

## **Jews and the Nations: the Clash of Civilizations**

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# Jews and the Nations: the Clash of Civilizations

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Since “9/11” (September 11, 2001) much attention has been centered on the writings of a distinguished Harvard University political scientist, Samuel P. Huntington and his dramatic essay “The Clash of Civilizations.” It first appeared in *Foreign Affairs*<sup>1</sup> in 1993 and was subsequently expanded to book length<sup>2</sup> in 1996 wherein Huntington answered many of his critics and clarified his ideas. He states his thesis clearly:

It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future<sup>3</sup>.

This conception of history is reminiscent of various statements in the classic texts of Rabbinic Judaism. While these are mostly focused on how to implement the Torah and its commandments in everyday matters of life, from time to time we also find imaginative speculations on the

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1. S.P. HUNTINGTON, “The Clash of Civilizations,” *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993). It is available on the Web at <[www.foreignaffairs.org/19930601faessay5188/samuel-p-huntington/the-clash-of-civilizations.html](http://www.foreignaffairs.org/19930601faessay5188/samuel-p-huntington/the-clash-of-civilizations.html)>.
  2. S.P. HUNTINGTON, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1996.
  3. HUNTINGTON, “The Clash of Civilizations,” website.

meaning of history and the passage of civilizations in which Jews lived and with whom they often clashed.

### 1. The Covenant of the Pieces

Much of the speculation on the subject centers on an early episode in the life of Abram—who has not yet even been elevated to Abraham—known as the Covenant of the Pieces, the *Berit ben Ha-Betarim*, found in Genesis 15. Abram has arrived in the Promised Land and after some trials and tribulations he fights a major battle defending some local city-states surrounding the Dead Sea from a group of Babylonian kings that attacked them. Chapter 14 describes Abram's military heroics and the successful campaign. However, Abram seems disconcerted by these events. He has left his native land and family to take up God's promise and challenge to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. He still has no children and the ride has been very bumpy so far. In chapter 15 Abram finally addresses God for the first time. Let us look at the text<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>(1)</sup> After these incidents, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Fear not, Abram; I am your Shield; your reward is exceedingly great." <sup>(2)</sup> Abram said, "O Lord God, what will You give me, since I shall die childless, and the steward of my household is Eliezer of Damascus?"

<sup>(3)</sup> Abram said further, "Behold, You have given me no seed, and behold, my steward will inherit me." <sup>(4)</sup> The word of the Lord came to him in reply, saying, "This one will not inherit you, but the one who will spring from your innards, he will inherit you." <sup>(5)</sup> He took him outside, and said, "Please look heavenward and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So will be your seed." <sup>(6)</sup> And he trusted in the Lord, and He accounted it to him as righteousness.

<sup>(7)</sup> Then He said to him, "I am the Lord, Who brought you forth from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it." <sup>(8)</sup> And he said, "O Lord God, how will I know that I will inherit it?" <sup>(9)</sup> He said to him, "Take for Me a three-year-old heifer and a three-year-old goat and a three-year-old ram, and a turtle dove and a young bird." <sup>(10)</sup> He brought Him all these, and he divided them in two, and he placed each part opposite its mate, but he did not divide the birds. <sup>(11)</sup> Birds of prey descended upon the

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4. The quotation is from the Judaica Press English translation, available on-line at <<http://www.chabad.org/library/archive/LibraryArchive.asp?AID=63255>>.

carcasses, and Abram drove them away. <sup>(12)</sup> Now the sun was ready to set, and a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and behold, a fright, a great darkness was falling upon him. <sup>(13)</sup> And He said to Abram, “You shall surely know that your seed will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they will enslave them and oppress them, for four hundred years. <sup>(14)</sup> but I will judge the nation that they will serve, and afterwards they will go forth with great possessions. <sup>(15)</sup> You will come to your forefathers in peace; you will be buried in a good old age. <sup>(16)</sup> And the fourth generation will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites will not be complete until then.” <sup>(17)</sup> Now it came to pass that the sun had set, and it was dark, and behold, a smoking furnace and a firebrand, which passed between these parts. <sup>(18)</sup> On that day, the Lord formed a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your seed I have given this land, from the river of Egypt until the great river, the Euphrates river. <sup>(19)</sup> The Kenites, the Kenizzites, and the Kadmonites, <sup>(20)</sup> And the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Rephaim, <sup>(21)</sup> And the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Girgashites and the Jebusites.”

We begin with Abram being worried and fearful and receiving God’s reassurance. Abram has entered on to the stage of world affairs, involved in an international battle. It may not have been what he expected when he left home for a new life. Is this my future? Will I never have children, settle down and live in peace?

Well, the answer is yes and no—mostly no for now. But there will be a great future. So hold on tight as the ride begins. You will travel through many civilizations and many lands but eventually you will return here. That is your destiny if indeed you are to find the blessing. Finding blessing and being a blessing are not simple tasks.

This passage received much attention from rabbinic commentators from the early Midrash through Medieval Spain, France and Germany as well as more recent interest in Eastern Europe. It was suggestive to the rabbinic imagination for already Babylonia is part of the Biblical story and the animals described lend themselves to symbolic interpretation.

Here is the commentary of Rashi [Solomon ben Isaac, 11th century, France] who pulled together various Midrashic strands:

<sup>(10)</sup> *and he divided them.* He divided each one into two parts [...] *but he did not divide the birds.* Since the idol-worshipping nations are likened to bulls, rams, and goats, as it is said (Ps. 22:13): “Many bulls surrounded me, etc.,” and Scripture states (Dan. 8:20): “The ram that you saw, the one with horns, represents the kings of Media and Persia,” and Scripture states

(ibid. verse 21): “And the he-goat is the king of Greece.” And the Israelites are likened to young doves, as it is said (Song of Songs 2:14): “My dove, in the clefts of the rock.” Therefore, he divided the animals, as an allusion that the nations will gradually perish. “But he did not divide the bird,” as an allusion that Israel will exist forever [...].

<sup>(14)</sup> *And also the nation.* The words, and also, include the four kingdoms (Babylon, Persia and Media, Greece, and Edom), for they too will perish because they enslaved Israel. *will I judge*, with ten plagues.

<sup>(17)</sup> *the sun had set and it was dark. The day darkened. and behold, a smoldering furnace, etc.* He hinted to him that the kingdoms of the pagans would fall into hell<sup>5</sup>.

So we see here the beginnings of this type of concern about the processes of history and how Abraham’s progeny will experience the future. There will be inevitable civilizational clashes and they will survive them. Let us now examine some of those clashes.

## 2. The Heifer: BABYLON—From Exodus to Exodus

“I am the Lord, Who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it.” (Gen. 15:7) The Hebrew phrasing here is almost identical to the majestic opening of the Decalogue (Ex. 20:2; Deut. 5:6) except for one letter—“I” in the Decalogue is *anokhi* rather than the *ani* of the Abram address. Otherwise they are dramatically and, in my view, significantly close.

One implication of this similarity is the fact that we use the term Exodus to describe the leaving of Egypt. There is an Exodus from slavery to freedom from persecution and suffering to a hopeful new beginning in our Promised Land. Should we not also use the term Exodus to describe Abram’s departure from ancient Babylonia to the Promised Land? Of course, the Bible does not describe Abram and Sarah and their family as being the victims of any long-term persecution. But is an Exodus only a response to physical persecution? Or, must we also speak of an Exodus when the issues are cultural, spiritual and religious quests and journeys?

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5. RASHI’s commentary is printed in almost every Jewish Bible that contains commentaries. Various translations exist in English and French. This reference can also be found on the Web at <[www.chabad.org/parshah/rashi/default.asp?AID=9169](http://www.chabad.org/parshah/rashi/default.asp?AID=9169)>.

In other words, a civilizational clash can also produce an Exodus without war and suffering, persecution and slavery.

Already from the beginning of our meeting with Abram we can see a civilizational approach. Rather than God saying to Abram “Come with me to a new land,” God says “Leave your land, your birthplace and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” (Gen. 12:1) There is a subtle yet definite suggestion that the purpose of going is to detach him from the civilization and culture in which he lives. This is not a vacation, a business trip or just a chance to start over. It is a rejection of one civilization in order to create another. Abram, you will become a new and great nation. You will be blessed and will be a blessing. What has to be achieved cannot be done in Ancient Babylonia. A new setting is chosen for a new venture.

Babylonia figures prominently in Biblical Jewish history and consciousness. It is where Abraham and Sarah come from and their families continually go back to find appropriate wives; the Babylonian kings are the ones Abraham fights off in defending the local Canaanites; and Babylonia will cause the destruction of the first commonwealth, the first Jerusalem temple and the first Exile. Babylonia is remembered in the Psalms as a place of tears: “By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept while we remembered Zion.” (Ps. 137:1) But what was the Babylonia Abram and Sarah left behind in search for a new human path? What were they rejecting and why?

Just before we meet Abram the Torah has a story about Babylon, known as the Tower of Babylon episode (Gen. 11:1-9). We find the great city of Babel—originally meaning the Gate of God—deteriorating into what we now associate with the word “babble”—meaningless chatter.

Babel thought of itself as the gateway to heaven and built a mighty tower to reflect this identity. But in doing so they ignored God’s dream of seeing humanity spread out over the earth. For in constructing the city and tower they concentrated resources and people into one place. Their commitment to the project was so intense that our Rabbis say they ignored when a person fell off the tower during construction but deeply lamented when a brick fell down. As well, we are told in the Torah that they had “one language and the same words.” (Gen. 11:1) Here again an image of imposed uniformity in word and thought against the divinely desired diversity. Today we would look at this as prototypical totalitarianism.

Babylonian civilization had some disturbing elements and characteristics. A sensitive person might be dissatisfied with the pagan worship and ethic. If one had come to believe that pagan plural gods and the lack of respect for the individuality and variety of human being were not the highest human capacity you might get a civilizational clash. In fact, this is what happened to Abraham. Unhappy with his native civilization he rejects it and is ready to follow God to a new land to build a new civilization.

As expressed by the 19th century Lithuanian rabbi, N.Z.Y. Berlin, known as Neziv,

Since the views of human beings are not the same, [the builders of Babel] were concerned that no one should have a contrary opinion. They therefore took care that no one be allowed to leave their city, and those who expressed contrary views were condemned to death by fire, as they sought to do to Abraham. Their “shared words” became a stumbling block because they resolved to kill anyone who did not think as they did<sup>6</sup>.

Neziv is here reflecting the views of many Rabbis (including Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, 19th century Germany) and numerous modern era democratic thinkers that the diversity of human beings and

... the division of mankind into separate countries and continents, nations and cultures, was the best defense against the global rule of evil [...]. Neziv’s view is that Babel was in danger of becoming the first totalitarian state (“the attempt to impose a man-made unity on divinely created diversity”). The “unity of speech” of its builders threatened the natural diversity of human opinion. They refused to allow dissidents to leave, and sentenced to death those who expressed dissenting views. While they were building the city, the people were united by a common purpose. The dan-

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6. NEZIV’s Torah commentary is called *Ha’amek Davar*. This comment is on Gen. 11 and is found in J. SACKS, *The Dignity of Difference: A Clash of Civilizations? Judaic Sources on Co-existence in a World of Difference* (available on the Web at <[www.chief Rabbi.org/ar-index.html](http://www.chief Rabbi.org/ar-index.html)>, in the category “Other Articles and Broadcasts”), § 10. All the NEZIV quotations are from here. SACKS also published a book of the same name, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, rev. ed., London/New York, Continuum, 2003<sup>2</sup> (2002). The internet article is a collection of Jewish sources apparently intended to supplement the book. For background on the life and thought of Rabbi Berlin see H.S. JOSEPH, *Why Anti-semitism?*, Northvale, Jason Aronson, 1996.

ger was that, had they succeeded in building it they would continue to impose uniformity.

Neziv adds an interpretation of Jeremiah 2:33-34 in which the prophet delivers a stinging criticism of Israel: “How skilled you are at pursuing love! Even the worst of women can learn from your ways. On your clothes, men find the lifeblood of the innocent poor, Though you did not catch them breaking in.” Neziv comments:

The meaning is that there were in his [Jeremiah’s] day groups who prided themselves that they had more love and peace than anyone else. The prophet says that it was not so. On their clothes was the blood of the innocent poor—not because they had stolen from them but because they [the poor] were not part of their group. Sectarianism leads to murder, and the way to praiseworthy peace only comes when people are careful to do no evil to those who are not members of their group.

Thus, Biblical history begins with an Exodus from Babylon prior to the Exodus from Egypt. It is an Exodus not based on persecution and slavery but on cultural dissonance. Abraham was not persecuted and enslaved—although some rabbinic legends do have him thrown into the fire pit for his heretical views—but he has issues to resolve and explore that cannot be resolved where he is. The clash results in an Exodus, the first of many to be experienced by our people. When God speaks to Abram, the language is familiar: “I am the Lord, Who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans...” (Gen. 15:7) It is the same expression found in regard to the Exodus from Egypt. “I am the Lord your God who brought you forth from the land of Egypt.” (Ex. 20:2; Deut. 5:6) The Exodus from Babylon comes first.

But, of course, it is the Exodus from Egypt that stands out in our historical memory and which is referred to more often. It is a defining moment, a foundational event. Here Israel becomes a nation with a new Torah-based identity. The Exodus from Egypt is not just liberation from slavery and persecution but it becomes a clash of values. It is a rejection of slavery and persecution for all. It is a rejection of Egyptian society and its cultural values. It becomes a paradigm for the Biblical view of society and human responsibility. So much of Judaism is founded on *zekher liyetziat Mitzrayim*—in memory of the Exodus from Egypt. As Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has recently written,



In virtually every society known to history, the strong have attempted to use their power against the weak. The biblical paradigm for this was ancient Egypt, which turned the Israelites into slaves. It is no coincidence that the formative experience of Israel was that of God, the supreme power, rescuing the powerless and leading them across the desert to freedom. The task he set them was to create a society built on the rule of law, together with social welfare and practical compassion, in which no one's freedom would be purchased at the cost of others being reduced to servitude or humiliating poverty and dependence<sup>7</sup>.

Jewish identity is forged upon the memory of these two Exodus experiences. While there is a physical persecution aspect to the Exodus from Egypt there is a civilizational clash as well. The ancient Babylonian and Egyptian value systems and worldviews that lead to a denial of human dignity are rejected. There is a Promised Land in which to create a new civilization based on a different view of the world and what is good and bad, right and wrong. As my teacher, the late noted theologian and Talmudist, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik used to say, the Exodus was not only to a new destination but to a new destiny as well.

### 3. The She-Goat: Greece

In the days of Mattathias son of Yohanan and his sons the Hasmonean high priests, the wicked Greek kingdom rose against your people Israel to force them to forget your Torah and violate your commandments. With great mercy you stood by them in their difficult moment and rose to plead their cause, defend their judgment and mete out retribution. You delivered the strong into the hand of the weak, the many into the hand of the few, the wicked [*reshaim*] into the hands of the righteous [*zaddikim*], the impure into the hands of the pure and the rebels [*zedim*] into the hands of those who occupy themselves with your Torah [...]. Then your children came into your Sanctuary and cleansed it kindling lights in its holy precincts and instituted these eight days [Hanukah] of praise and thanksgiving for the wonders you did for them<sup>8</sup>...

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7. This quotation is from Chief Rabbi Sacks' thoughts on Deut. 17:14 available at <<http://www.chief Rabbi.org/thoughts/shoftim.pdf>>.

8. *The Traditional Prayer Book for Sabbath and Festivals* / edited and translated by D. de Sola Pool; authorized by the Rabbinical Council of America, New Hyde Park, N.Y., University Books, [1960] — insertion for Hanukah.

The Jewish winter festival of Hanukah is a primary example of the clash of civilizations, this time with ancient Hellenism. The language is clear: the danger was that someone was trying “to force them to forget your Torah and violate your commandments.” Is it Gentile pagans versus monotheist Jews? Then why did the Sages choose language that is suggestive of other things? Maybe Gentiles can be wicked-*reshaim* but it is usually a name reserved for Jewish sinners. Even more suggestive is the term *zedim* which I translated as rebels. It has the meaning of people who deliberately and intentionally rebel related to the Hebrew word *mezid*. These are paired against *oskei Toratekhab*—those who occupy themselves with Torah. We do not ordinarily expect Gentiles to occupy themselves with Torah so how could they be considered as rebels? So who are these “bad guys” anyway?

Of course, The Books of The Maccabees give us a more complete understanding of the Hanukah story. A comparison to the brief prayer insertion above indicates that the Rabbinic authors of the prayer were being nice but yet subtle and suggestive when they composed this Hanukah prayer.

The main battle of Hanukah was a civil war among Jews. If the other side had won, Jews would all have become Hellenized and assimilated into Greek culture. Monotheism would have disappeared and there would have been no challenge remaining to pagan idolatry. There would probably be no Judaism, Christianity and Islam today. The Rabbis composed the prayer knowing that the culprits were Hellenizing Jews who wished to make our nation into one more Greek cultural entity among the many Greek dominated lands of the Mediterranean world. This was the then modern and progressive way to be part of a large, prosperous and culturally interesting civilization. Why should Jews isolate and separate themselves from this appealing and universal culture that was spreading rapidly? Other nations were joining and losing their national cultures. Why not the Jews?

The Jewish Hellenizers were growing stronger. They had even gained influence among the traditional Temple priests. The Hellenizers invited the Syrian Greeks to help them in their efforts. This finally led to the revolt by a different priestly family, Mattathias and his sons headed by Judah. The Syrian Greeks were forced to withdraw and the Torah loyalists overwhelmed the Hellenizers. The Temple was restored to traditional Jewish worship and the corrupted priests were removed. Judaism

was saved. An annual celebration was instituted similar to the earlier holiday of Purim established a few centuries earlier to commemorate the escape from physical annihilation in Persia as told in the Book of Esther. This time, however, the threat was spiritual, religious, cultural and civilizational. It was also a civil war between Jews and that too had to be remembered as a very dangerous event.

But there is more to this story. This was the first time that Jews encountered a civilization that believed that it had the universal message to humanity, that it possessed the truth necessary for all enlightened people and that those who resisted this truth were backward people and even enemies of mankind because they held back progress towards the betterment of humankind. This attitude was passed on to the later developments of Christianity and Islam under which Jews lived for generations. Even the modern enlightenment inherited this attitude. Jews have to face this constantly and live in its dangerous implications. But the first time we met this civilizational superiority complex was in the Greek period of ancient Middle East history.

Finally, it posed the challenge that Jews have faced ever since of how to adjust and adapt to other civilizations, how much can be learned and what must be kept away from in order to preserve Jewish identity, faith, tradition and civilization. Jews have had to discover where and how to draw lines between themselves and the outside world. This was not an easy task for there were always engaging elements in the civilizations among whom Jews lived. There were always some Jews who were so attracted that they lost their own traditions and identified completely with the outside culture.

Until modern times Jewish segregated political status helped preserve Jewish identity; for the lines were pretty much drawn by the outside world. However, in the modern open society—functioning as individuals rather than as communities—Jews have had great difficulty navigating a path and developing a strategy that is successful in preserving Jewish identity. Communities have no real hold over individuals. Jews must rely upon the good will, knowledge and commitment of individuals to guarantee the Jewish future.

So, Hanukah is an extremely serious moment in history, a moment when Jews almost disappeared from the historical scene. Jews remember the dangers of intra-Jewish disputes and the safe limits of debate and dialogue. They are inspired to think about their place in the world as

Jews, and the choices made each day as lives are lived among other ways of life. For those choices will determine the future course of Jewish history, and, indeed, if there will be a history at all.

#### 4. Another Goat and a Ram: Christendom and Islam

In Rabbinic literature Rome took on the Biblical mantle of Esau/Edom, brother and antagonist of Jacob/Israel. There is no clear genealogical reason for this but it may have been inspired by Herod the Edomite who represented Roman power at a very fateful time in Jewish history. Subsequently, the dominion of Christendom was also identified as the bearer of this Roman tradition.

Ishmael, another erstwhile Biblical ancestor became identified with the Arab Muslim world and its empire. Together, Christendom and Islam were the two powers under which the bulk of Jewry lived in the Middle Ages. As Biblical faiths often claiming supersessionary rights to the Biblical mantle the tensions between them and towards Judaism dominated medieval life.

About 900 years ago the celebrated Spanish poet Judah Halevi (*ca.* 1075-1141) was a participant-observer of this cultural scene. About the year 1140, Halevi also wrote a philosophical work called the *Kuzari* also known as *The Book of Argument and Proof in Defense of the Despised Faith*<sup>9</sup>. It is written in the form of a dialogue, purportedly between the king of the Khazars and the representatives of various belief systems, culminating with a rabbi. This was a literary device based on a real occurrence, the conversion to Judaism of the Khazars at the end of the eighth century. Although the reasons for this conversion are lost in the mists of history, Halevi presents the process as a spiritual one and creates a dialogue between the king and representatives of the major religious traditions.

At this time the Western world was divided between Islam and Christianity. Equilibrium had been reached since the Muslim conquest of Southern Europe, Spain and the Middle East. But now, Christians were

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9. J. HALLEVI, *Book of Kuzari* / transl. by H. Hirschfeld, New York, Pardes, 1946. Also, see *Le Kuzari. Apologie de la religion méprisée* / transl. and annotated by C. Touati, Paris, Verdier, 1994. Part I is found on the Web as well at <[www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/kuzari.html](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/kuzari.html)>.

beginning what they called the Reconquest of lost lands including what we now call the Crusades to liberate the Holy land from Muslim control. Europe and the Middle East were in for some turbulent times. Jews were often caught in the middle.

Halevi presents the king as seeking to improve his religious behavior. He decides to consult Christian and Muslim scholars for they represent the major religions. He was not intending at first to invite a Jewish sage for, he thought, everyone agrees that the Jews are contemptible and that Judaism cannot be true. "As regards the Jews, I am satisfied that they are of low station, few in number, and generally despised<sup>10</sup>."

The Christian scholar tells the king among other things the following:

In short [I believe] in all that is written in the Torah and the records of the Children of Israel, which are undisputed, because they are generally known as lasting, and have been revealed before a vast multitude [...]. Although we are not of Israelite descent, we are well deserving of being called Children of Israel, because we follow the Messiah and His twelve Israelite companions who took the place of the tribes [...]. We are worthy of the title of the Children of Israel. To us was also granted victory, and expansion over the countries. All nations are invited to this religion, and charged to practice it, to adore the Messiah and the cross on which He was put, and the like. Our laws and regulations are derived from the Apostle Simon, and from ordinations taken from the Torah, which we study. Its truth is indisputable, as is also the fact that it came from God. It is also stated in the New Testament: I came not to destroy one of the laws of Moses, but I came to confirm and enlarge it<sup>11</sup>.

What stands out in this careful condensation of Christian beliefs is the acceptance of Judaism as the foundation of Christianity and the claim to have replaced or superseded Judaism. The Church is the New Israel and Jews are the old Israel consigned to the dustbin of history, a relic of a discarded nation. Furthermore, the new version of Judaism is no longer confined to the Jewish nation but is now universalized, opened up to the nations of the world.

When the king speaks to the Muslim scholar he also learns that Islam looks at itself as also following from the Biblical faith without accepting

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10. *Book of Kuzari*, I:4.

11. *Book of Kuzari*, I:4. The Christian scholar makes reference to Matt. 5:17.

the veracity of the Bibles of Jews and Christians, only their own Muslim scriptures, the Koran. But then the Muslim says: “Our prophet is the Seal of the prophets, who abrogated every previous law, and invited all nations to embrace Islam<sup>12</sup>.”

Here again we have the stark claim of supersession. This time it is Islam that replaces both Judaism and Christianity for it claims the final revelation—the Seal of the prophets. The true Biblical faith passes through Abraham to Ishmael and not to Israel through Isaac. According to Islamic tradition, the stories in the Bibles of Judaism and Christianity are falsified. Finally, we again have the universal claim: Islam is for all; it is universal truth for everyone.

Now the king decides that he must speak to a Jewish sage for the Christian and the Muslim continually refer to Judaism as their foundation. However, when he does address the rabbi he is very surprised that the rabbi rejects the universal type claim of the others. Judaism is for Jews only.

Later on the rabbi will have a very positive take on Christianity and Islam as part of God’s plan for ultimate redemption of mankind for they have borrowed and spread teachings from the Torah. But the Torah is for Jews—those who were taken from Egypt and stood at Mount Sinai hearing God’s commandments.

Halevi has briefly condensed the entire religious conflict between the three Biblical faiths in just a few short paragraphs. Of course, the major cultural battle at this time was between Christianity and Islam; Judaism was no competitor on the historical playing field. Christianity continually posed itself as the true offspring of Judaism and looked at Islam as a young upstart. Islam did not pay much attention to combating Judaism for Christianity was the other major player of the time and its main competitor on the battlefield.

But the conflict did not remain intellectual. The medieval Christian world inherited insanely false claims against Jews that prevailed in more ancient times: Jews were misanthropic, blind to the truth even of their own faith. They were deniers of what was so clearly true to Christians and were preventing the final redemption from taking place by their stubborn refusal to accept Jesus as the Messiah. They desecrated Chris-

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12. *Book of Kuzari*, I:5.

tian holy objects and used Christian blood in their rituals such as Passover wine or unleavened bread. Before Christmas in 1491 in Spain it was alleged that Jews killed a child and used his blood for some Jewish ritual. No child was found to be missing, no body was found. However, a group of Jews was convicted on the charge and killed. This event known as the "Infanto De La Guardia" Affair was used as a final excuse to expel Jews from Spain in 1492. It is still taught to schoolchildren in Spain that way.

To be sure, Muslim hostility never reached the pitch and fervor of the Christian world. Jews were expected to remain subdued and not display their Jewishness in public. Only rarely did popular violence break out against Jews in the Muslim world until the twentieth century. Only when Jews began to try to reclaim their land and to enter the political arena did they arouse intense Muslim hatred.

There is an important continuity here from earlier times. The competition is not now between Judaism and universalizing Hellenistic culture. It is between universalizing claims of new forms of Judaism and the Judaic form. Christianity and Islam inherited much from Judaism but they also inherited the Greek claim to have the one and final truth that will redeem all humanity. Only the Jews stand in the way for each. And this Jewish rejection for them may be more painful because Jews are the original version of what they claim to be. If Jews do not accept their version of true Biblical faith this might question the veracity of their views.

Against these claims Judah Halevi and other medieval rabbis stood firm. Their attitude can be summarized in the following way: You may have borrowed from us many valid ideas but history is not yet finished. We are willing to recognize your acceptance of much of the essence of the Torah such as the belief in the invisible God and the demands of morality. However, there is much more to go. We will not give up until the coming of the Messiah when all nations will live under the guidance of the one true God that you have begun to worship. As we see it, nations will retain their national integrity and yet share a true and final faith and create truly human societies. So do not deny our or other nationalities and force an amalgam of all into one. We are not trying to make you into Jews; don't force us to abandon our ways as well.

Jews by and large refused the invitations of the new daughter faiths and continued to be Jews. Sometimes this caused great hardship and suffering. However, they passed on their faith because they believed that

it was still meaningful: it had not been replaced or transcended. The ingratitude of the “daughters” was painful but that’s what a parent must endure from time to time. Parents learn to be patient with their children and learn to suffer disappointments while praying for them to find the right way for themselves. Sometimes children rebel as part of their own identity formation. But eventually they grow up and recognize the gifts their parents gave to them. Medieval Jews waited for that day to arrive.

### 5. The Dove: Israel

The dove has remarkably survived the lamb and the ram, the goat and the calf, the cross and the crescent. Most Jews now enjoy an essentially secure existence in North America under the eagle and the maple leaf, the symbols of America and Canada. A large number of Jews also live in a strong State of Israel that has the ability to defend itself and to solve its security problems as well.

For the first time in many centuries Jews are almost totally enmeshed in only one civilization, the modern Western tradition. One thousand years ago about 85 % of Jews lived in the Muslim world. One hundred years ago about 85 % lived in the various parts of the Christian world, either Eastern or Western Christianity. Today Jews have come to believe in and identify with modern liberal Western culture as the most secure locale for safety from physical assault. That includes Israel which is trying to build a modern Western style open democracy as well. Jews who live in the North American branches of that civilization believe that they are the most fortunate Jews ever to have lived in a long while.

This commitment to Western culture is remarkable for it comes in the face of the greatest destruction in Jewish history produced by that very culture. The Holocaust did not happen in the Muslim world but in what some call “Old Europe.” In the New World Jews believe very firmly in their safety and security in this branch of Western civilization. They believe that the open democratic society that attempts to really create liberty, equality and fraternity is the most attractive and safest place. So accepting is this society that about 50 % of Jews are intermarrying at this time. This would not be possible without a high degree of acceptance and tolerance. It also illustrates the danger to survival that exists in this open society.

Thus, a new challenge faces Jewish existence: assimilation and the loss of identity. The cultural clash is not between Judaism and any other



religion. It is one that is indeed faced by other religions as well for it characterizes the modern secular culture that dominates Western civilization. For Jews it poses particular temptations for it promises tolerance and acceptance as Jews have never before experienced.

In a multi-polar world, says Samuel Huntington, with increasing cultural consciousness each culture must affirm its own identity in order to be strong and survive. Jews are comfortable living in this civilization but not yet happy: they are cautious in affirming their identity and hesitant about being true to themselves and their traditions. They are often afraid to stand out and be different from others. They are afraid to jeopardize the comfort and security they have found. They are afraid of anti-Semitism and a return to the exclusionary societies of the past. Only the most traditionalist elements of Jewish society march forward with the confidence that ignores these fears.

The Holy Day of Yom Kippur ends with the following quote from the Prophets: “No weapon that is formed against you shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against you in judgment shall fall apart. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their due reward from Me, says the LORD.” (Es 54:17)

Moses Maimonides, in his famous and inspiring *Letter to Yemen* during the 12th century, cites this verse in trying to encourage the Jewish community there beset by persecution<sup>13</sup>. He explains that the sword obviously refers to those nations who physically attack Jews: they will not be successful in destroying us. “Tongue” refers to language and culture. Cultures that pose a challenge with their ideas and deny Jewish validity and legitimacy—they too will not be successful. Jews will survive the clash of civilizations. They will need passion, wisdom and courage to continue toward their destiny.

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13. One will find an English version of the *Letter to Yemen* in *Moses Maimonides' Epistles to Yemen* / intro. and annotated by A.S. Halkin / transl. in English by B. Cohen, New York, American Academy for Jewish Research, 1952, p. i-xx. For a French version see *Épîtres* / transl. by J. de Hulster, Paris, Verdier, 1983.

## RÉSUMÉ

La discussion actuelle portant sur le «choc des civilisations», suite aux événements du 11 septembre 2001, rappelle différentes affirmations qui se trouvent dans les textes classiques du judaïsme rabbinique. Alors que ces textes s'intéressent principalement à la mise en pratique de la Torah et de ses commandements dans la vie de tous les jours, nous y trouvons de temps à autre des conjectures imaginatives sur le sens de l'histoire et de la succession des civilisations au milieu desquelles les Juifs ont vécu. La survie des Juifs constitue donc une histoire où ceux-ci se heurtent à nombre de civilisations et passent comme à travers elles.

## ABSTRACT

*The current discussion on the Clash of Civilizations that has followed the events of September 11, 2001 is reminiscent of various statements in the classic texts of Rabbinic Judaism. While these texts are mostly focused on how to implement the Torah and its commandments in everyday matters of life, from time to time we also find imaginative speculations on the meaning of history and the passage of civilizations in which Jews lived and with whom they often clashed. The survival of the Jews has been a history of passage through and clash with a whole series of civilizations.*