psalms, as well as verses from other books of the Torah. Other prayers found in the standard liturgy were written by rabbis before the canonization of the first rabbinic prayerbook around 750 C.E.

The Shema is internal in its orientation. The opening line itself says “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One”—an affirmation of the unique relationship the People of Israel have with their God. The second paragraph of the Shema is written in the first person. It is a statement from God to God’s people. This paragraph serves partly as a way of showing God’s love and partly as a warning of the consequences of betraying God and turning to idol worship. As we have seen, on one hand the Rabbis of the Mishna give permission to engage in commerce with idol worshippers within certain parameters, but on the other hand they did this because such commerce was impermissible according to the Tanach. The Sim Shalom Siddur’s English translation of the Shema’s second paragraph brings us back to the tension born of this conundrum, and to the rabbis’ way of solving it: “Take care lest you be tempted to forsake God and turn to false gods in worship. For then the wrath of the Lord will be directed against you.”

Again, the focus is inward: If “we” sin against our God by embracing The Other, he will avenge this violation of “our” exclusive relationship. To be sure, the greater portion of the text of the Shema is positive. It describes the ways Jews love God and how they show their love; but this one particular line stresses the importance of not straying from God and turning to idol worship;
else, God will “hold back the rain; the earth will not yield its produce. You will soon disappear from the good land which the Lord is giving you.” This prayer is recited every day, twice a day as a reminder of the relationship that God forged with the Jews, and of how the Jewish way of life, and Jewish existence itself, depend on that countercultural bond.

The Amidah prayer replaced the priestly rituals, as it is to be recited at least three times a day in place of the morning, afternoon, and evening sacrifices—as well as any special holiday sacrifices—that were conducted at the Beit HaMikdash. Because the Temple no longer existed, the Rabbis of the late Roman era had to devise the best way to transform and supplement the rituals conducted there in order to make sure Am Yisrael stayed ever mindful of their ties to the Holy Land. The Amidah is either recited out loud or silently depending on the time of day and how many people are present. (In order for this and prayers to be recited there must be a minyan of 10 people.) Certain phrases in the Amidah change seasonally and many of the blessings of the Amidah are different on Shabbat and holidays than during the rest of the week. The first three sections of the Amidah are recited aloud during the morning and afternoon services. They are said quietly during the evening prayer service. The three sections recited out loud are the Avot, Gevurot, and Kedusha. The Avot and Gevurot sections do not change based on time of day or holiday other than in one line, which is a prayer for rain. That line is recited seasonally from the end of the Festival of Sukkot to the beginning of Passover. This line is, mashiv ha’ruach u’morid h’gashem: “You cause the wind to blow and the rain to fall.” This line is included during the calendrical period when the Land of Israel needs rain. In other words, the seasonal line is there to remind Am Yisrael that even in the Diaspora, regardless of the weather that prevails there, they

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38 In Orthodox settings only men above the age of 13 can make a minyan, in other movements women and men above the age of 13 are counted
must still focus their deepest prayers and intentions on their ancestral land. In a sense, *mashiv ha'ruach* encourages them to feel that they are all still there.

The Jewish liturgy, which was canonized by the Rabbis by 750 CE, is still used today. This is not surprising, as its daily recitation over millennia has aided in the survival of Judaism. Arguably, without the commandment to pray three times a day as codified in the Talmud, *Berachot 26b*, the commandment that *Am Yisrael* remain separate from the other peoples around them would have been difficult to fulfill in the long term. Prayer became an integral piece of day-to-day life for Jews across time and space, and thus came to distinguish Jewish people from non-Jewish people, thereby contributing to the formulation and inculcation of Jewish life and all its distinctive practices.
Case Study 4: Judaism during the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period

The Middle Ages was a transformational era in the history of Am Yisrael. There were many cases where Jewish survival was threatened outright, including the expulsion of Spanish Jews by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabela, and the Crusades, when Christian warriors raped, pillaged, and slaughtered Jews while ostensibly on their way to the Land then called Palestine, as well as in that land. Violence against Jews was not a new occurrence, but by the eleventh century it was a very common theme in the lives of Jewish people in Christian Europe during the Middle Ages. Anti-Jewish violence it contributed to the crystallization of Jewish ideas concerning the dangers of assimilation and strengthened an existing cultural stance that militated against integration with Christian and Muslim societies. This period was characterized by many rabbis who contributed commentaries on Jewish law with the aim of finding a balance between maintaining a way of life marked by distinctive religious rituals and customs and yielding to the need to participate in broader social settings beyond of the Jewish community.

THE CULTIVATION OF DIFFERENCES THAT DISRUPT POLITICAL PRECEDENTS

Every medieval Jewish community was internally autonomous. It had its own schools, courts, and medical care and other social services, such as a chevra kaddisha. Rather than living exclusively under the law of non-Jewish kingdoms or other polities, Jewish communities were essentially separate and governed by Jewish law. Some Jewish communities chose to strengthen and leverage the cultural differences that set Am Yisrael apart from gentiles, while other communities were forced to remain more starkly separate, for instance, communities in

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39 Jewish Burial Society
Italy, where ghettoization reaffirmed an existing situation of Jewish otherness from the sixteenth century to the beginning of the modern era.

While not voluntary, ghettoization reified something the Diasporic Jewish population had been doing for many years, but it did so in a way that was purposely degrading and externally imposed. The rulers of Italian states were aware that Jews tried to maintain their cultural separateness—practically, structurally and institutionally—and therefore sought to punish and discourage it through the imposition of Ghettos. However, Ghettoization did not work in the way its designers wished, because Jews were habituated to a culturally self-sufficiency, and thus were not primed to abandon it even while under duress. After all, Jewish autonomy had already been happening for centuries by virtue of the Jews’ own choice to reside largely separate from gentiles. Ghettoization was degrading because it entailed enforced curfews and thus built a blatant spatial separation between Jews and Italians—a clear distinction between two peoples, Jewish people and Italians, that would otherwise not have been a cause of endemic and extreme Jewish poverty and overcrowding. Yet the walls of the Ghettos merely reaffirmed the old idea that Judaism is a distinct ethno-religion, and that there are therefore necessary distinctions, however uncomfortable, between Jews and non-Jews.

In places where Ghettoization was not as widespread as in the Italian states, Jews were forced to cultivate their cultural difference by engaging in occupations that Christians viewed as immoral or simply undesirable. One such occupation was petty moneylending. The profession of moneylending became widespread among the Jewish populations of Italy as well as in central and northern Europe. This ended up causing many problems as Christian neighbors took perverse pleasure in spreading invidious rumors about Jews who engaged in “usury.” Notably, the Tanach permits Jews to lend money to gentiles but not to each other. Thus, Jews lent money to
Christians and Christians lent money to Jews, all while the Church spread heinous rumors about the ways in which Jewish moneylenders were conducting their business and thus corrupting Christian souls. Very often, these rumors spurred or dovetailed blood libels, and thus caused deadly anti-Jewish riots and expulsions.

QUESTIONING OF CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS

Life for Jews who lived under Christian and Muslim rule varied wildly and impacted the Jewish People’s ability to maintain a distinctly Jewish way of life. For example, Spanish Jews living under King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella during the 15th century faced horrific adversity and persecution enduring the Spanish Reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula. Then, their forcibly converted friends and relatives faced the Inquisition. According to traditional Jewish memory, the tortures of the Inquisition did not keep baptized members of Am Yisrael from observing Jewish holidays and participating in various rabbinic rituals. In any event, the converts’ perceived lack of willingness to comply with the forced conversions and become good Christians led to the expulsion of Spanish Jews in 1492.

In the Ottoman Empire, Jews had to abide by a seventh century contract called the Pact of Omar, which “required [monotheistic] non-Muslims living under Muslim rule to abide by a host of discriminatory regulations, such as rising in the presence of a Muslim, dressing in distinctive garb, and (re)building synagogues only when absolutely necessary, and then constructing humble structures.” Jews were also subjected to a tax called the Jizya. This meant that for all the evidence of cultural cross-pollination between medieval Muslims and Jews--and there was plenty--the latter remained a separate people.

40 Roth, Norman. Jewish Moneylending
41 MyJewishLearning.org, “Medieval Jewish History, 632 to 1650”
FORMULATION AND INOCULATION OF A DISTINCTIVE WAY OF LIFE:

The Middle Ages so the consolidation of a distinctly Jewish way to conduct and govern one’s communal life, even, and perhaps especially in the Diaspora. That way of life trickled down into all forms of Jewish being, practice, and observance. During the Middle Ages Am Yisrael faced adversity from many directions, and this directly shaped the Jewish way of life. External pressures generated various responses: from hiding one’s Judaism, to living to living separately from one’s non-Jewish neighbors, and so on. A renown Torah scholar and commentator, Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon, also known as Maimonides, gave voice to diasporic conceptions of Jewish autonomy and good government under difficult conditions when he wrote about political leadership in the Jewish community. He was by far the most famous and influential Jew of the Middle Ages. In his works, Maimonides uses Biblical scripture as a guide to living one’s life and describes, for instance, how one should imitate God when governing a city: “God is gracious, so be you also gracious; God is merciful so be you also merciful”42.

Maimonides’ writings stress the importance of governing oneself and one’s community ethically, which is not something that every group of people valued during the Middle Ages, at least not in practice. Within the ideals of Jewish peoplehood and civilization that Maimonides and other medieval rabbis configured, the imperative to “walk in God’s ways” is evident not just in textual analyses of holy writ, but in prescribed actions that are intended to set the whole of Am Yisrael apart. While there were and continue to be Jews who act unethically, the value of emulating God is prominent in the writing of medieval rabbis as a means of distinguishing the Jewish way of life from that of the gentiles. This concept of moral distinction was especially

42 Berman, Lawrence V. “Maimonides on Political Leadership”. Kinship and Consent
apparent in the Middle Ages, when the Christian and Muslim majorities often treated Jews poorly simply on the basis of the Jews’ “Otherness,” while the Jews had done nothing wrong by their own moral standards. Medieval Judaism valued learning as a common intra-communal goal, which was not commonly seen in other groups outside of the learned classes. The vast majority of medieval gentiles were peasants or belonged to other working classes; thus they received minimal or no formal education. By contrast, the Jews’ emphasis on being learned in the words of *Torah*, and in philosophy within the Muslim realms, was unique to their community. Indeed, the rates of Jewish literacy and numeracy far surpassed those of gentiles in relative terms, and probably in absolute terms as well.

External challenges to the practice of Judaism during the Medieval Period put a great strain on maintaining a distinctly Jewish way of life due. Extreme forms of persecution forced Jews to experience the cost of their Peoplehood on a global scale. However, the Jewish People continued to survive clinging to whatever faith, rituals, customs, and practices they had learned for generations. To be a Jew was a natural, all-encompassing reality for those who were born into or joined medieval Jewish communities. Torah, the people’s principal connection to each other and to their God, sustained the people and aided in its survival.
Case Study 5: Modern Judaism

The period of Modern Judaism as defined for the purpose of this paper starts around the late 18th century and continues into present day. Here, customs, practices, and other aspects of Jewish culture have existed and exist across a spectrum of observances and levels of connection to Jewish peoplehood. Throughout the history of Judaism, antisemitism has existed and continues to affect the lives of the Jewish people globally. The greatest anti-Jewish adversary has not been a singular person or regime, but rather the attitude of hatred held by various peoples over the course of thousands of years and still held by many in the Modern Period. Paradoxically, the propagation of antisemitism has motivated an intensely Jewish desire to survive even where the Jews; connection to their ancestral culture has lost its sturdiness. When spurred by faith in God and strong-willed leaders, that desire is even stronger. Modern Judaism is primarily defined by the constant Challenge of antisemitism as well as a by very strong Zionist ideology—the two go hand-in-hand in the sense that Antisemitism and Zionism are countervailing ideologies—antisemitism being externally directed at Jews, and Zionism being internally directed to Jews in order to strengthen them and provide them with purpose and direction. Both forces have shaped the path of modern Jewish life.

While the term “antisemitism” is fairly new, its underlying concept, anti-Jewish hatred, is ancient. The modern term was coined in 1879 by a German writer named Wilhelm Marr during a time when the ideas that would coalesce in Eugenics and Social Darwinism were becoming increasingly popular. Modern antisemitism began as a branch of race-science, a pseudo-scientific methodology of determining a population’s alleged superiority or inferiority based on real or supposed ethnic and racial characteristics. Wilhelm Marr wrote about the “Jewish question,” namely, “Do Jews really belong [as equals among non-Jews]?” He did this during a
period when the Jews of Western Europe were newly emancipated, and thus had been granted
the legal rights of any other native or naturalized citizens within the Jews’ respective countries of
birth or residence. Beginning with France in 1789 and ending with Switzerland in 1874, the
Jewish population of Western Europe became politically emancipated, at least in theory.

As I will discuss below, the practice of emancipation of the Jews was both beneficial and
detrimental to the survival of Jewish peoplehood. And while the Jews of Western Europe were
emancipated, the Jews of Eastern Europe were experiencing government sanctioned pogroms—
outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence including murder, rape, arson, and generally destructive
behavior.

THE CULTIVATION OF DIFFERENCES THAT DISRUPT POLITICAL PRECEDENTS

Modern Judaism is complicated in part because there are so many people who identify as Jewish
who fall all over the spectrum of religious observance. The ethno-religion currently consists of
multiple denominations separated by their ideas of proper Halachic interpretation and
observance. The three most prominent of these denominations are the Reform, the Conservative,
and the Orthodox. While these movements exist globally, they are far more prevalent in the
United States, on which I will focus presently.

Due to its nature as a liberal form of practicing and observing Judaism, the Reform
movement inspired the westernization of modern-minded Jews, yet for that same reason caused a
countervailing reaction. Specifically, Reform motivated the creation of the Conservative and
Orthodox denominations. According to Reform, halacha is not absolutely binding and must
evolve. For its part, Conservative Judaism follows the idea that aspects of the implementation of

43 “Jewish Emancipation in Western Europe” Eli Barnavi
halacha may change in accordance with practices and observances that develop organically within the Jewish community. Meanwhile, Orthodox Judaism has it that following the letter of the law is absolutely obligatory, as Halacha rests on an infallible divine authority.

Some denominational communities tolerate acculturation into the non-Jewish, American mainstream while others work hard to differentiate themselves and maintain a prominent Jewish identity. American social life revolves around pastimes like sporting events. Many youth leagues hold athletic games on Saturdays, which has created debate within more observant Jewish communities over the prioritization of generic social activities over specifically Jewish ones.

For some American Jews, rituals like saying a prayer before eating or drinking are habitual, but to an outsider may seem very foreign or strange. Other ways in which Jews have set themselves apart from gentiles include the way they dress—a practice that is much more common in Orthodox settings where tzniut, or modesty, is highly valued, as is donning religious garments like tzitzit⁴⁴ and kippot⁴⁵ that have little to do with traditional notions of modesty per se. These physical reminders are ways that observant Jewish people cultivate to maintain differences between their culture and the cultures of other peoples. I grew up in Los Angeles in local communities such as Beverly Hills, near the predominantly Jewish neighborhood of Pico-Robertson. Here, soccer and basketball leagues play on Sundays rather than Saturdays to accommodate the Jewish population. This type of social modification does not exist in most of the United States, however, because the small size of local Jewish populations, where they exist at all, typically does not warrant this type of change. Non-Orthodox Jews, then, typically must rely on private communal spaces and practices to maintain their sense of cultural separateness and viability.

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⁴⁴ Fringes worn on the corners of one’s undershirt, worn primarily by observant Jewish men
⁴⁵ Skullcap also known as a yarmulke
As I will discuss, the creation of the State of Israel, and Jews’ attachment to the country’s culture, are other important ways in which Jewish people in modernity have maintained their particular sense of collectivity.

QUESTIONING OF CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS:

The 20th Century was arguably one of the most defining historical periods of post-Temple Jewish history in terms of Jews’ religious evolution and their resistance or acceptance of assimilation. More specifically, the late 19th and 20th centuries led to a collective questioning of the cultural assumptions prevalent in communities in which the Jewish people had lived for hundreds of years if not millennia. While antisemitism was not new, it became a dominant issue in Jewish life. Hatred diminished the overall feeling of safety that Jews had hoped to gain within broader non-Jewish communities in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. This led to many Jewish people emigrating to the United States, and to British Mandatory Palestine. Modern Zionism came out of this period fraught with antisemitism.

The goal and practice of returning to the Land and Jerusalem has existed for over 2000 years among diasporic Jews, yet it became a mass political, religious, and social movement only in the second half of the nineteenth century. The main actor within modern Zionism was a man named Theodore Herzl, a secular Jew who founded the Political Zionist movement and organized the World Zionist Congress. Herzl began lobbying for a Jewish state when he realized antisemitism was a pervasive problem that affected Jewish people throughout Europe even as they were becoming politically integrated and were allowed to participate in broader European culture post-emancipation. While Herzl died 40 years before the establishment of the State of
Israel, his work as a Zionist greatly contributed to the foundation of the State, and thus paved the way for modern Jewish forms of countercultural thinking and behavior.

The climax of antisemitism in Europe happened during the Second World War, when the Nazi party and its allies, buoyed by decades of anti-Jewish propaganda, attacked and committed a systematic genocide of the Jewish People. The Nazis and their allies blamed European Jews for a host of social ills, and treated them as a scapegoat for cultural, political, social, and economic problems that came to light in the decades following the First World War. Once again, Jewish people were compelled to hide their identities or face persecution. Fueled by a secular interpretation of Jewish tradition, many modern Jews had already decided to act and make change in defense of Jewish peoplehood.

Trying to leave behind the rampant antisemitism that pervaded Europe for centuries, Jews had been immigrating to what was Ottoman-controlled Palestine in waves called aliya since the mid-19th century. During and after the Holocaust, the aliya continued despite British efforts to end them (for the British conquered Palestine from the Ottomans). The term aliyah means to ascend. It is the term that Jews have traditionally used when referring to the practice of moving to Israel—English-speaking Jews will colloquially refer to the process of moving to Israel as “making aliyah.”

In 1918, Britain gained control of the Jewish homeland and it became known as British Mandatory Palestine. When the British surrendered that control, the establishment of the State of Israel in May of 1948 was a turning point; it revived long-dormant Jewish feelings of dignity and collective hope; there was once again a viable Jewish State in the Jewish homeland, in which Jews could cultivate their distinctive identity and way of life as they saw fit.
FORMULATION AND INCULCATION OF A DISTINCTIVE WAY OF LIFE

Secularized Jews living in the State of Israel feel a different tie to the Jewish culture than those who remain in the Diaspora. The State of Israel is governed by a secular, democratic government which sets policy, governs external affairs, enforces laws, and performs other generic governmental duties. There is no official religion in the State of Israel; however, Jews, Muslims, and Christians living in the country each count with a state-sponsored, governing body of religious experts who oversee matters of personal status, and practices such as marriage and burial. That is why, for instance, religious intermarriages are not recognized by the state religious courses, though such intermarriages may take place outside of Israel and are recognized by the state’s secular court system. For Jews living in Israel, the Chief Rabbinate oversees the personal and purely “religious” aspects of Jewish life. As one commentator notes, “The State recognizes the jurisdiction of the Rabbinical courts over all Jewish inhabitants in matters of personal status, deciding these issues according to the Halakha. A similar jurisdiction is granted to the other recognized communities over those belonging to them” 46 Thus, Israeli Jews enjoy a secular-national attachment to their ancestral culture that is supplemented by (Orthodox) rabbinic oversight of certain aspects of individuals’ civic and personal life.

By contrast, in the US Orthodox Jews practice the most strictly traditional form of Jewish culture, thus experiencing a different level of “assimilation” than a Jew who is merely a Jew in name, versus someone who practices in accordance with the Conservative, or Reform movements. But the notion of a secular-national attachment to Jewish culture is largely absent. Jews who align with the Conservative Movement have a more liberal view of Halacha than Orthodox Jews and follow the decisions of local, congregational rabbis or Rabbinical Assemblies

46 Natan Lerner, p.447
representing the Conservative Movement. Reform Jews live their lives in almost complete harmony with the rest American society. They believe it is up to each individual to determine his or her *Halachic* observances. The Reform Movement has challenged the established Rabbinic structure of Judaism on multiple occasions since its emergence in the nineteenth century. For example, most Reform synagogues use a liturgy that varies significantly from those used by the Orthodox or Conservative Movements, both of which adhere more closely to the traditional language and order of liturgical devotion. Thus, Jews’ interpretation of, and participation in private devotional rituals, rather than in a “public square” created principally by Jews and for Jews, is the focus of American Judaism.

As we have seen, inside the Land of Israel there are structures in place to ensure that followers of each of the three Abrahamic religions maintain a sense of separation from each other while giving expression to their ethnicity as members of recognized “sectors” on the statewide level. But that concept does not exist outside of Israel. For the most part, Jews living in the United States have a different sense of Jewish identity than people living in Israel. One scholar explains this as follows: “In the Diaspora the geographic community is primarily experienced as a local phenomenon, [while] in Israel the concept of Jewish community is first and foremost a national experience.” My impression is that outside of Orthodox groups, the maintenance of a traditional, devotionally-focused Jewish culture is stronger in Jewish communities that exist outside the Jewish homeland. Perhaps this is due to the need to maintain cultural distinctiveness in the face of dominant non-Jewish cultures in the Diaspora. In Israel, the opposite appears to me to be true, though standards of religious observance, as distinct from actual practice, favor Orthodox norms, and knowledge of Hebrew, of the Hebrew Bible, of Jewish history, of the

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47 Kopelowitz, p.102-103
Jewish homeland, and of Jewish lore far exceeds the norm among American Jews. It has been a challenge, for instance, to convince non-Orthodox Israeli Jews to live a halachic way of life in a consciously countercultural way. In a recent survey of secular Israeli Jews, only 35 percent of them answered that they would have chosen to be Jewish if they had been born abroad. This stems from their association of their Jewish identity and its distinctive practices with living in Israel rather than anything else. It is far easier, in effect, to engage in a distinctly Jewish way of life unconsciously and semi-consciously when one lives in a country where a majority of people are Jewish than when one lives in the Diaspora, where less than one percent of the population in most places identifies as Jewish. In America, Jews who are not deracinated perceive the need to actively participate in organized Jewish life as a means of staying connected to Jewish peoplehood. This usually takes the form of membership in a synagogue, a JCC, or a Jewish youth group.

Today, many Jewish people feel a strong sense of connection to the peoplehood because of the State of Israel, Jewish youth groups, summer camps, synagogues, and participation in University organizations whose mission is to foster Jewish life, such as Chabad or Hillel—as well as dozens of other organizations. Some diasporic Jews establish a distinct way of life based on religious observances while others feel bonded to their people through an ethnological relationship. Regardless of someone’s level of observance, many people who identify as Jewish feel a strong sense of kinship toward one another based solely on the bond of Jewish Peoplehood.

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48 Kopelowitz, p.104
Conclusion

Each individual and event that I have discussed within this paper is part of the reason that Am Yisrael exists. Avraham and Sarah, Ruth, and Esther and Mordechai each had to forge their own paths as prototypes if not members of a people planted firmly within their ethnicity and faith. In different ways, each of these stories shows how they constantly wrestled with their belief in their God and in the peoplehood within themselves, especially when faced with adversity. The perseverance of these people can be directly traced through millennia, though the experience of many generations, and is responsible for the survival of the Jewish people. Every person who identifies as Jewish shares that commonality regardless of their level of observance of Halacha, their belief in God or in the stories of the Tanach, and regardless of the emphasis—national or religious—of their ties to the ancestral Land of Israel. The phrase Am Yisrael Chai is so commonplace in the global Jewish community because the meaning behind it permeates the lives of that community’s members; it is a mantra of survival and expresses a countercultural mindset that undergirds countercultural practices. Judaism does not continue to exist because its people are hated; the Jewish people continue to survive because of a universally held attitude that is positively directed at the will to continue to survive and to expand both in harmony and in contradistinction with tolerant, surrounding cultures. As I touched on in the Rabbinic case study, the text of Vehi She’amda states “in every generation they try to destroy us, and God saves us from their hands.” This sentence showcases the unconventional relationship Jews have with their God, who both allows God’s people to experience persecution, and saves them from it time and time again.

49 The Nation of Israel lives
This paper has endeavored to show how Jewish people have exhibited conscious and subconscious countercultural behaviors for thousands of years through evidence from the Biblical era through modernity to argue that the Jewish ethno-religion’s survival is attributable to actions that go directly against dominant cultural norms. This countercultural behavior has been built over centuries, and it has become a both conscious, mindful belief in Jewish peoplehood. As I have stated throughout this paper, Judaism cannot be confined to the idea of religion, it is far greater than that; it is a peoplehood. While the English term ‘Jewish Peoplehood’ was coined fairly recently by American Jewish leadership to “strike a safe balance between two opposing forces,” Jewish peoplehood itself is ancient. For many people who identify with Jewish Peoplehood, a countercultural voice has been deeply ingrained in the day-to-day. From keeping Kosher to being aware of holidays, to loving the State of Israel, many people’s Jewish identity cannot be removed from their other identities.

50 Graizbord, David L. p.34n.35
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