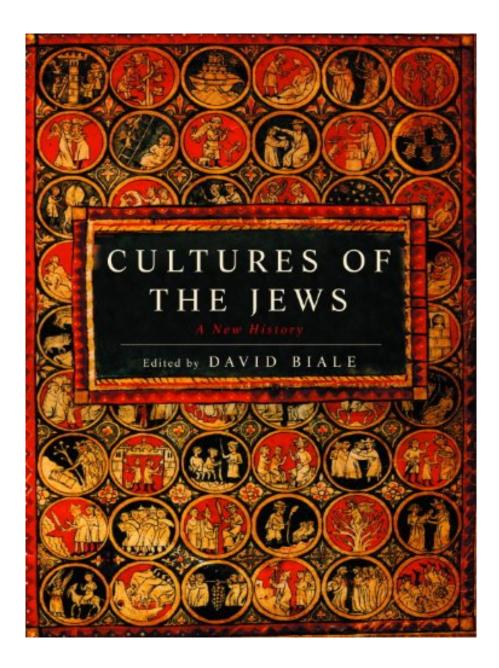


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Who are "the Jews"? Scattered over much of the world throughout most of their three-thousand-year-old history, are they one people or many? How do they resemble and how do they differ from Jews in other places and times? What have their relationships been to the cultures of their neighbors?

To address these and similar questions, twenty-three of the finest scholars of our day—archaeologists, cultural historians, literary critics, art historians, folklorists, and historians of relation, all affiliated with major academic institutions in the United States, Israel, and France—have contributed their insight to Cultures of the Jews. The premise of their endeavor is that although Jews have always had their own autonomous traditions, Jewish identity cannot be considered immutable, the fixed product of either ancient ethnic or religious origins. Rather, it has shifted and assumed new forms in response to the cultural environment in which the Jews have lived.

Building their essays on specific cultural artifacts—a poem, a letter, a traveler's account, a physical object of everyday or ritual use—that were made in the period and locale they study, the contributors describe the cultural interactions among different Jews—from rabbis and scholars to non-elite groups, including women—as well as between Jews and the surrounding non-Jewish world.

Part One, "Mediterranean Origins," describes the concept of the "People" or "Nation" of Israel that emerges in the Hebrew Bible and the culture of the Israelites in relation to that of the Canaanite groups. It goes on to discuss Jewish cultures in the Greco-Roman world, Palestine during the Byzantine period, Babylonia, and Arabia during the formative years of Islam.

Part Two, "Diversities of Diaspora," illuminates Judeo-Arabic culture in the Golden Age of Islam, Sephardic culture as it bloomed first if the Iberian Peninsula and later in Amsterdam, the Jewish-Christian symbiosis in Ashkenazic Europe and in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the culture of the Italian Jews of the Renaissance period, and the many strands of folklore, magic, and material culture that run through diaspora Jewish history.

Part Three, "Modern Encounters," examines communities, ways of life, and both high and fold culture in Western, Central, and Eastern Europe, the Ladino Diaspora, North Africa and the Middle East, Ethiopia, Zionist Palestine and the State of Israel, and, finally, the United States.

Cultures of the Jews is a landmark, representing the fruits of the present generation of scholars in Jewish studies and offering a new foundation upon which all future research into Jewish history will be based. Its unprecedented interdisciplinary approach will resonate widely among general readers and the scholarly community, both Jewish and non-Jewish, and it will change the terms of the never-ending debate over what constitutes Jewish identity.

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By Yehezkel Dror

There are few more complex and also baffling subjects than the nature of the Jewish People and Judaism as a fusion between a civilization and a community/people/nation. Even more enigmatic is the survival and

frequent thriving of Judaism during more than three thousand years of continuous pluralistic existance under a great variety of radically different conditions and in very different political and cultural environments.

This collection by David Biale is an outstanding introduction and profile of this historic riddle, presenting in clear but scholarly sound narratives an overview of the dynamics of Jewish cultures (note the plural) with their shared cores and diverse envelopes. Further such books by Biale are to be eagerly expected, hopefully together with a comprehensive theoretic treatment providing deep understanding of the past and supplying a basis for predicting and trying to weave the future.

This book is strongly recommended to scholars and intellectuals concerned with the history and nature of the Jewish People and to decision makers and policy planners trying to assure its thriving together with contributions to changing global cultures in the future. This book is also essential reading for students of the dynamics of cultures.

Professor Yehezkel Dror. Founding President, the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute (established by the Jewish Agency of Israel) and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

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By I. W. Gittleman

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