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**On Studying Jewish History
in Light of the Holocaust**

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WASHINGTON, D.C.

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MAURICE R. AND CORINNE P. GREENBERG INAUGURAL LECTURE
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The Maurice R. and Corinne P. Greenberg Chair of Holocaust Studies at New York University was established in 1999 through the generosity of Maurice R. and Corinne P. Greenberg in partnership with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The individual selected to hold this endowed chair is a distinguished scholar who has done substantial research on elements of the Holocaust and is recognized in the academic community as a prominent teacher and researcher in the field of Holocaust studies. This lecture, delivered in Washington, D.C., and New York City, has been jointly organized by the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, New York University, and the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

It is in the nature of inaugural lectures to be programmatic; they are supposed to summarize the state of the field and to exhort practitioners regarding their most pressing coming tasks. Since the occasion seems to demand it, the remarks that follow also have a programmatic aspect. Nevertheless I shall try to keep that aspect to a minimum, to frame it within a substantive historical discussion, and to direct whatever exhortations are appropriate not only toward Holocaust specialists but also—even particularly—toward those whose primary interests lie elsewhere.

What I have to say tonight is prompted by the fact that the first incumbent of the Maurice R. and Corinne P. Greenberg Chair in Holocaust Studies at New York University is affiliated with the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, and prior to his most recent appointment occupied the Skirball Chair in Modern Jewish History. I suppose that the uninitiated will find little in that fact that merits reflection, and will wonder just what I have to talk about in that regard. Indeed, could there be a more logical place in which to find a Holocaust scholar than among historians of the Jews in modern times? Certainly, popular perceptions in the United States link the Holocaust with Jewish studies almost presumptively. Walk into a sufficiently large general bookstore and ask for works on the Holocaust, and you will as likely as not be directed to the Judaica section. The same tends to be true of publishers' lists and booksellers' catalogues. Even a visitor to Amazon.com seeking to browse the division "Jewish" of the broad classification "History" must choose between two further options before being presented with any titles—"General Jewish History" on the one hand, "Holocaust" on the

other. Choosing “Holocaust” leads to a list also reachable via the categories “Religion and Spirituality—Judaism.” By this measure, at least, one would think that the Holocaust was not only a *major* concern of those interested in things Jewish but the *dominant* one.

What is more, Judaica sections of bookstores seem increasingly to house books in which Jews figure neither as subjects nor as objects—that is, in which they neither perform any actions nor have any actions performed upon them. A recent visit to a large chain retailer, for example, turned up the following titles of ostensibly “Jewish” content:

- *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies*
- *The Face of the Third Reich: Portraits of the Nazi Leadership*
- *Hitler’s Austria: Popular Sentiment in the Nazi Era*
- *Tearing the Silence: On Being German in America*
- *Hitler’s Traitor: Martin Bormann and the Defeat of the Reich*
- *Nuremberg: Infamy on Trial*

To be sure, these books deal with various aspects of the Nazi regime or recent German experience, both of which have intersected the modern history of the Jews, with fateful consequences for each party. Shelving them together with books about Jews or things Jewish, however, seems a bit like interspersing biographies of Abraham Lincoln with books about the acting career of the Booth family or the history of Ford’s Theatre. Yet we can safely presume that successful booksellers know what they are doing. They understand that in popular consciousness—or in American popular consciousness, at least—not only “Holocaust” but “Nazi,” “genocide,” and often even “German” are perceived as part of the bailiwick of Jewish studies. In fact, this association is so dependable and so powerful that even books that explicitly aim to challenge it often end up in the Judaica section, alongside tales of Hasidic wonder-workers, pictorial albums of Israel, and collections of recipes for chicken soup. Thus Richard Lukas’s *The Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles under German Occupation*, which decries the representation of the Holocaust in “exclusivistic [Jewish] terms,” and Ward Churchill’s *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas*, which insists that the term “holocaust” be applied to the decimation of the native American population in the wake of the European conquest, have on their way to the bookstore been transformed, *mirabile dictu*, into “Jewish” books.

This common practice in the book trade would seem at first glance to testify to the accuracy of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s observation that the Holocaust is “all too often sedimented in the public mind as a tragedy that occurred to the Jews and the Jews alone.” It is conceived, in Bauman’s view, as “an exclusively Jewish affair, of little significance to anyone

else”; even in the academic world, according to Bauman, “the Holocaust has been defined by many as a specialist topic in Jewish history,” isolated from “the mainstream of scholarly discipline and cultural life in general.” This, for Bauman, is a situation that must be changed, for “the Holocaust was not simply a *Jewish problem*, and not an event in *Jewish history* alone.”¹

I certainly do not take issue with the *prescriptive* thrust of Bauman’s observations; on the contrary, I hardly welcome the presumption manifest in current bookselling practices that the encounter between the Third Reich and the Jews, let alone all instances of mass death at human hands, ought to be of interest primarily to Jews. I also find it more than disquieting that what seems to interest many people more than anything else is how Jews died at the hands of the Third Reich (just as I think most of us would be distressed if the life and works of Abraham Lincoln were overshadowed by public fascination with the details of his murder). But on the *descriptive* level it seems to me that Bauman was doubly mistaken. After all, in the same year in which his observation was published (1989) Saul Friedländer summoned twenty leading scholars from various fields in the humanities, most of whom were not specialists in either Holocaust studies or Judaic studies, to an international conference dedicated to exploring the Holocaust’s implications for certain philosophical and methodological problems common to all humanistic disciplines. Friedländer’s call to the conference noted that the Holocaust had already begun to serve as a principal catalyst both for the spread of postmodernist approaches to the humanities and for the questioning of those approaches.² The conference’s impact was substantial. Indeed, during the ensuing decade concern for the Holocaust in the academy at large became broader and deeper, to the point where today it can fairly be said that no matter what their specific interests and areas of expertise, scholars may ignore the Holocaust only at their own peril.

Thus it strikes me as especially strange, even ironic, that, Bauman to the contrary, the one area of humanistic study where the Holocaust has *not* exerted any notable influence has been the study of *Jewish* history. One of my colleagues, a leading historian of modern European Jewry at a prestigious American university, testified to this fact quite bluntly when she stated that “despite its importance in the contemporary Jewish consciousness, the Holocaust has not yet had any particular impact on modern Jewish historiography...[and] has...led to no thoroughgoing revision of our understanding of modern Jewish history.”³ In fact, at the 2001 annual meeting of the Association for Jewish Studies that colleague not only reiterated her evaluation but urged that the situation continue, stating at a panel on “The Holocaust and Jewish History” that “the Holocaust *should not* lead to a major reshaping of modern Jewish history.”⁴ In this prescription she echoed what has long since become the accepted orthodoxy among

historians of the Jews in the modern period. In fact, at the same meeting another leading historian of the Jews termed the contrary suggestion—that the Holocaust *should* lead to such a reshaping—nothing less than “heresy.”⁵ And indeed, judging from the contents of academic Jewish historical journals, the arrangement of the major comprehensive scholarly histories of the Jews, and the syllabi of many university-level survey courses in modern Jewish history, the Holocaust is deemed far less significant a subject for discussion than a range of other historical themes, including enlightenment, emancipation, religious reform and orthodoxy, social and cultural adjustments to modernity, urbanization, migration, and Jewish nationalism.⁶ Moreover, the growth in the body of scholarly literature on the Holocaust in the last fifteen years seems to have influenced the way those subjects are presented far less than the broad intellectual currents subsumed under the headings of gender, social history, and cultural studies. Strange as it may seem, few today who occupy themselves professionally with the history of the Jews in modern times appear to regard the Holocaust as central to their intellectual concerns; fewer still appear regularly to read the major journals in which research on the Holocaust is reported. As a result, few historians of the Holocaust today—at least outside Israel—have come to the field from the direction of Jewish history. Thus for many who study the history of the Holocaust, the scholarly literature on the history of the Jews is not only *terra incognita* but is looked upon as at best only marginally related to their needs. It is this curious and altogether counterintuitive phenomenon of the bilateral marginality of Holocaust studies and the contemporary historiography of the Jews to one another, and the consequences of that marginality for our understanding both of modern Jewish history and of the Holocaust, that I wish to explore, if only partially, here.⁷

The part of my argument that I shall present here can be summarized more or less as follows: in modern Jewish historical scholarship, integration of the Holocaust has been hindered by an ongoing clash between two fundamentally different ways of conceptualizing the experience of the Jews in Europe since the French Revolution. Though the roots of this clash lie primarily not in historiography but in ideology and politics, they have, not surprisingly, defined two sets of historiographical agendas that have competed with each other for more than six decades. Ironically, these agendas were set on the eve of the Holocaust, at a time when the physical security of Jews throughout central and eastern Europe was a matter of intense Jewish public concern, but each has had the effect of deflecting attention from that problem, posing instead issues of culture and identity as the central themes in Jewish history over the past two hundred years. I suggest, then, that if the Holocaust has failed to claim a discernible place on either agenda, this has happened because proponents of each agenda have concluded that talking about it will either add nothing of importance to the understanding of the outstanding features of

the Jewish experience or seriously distort that understanding. The history of the confrontation between these two approaches to the recent Jewish past thus merits an extended digression.

The confrontation is epitomized by two terms through which the situation not only of modern European Jewry but of the large majority of Jewish communities over the past two millennia is frequently characterized. The terms are “exile” on the one hand, and “diaspora” on the other. On the denotative level both terms refer to the same physical phenomenon—the existence in various parts of the world of communities of people calling themselves Jews, whose putative ancestors had once resided by right in a province called Judea before migrating from it at some point in the distant past. Connotatively, however, they suggest quite different evaluations of that phenomenon. To attach to such communities the label “exile” is to characterize their members as living in enforced, involuntary separation from the place to which they feel they rightly belong, in an environment in which they are essentially foreign and powerless, constantly exposed to the vicissitudes of local xenophobia. In contrast, to designate them as “diaspora” is to entertain the possibility that their members might regard themselves as secure and empowered where they are, feeling, perhaps, some sentimental affection for the place where their ancestors presumably originated but in no way looking upon it as their homeland to which they long to return.

These understandings are suggested not only by the plain lexical sense of the two terms but by a longstanding tradition of elaboration in Jewish religious, political, and historical thought. The condition of “exile” (in Hebrew *galut*) has been invested since antiquity with theological meaning: it was represented by the architects of normative Judaism as a divinely-ordained punishment for Israel’s violations of the letter or spirit of its covenant with the one God. To this day, in fact, the traditional Jewish festival liturgy reminds worshipers that “because of our sins we were exiled from our country and banished from our land.” The punishment was not merely physical dispersion and relegation to minority status among more powerful hosts; rather dispersion was understood inevitably to bring with it a life of constant suffering, misery, and degradation. As early as the fifth century C.E., God’s promise in Genesis 13: 16 to make Abraham’s offspring “as the dust of the earth” was interpreted to show that “just as dust is the product of earth being trampled underfoot, so will your offspring be trampled underfoot by foreign kingdoms.”⁸ Exile meant that, wherever they turned, Jews would be mere “temporary sojourners” among the descendants of Esau, who, according to a rabbinic admonition, “always hate Israel.”⁹ Only one thing prevented those enemies from destroying the Jews altogether—a divinely-brokered contract between them and the nations of the world, in which, in return for the Jews’ promise not to rebel, the nations swore “not to enslave Israel

excessively.”¹⁰ The rabbis thus likened the Jews in exile to prisoners of war or to slaves whose master had sold them temporarily with the understanding that he would reclaim them at a later date: though some remote agent was believed still to be concerned with their welfare, their immediate lot was grievous indeed.

Such characterizations may have been invented initially to convey a theological concept, but generations of Jews understood them also as accurate representations of their contemporary situation. Listen, for example, to the words of the Italian Jewish man of letters Leone Modena, from a sermon he preached in Venice in 1593: “How manifold was the greatness that we possessed in the [preexilic] past, how many and awful are the sorrows that beset us [in exile] today, how great and blessed the eternal happiness that will return to us in the [messianic] future! When we keep these three [historic stages] in mind, we are directed toward the goal we seek: the past we mourn, the present we bemoan, and for the future we hope and pray.”¹¹ Modena could bemoan his present even though, at the time he spoke, the Venetian Jewish community to which he belonged was growing rapidly, the Venetian Republic was regularly confirming Jewish privileges and protections, and no serious concrete threat to Jewish physical security was evident to any known observer.¹² True, enforced residence in a ghetto, the requirement to wear distinguishing marks, and frequent subjection to derision by Christians—all features of late sixteenth-century Venetian Jewish life—might well have counted as “many and awful sorrows.” Yet it appears more likely that Modena’s characterization of his community’s existence was rooted mainly in a stereotypic understanding of the exilic state: whatever the specific conditions of that existence, they *had* to be interpreted as miserable, because misery was a necessary concomitant of exile. Thus his characterization would no doubt have been the same no matter what the quality of the actual experience of Venetian Jews in his day.

A weakening of the force of this stereotype became historically significant for the first time in the final decade of the eighteenth century, under the impact of the American and French revolutions. One of its boldest expressions was offered by the Alsatian Jewish merchant banker and communal leader Berr Isaac Berr in response to the 1791 decree of the French National Assembly, which admitted Jews to full French citizenship: the day before its proclamation the Jews still “seemed doomed to remain forever in bondage and abasement,” but “on the following day...more than sixty thousand unfortunate beings, mourning over their sad fate, are awakened to a sense of their happiness by the liveliest emotions of the purest joy.” For Berr, although the process of redemption had not yet been completed, the sting of exile had surely been eliminated: as he put it, “Our God...has chosen the generous French nation to reinstate us in our rights and to effect our regeneration, as in other times he had chosen Antiochus, Pompey, and others to

humiliate and enslave us.” No more, he exulted, would Jews be “vile slaves, mere serfs, a species of men merely tolerated and suffered,” but “children of the country, to bear its common charges and share in its common rights.”¹³

Berr’s comments suggested that physical dispersion and minority status no longer necessarily meant torment and insecurity. If so, then dispersion and exile had to be treated as fundamentally different concepts, and the situation of Jews in diaspora communities could be evaluated other than through the prism of the theological category of *galut*. That conclusion was to have profound ideological ramifications that are strongly felt even today, particularly (during the last hundred years) in the ongoing internal Jewish debate over the propriety and efficacy of Zionism. For our purposes, though, it is most important to note that an area of Jewish life in which those ramifications have been consistently felt has been the study of Jewish history. Beginning in the late 1820s, modernizing Jewish intellectuals, inspired by the premises and methods of the new academic approach to historical study (which, among other things, removed God from consideration as a causal force in human affairs) developed a secular language for appraising the quality of Jewish existence in various times and places. At first these founding fathers of the Jewish historical profession tended to follow Berr’s implications that although exile (in the sense of a state of servility and travail, although no longer one of divine punishment) remained an empirically accurate description of prerevolutionary Jewry, that appellation was no longer appropriate in the countries that had absorbed the revolutionary legacy. Beginning in 1928, Salo Baron, the founding father of university-based Jewish historical studies in the United States, extended the nonexile-based characterization back through the Jewish middle ages. Railing against what he termed “the lachrymose theory of pre-Revolutionary woe,” Baron called for a historiography that would deemphasize suffering and transfer attention to the social, intellectual, and economic interactions between diaspora Jews and their surrounding societies—interactions that he conceived as having been beneficial for the Jews more often than they were catastrophic.¹⁴ Far from being a source only of weakness and insecurity, diaspora, according to Baron, could have actual survival value. In his landmark 1937 *Social and Religious History of the Jews*, which exemplified his approach to the Jewish past, he celebrated the Jews’ “emancipation from state and territory,” which, although the source of periodic tragedies, had helped them cultivate “the religious and ethnic power of perseverance”—a power that had enabled them “to endure beyond all the mighty empires of antiquity.”¹⁵

To be sure, Baron recognized that the years following the French Revolution were not entirely salutary for Jews—that they were “attended by the destruction of Jewish self-

government, the material limitation of the applicability of Jewish law, and a partial disintegration of traditional religious and cultural patterns,” all of which posed ongoing challenges to Jewish survival.¹⁶ He expressed confidence, however, that the Jewish people’s millennial experience had equipped them with the resources to meet those challenges successfully, even if the Nazi rise to power had seriously exacerbated the struggle. Not all students of Jewish history were so sanguine, however. Indeed, just as Baron was setting forth his program, several of his colleagues dissented vigorously from the antilachrymose approach. Not surprisingly, these colleagues were identified mainly with the Zionist movement, which had long since raised “negation of exile” to the level of a fundamental ideological principle that Baron’s view implicitly challenged. As a result they insisted that the centuries-old condition of *galut*, now understood in secular terms, had not yet ceased to exist. In 1928, the year in which Baron published the first outline of his historiographical credo, the historical sociologist Yehezkel Kaufmann presented his seminal interpretation of the Jewish experience, *Golah veNechar* (Exilic and alien lands). That work asserted that the term *galut* was appropriate to “an entire range of sociohistorical processes leading toward ethnic ruination—destruction, enslavement, migration, ghettoization, assimilation, and [negative] natural increase.” At least some of these processes were to his mind fundamental features of the postrevolutionary era, which made the modern period no less exilic than the medieval one.¹⁷ Along similar lines, Yitzhak Baer, the first full-time historian of the Jews to be appointed to the faculty of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, proclaimed in 1936, “Galut has returned to its starting point; it remains [today] what it has always been: political servitude.”¹⁸ Baer emphatically employed the Hebrew word *galut*, which was also the title of the book in which he presented his evaluation, even though the book itself was written in German and published in Berlin.¹⁹ For him, exile—not diaspora—constituted the crucial fact of Jewish history from late antiquity to his own time. Thus, together with his Hebrew University colleague Ben Zion Dinaburg, he urged the abandonment of “Baron’s optimistic song of exile, which loudly proclaims...commercial and intellectual achievements,” in favor of a historiography highlighting the continuous struggles of the Jewish people to overcome the inexorably hostile and debilitating forces that in all generations have threatened to destroy them.²⁰ Not mutually fructifying cultural exchanges between the Jews and their surrounding societies were to be the principal objects of Jewish historical study, but the Jews’ own autonomous dynamic inner spirit, which alone enabled them to persevere in a hostile world.

Each of these historiographical agendas was elaborated with full regard for the European political situation of the 1930s. Indeed, both Baron in *Social and Religious History*

and Baer in *Galut* commented upon that situation explicitly. Of course, the historians proved no more prescient than anyone else in predicting the Holocaust. To be sure, this failure should be a cause neither for wonder nor for condemnation: historians are fallible enough when they try to comprehend what has already happened, let alone to predict the future. What does prompt wonder, however, is that the events of the first half of the 1940s do not appear to have shaken the confidence of either historian in the validity of his historiographical approach. Baer reissued *Galut* in 1947 in English translation without a single change, save the addition of a three-page epilogue reaffirming that in the end “all that we did on foreign soil was a betrayal of our own spirit.”²¹ And although Baron began to publish a new and greatly expanded edition of *Social and Religious History* in 1952 on the grounds that “the story of the Jewish dispersion, the friendly or unfriendly relations between Jews and their neighbors..., assume new aspects when viewed from the standpoint of the tragic decline of European Jewry,” his fundamental historiographical presuppositions, particularly as spelled out in his introductory chapter, remained essentially in tact.²² Similarly, a 150-page 1956 essay surveying the modern period spoke of the Nazi horrors largely with a mind to reemphasizing his objections to the lachrymose view.²³ In fact, as his biographer has noted, “Baron repeatedly claimed—with some justification—that few of his fundamental tenets had changed over time, regardless of what events intervened.”²⁴

At first it seems tempting to view this professional Jewish historiographical disregard for the Holocaust as yet another manifestation of the general recoil from discussing the catastrophe—a phenomena that, according to many, persisted into the 1960s. There appear to be sound reasons, however, for seeking the roots of the phenomenon elsewhere. The most obvious reason is that the architects of each of the competing historiographical schools hardly can be said to have ignored the Holocaust altogether or to have denigrated the importance of its study. Quite the contrary. As a founder of the Conference on Jewish Relations and editor of its journal, *Jewish Social Studies*, as well as in his capacity as chairman of the Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, Baron actively encouraged, from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, academic investigation into many phases of the encounter between Nazi Germany and the Jews. *Jewish Social Studies*, in particular, became during the 1940s and 1950s the primary English-language repository for research on the Holocaust. Baron also played a central role in bringing his former student, Filip Friedman, who had served as founding director of the Central Jewish Historical Commission in postwar Poland, to a lectureship at Columbia University. Baron called Friedman “the father of Jewish Holocaust literature,” and helped him obtain funds for his research on the social history of the ghettos, Jewish resistance, and non-

Jewish rescue efforts.²⁵ Across the ocean, Baer's colleague Dinaburg (known since 1951 as Ben Zion Dinur), drafted, as Israel's education minister, the legislation establishing Yad Vashem, the official Israeli Holocaust memorial. He also served as its first president, founded and edited its journal, and prepared the blueprint for the research program that has guided that institution ever since.²⁶ Dinur insisted moreover that the Yad Vashem research institute be connected with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, in order to facilitate university-level teaching of Holocaust history.²⁷ Both he and Baron regarded the Holocaust as the center of (in Baron's words) "a new discipline in Jewish studies" that merited the attention of scholars trained in Jewish history.²⁸

Yet in approaching the study of the Holocaust as a new discipline, both Baron and Dinur implicitly bracketed it off from other fields of Jewish studies, particularly from the history of the Jews. Both appear to have regarded its aim more as documentary than explanatory, its proper method more as factographic than analytical. Such a conception of the field discouraged those who gravitated toward it from reflecting upon the broad analytical paradigms, whether rooted in the concept of "exile" or in that of "diaspora," that were shaping the study of the rest of the Jewish past, thereby hastening their detachment from the broader Jewish historiographical enterprise. Perhaps this preference for description over interpretation was advisable in the early days of research, when an unprecedented volume of primary source material needed to be located, collected, catalogued, edited, and published. But although much of this sort of work remains to be done, especially following the opening of archives in the former Soviet Union and eastern-bloc countries, we have certainly learned enough during the past fifty years to begin to think about how the Holocaust ought to influence how larger, long-term trends and processes in Jewish history are conceptualized and narrated. Yet the doctoral children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of Baron, Baer, and Dinur, who even today form the backbone of the Jewish historical profession in its two main centers, remain curiously reluctant to do so. The history of the Jews continues to be written today almost entirely according to conceptions and agendas formulated in the pre-Holocaust era, and research on the Holocaust informs it but little.

It seems to me that one of the keys to understanding this reluctance lies in the way the study of Jewish history has been embedded from the outset in the ideological debate over the exilic and diasporic conceptions of Jewish existence. A clear indication of this connection and its effects can be found in what on the surface appears to be the very first attempt by a major historian of either school to gauge the Holocaust's significance for the conceptualization of Jewish history. In 1943, only months after news of the annihilation of two million Polish Jews had been absorbed in Jewish Palestine, Ben Zion Dinaburg set out to analyze a phenomenon he

called “exilic communities and their destruction.” Playing off a scheme proposed by the Russian Jewish historian (and staunch diaspora affirmer) Simon Dubnow, who described the flow of Jewish history in terms of a successive migration of hegemonic cultural centers (from Palestine to Babylonia to Spain to central and eastern Europe), Dinaburg suggested “the real meaning...of ‘the migration of centers’...[is nothing other than] the destruction of those exilic communities and the formation of new ones..., [which are] destined to be destroyed in their turn.” In his view, the very situation of exile set in motion a dialectical process in which the prosperity and creativity of a Jewish minority automatically aroused envy in the surrounding society—envy destined to burst forth in ruinous proportions in times of general instability, bringing upon the Jews banishment, forced conversion, or lethal violence. Such, he claimed, had been the invariable historic pattern of all exilic communities “in all times, in all lands, and under all regimes,” from antiquity until his own day, so that not merely the end but the entire course of the history of any group of Jews outside the historic Jewish homeland was entirely predictable.²⁹

Dinaburg’s theoretical insight was not the result of any new empirical discoveries; on the contrary, he confessed that he had no data at all that could explain the decline of the once-flourishing Jewries of Alexandria or the Parthian and Byzantine empires. In fact, like so many other historians with a strong theoretical bent, he saw one of the great advantages of his model in its ability to fill in large evidentiary gaps. Rather, as he reported with great pathos, his theory came to him in a sudden flash of inspiration, whose source was “the great cataclysm (*sho’ah*) that has befallen us in our generation.” “The struggles of [previous] generations,” he wrote, “have been illuminated instantly by the blinding light of the blaze of the exilic communities burning before our eyes; things that seemed opaque to us have now been elucidated and clarified, and sounds that came to us muffled by the distance of generations now fill our soul, our entire being, with their moan.” Now, he exhorted, it was up to historians to use that great blaze as “a bridge of fire to the awful historic conflagrations of previous generations..., [so as not to] delude ourselves with fine-sounding phrases and vacuous words of comfort.”³⁰

There is no need here to comment on the merits of Dinaburg’s theory and its blatantly Zionist implications, except to point out that, but for General Montgomery’s victory at El Alamein less than half a year previous, the Jews of Palestine might have become engulfed by the great blaze themselves, despite their ostensible rootedness in their ancestral home. The point to be stressed is rather that the promulgation, at the very outset of historical exploration of the Holocaust, of this particular conception of the nexus between it and the principal broad themes in Jewish history ultimately worked against that nexus becoming a serious focus for scholarly reflection and research.

There are several reasons for this phenomenon. On the most elementary level, Dinaburg's representation actually serves to render such reflection and research superfluous. By figuring the Holocaust as simply the latest manifestation of an ancient archetype, Dinaburg suggested that there was little remarkable about it. The novelty in the Holocaust, he stated explicitly, lay in "its form and extent, its calculated organization and its horrific aspects, but not at all in its essence."³¹ Thus, although it could serve as a source of inspiration for broad theorizing, one could not learn any more about the larger structure of Jewish history by studying the most recent instance of destruction than one could by studying the demise of any other exilic community. For Dinaburg, the Holocaust was not likely to reveal anything about the character of the Jewish experience that was not already known. It could and should be studied for memorial and judicial purposes and to inform contemporary discussions of public policy, but not in order to generate any revision of prevailing views of the Jewish past.

Ironically, though, the same operative conclusion was drawn by those who became, not unexpectedly, the greatest detractors of Dinaburg's reading—Salo Baron and his disciples of the antilachrymose, non-Zionist, diaspora-affirming bent. When Baron, preparing to testify at the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961, observed "the Nazi onslaught [constituted] the greatest catastrophe in Jewish history, which has known many catastrophes," he was effectively agreeing with Dinaburg (or, by then, Dinur) that the Holocaust could be understood as a new variation of an ancient archetype, distinguished from other manifestations solely by its magnitude.³² The difference between the two positions, as Baron made explicit elsewhere, was that whereas for Dinur catastrophe was inherent in the exilic condition, Baron found such a deterministic conclusion "unjustifiably rash."³³ Hence, he suggested, just as medieval anti-Jewish violence and persecution were not to be regarded as indicators of the overall tenor of Jewish existence then, neither should the Holocaust be taken in this fashion with respect to the modern era. In fact, in 1963 Baron explicitly reaffirmed his ongoing opposition to the lachrymose conception of Jewish history in a context that made specific reference to the Holocaust.³⁴ For him, no less than for Dinur, the Holocaust simply confirmed what he had known years before.

Baron and his disciples, many of whom were vitally concerned with strengthening the confidence and resolve of American Jewry in the wake of the catastrophe, no doubt found considerable comfort in regarding the Holocaust in this fashion.³⁵ Curiously, though, Dinur also seems to have accepted with equanimity the relative decentering of the Holocaust in Jewish historical consciousness that his approach in *Galuyot veHurbanan* implied, even though it might have been expected that his Zionist commitments would have led him to set it above all

previous catastrophes and to represent it as the single conclusive proof that the Zionist negation of the diaspora was well taken. However, it appears that Dinur was vitally concerned lest the overwhelming horror of the Holocaust lead to a negation not only of future Jewish existence in exile but of all that exilic Jews had produced in the past. For Dinur, the cultural production of the various exilic communities throughout the centuries, even if produced in the shadow of imminent destruction, continued to offer contemporary Jews a treasure house of wisdom and spiritual resources—resources that could serve them well in the task of building the new Jewish homeland. Thus, ironically, it seemed to him that the bracketing of the Holocaust, its relegation to a corner of the collective Jewish imagination in a fashion that did not lead to a complete reconstruction of Jewish historical understanding, actually served an important public purpose.³⁶ For all of their differences, adherents of both historiographic camps tacitly agreed that the Holocaust was to remain “a new discipline in Jewish studies,” separate from the mainstream of Jewish historical study.

As a result, the lines of cleavage among postwar historians of the Jews remained more or less where they had been drawn in the 1930s, and it appeared to both sides that little was to be gained by introducing the Holocaust into the debate. Thus we are faced with an anomaly: the prevailing paradigms for understanding the Jewish past actually marginalize what Yehuda Bauer, the dean of Israeli historians of the Holocaust, has called “the central event in the history of the Jewish people in recent centuries, into and out of which flow other events that have determined and will continue to determine how Jewish history unfolds.”³⁷ And it is not only Jewish historiography that is the poorer for this anomaly, but Holocaust historiography as well. Largely because of its marginalization by historians of the Jews, the initiative in studying the history of the Holocaust has long since passed to scholars whose work is driven by concerns in which Jews as such do not figure. As a result, most writing about the Holocaust today, at least outside Israel, is perpetrator- or bystander-oriented, approaching the victims as passive objects alone, like a destroyed rain forest or a slaughtered buffalo herd. This development is to be regretted, I think, not only on moral grounds but even more because it masks a fundamental truth about the encounter between the Third Reich and the Jews. That truth is implicit in the very word “encounter”: the Third Reich, its agencies, and its allies on the one hand, and the Jews of the twenty-plus European and North African countries that fell within the Nazi orbit on the other, interacted dynamically with each other and with the local non-Jewish populations of those countries, over a longer or shorter period, with results that varied widely on a country-by-country basis. Each party came to that interaction with certain resources—material, political, social, and cultural. In the end, it was the nature of those resources and the manner in which

they could be and were brought to bear by both sides that determined how the encounter between them ended. In other words, understanding how that encounter turned into a Holocaust and how that Holocaust assumed precisely the dimensions that it did requires exploring what *both* Germans *and* Jews brought to the table from the start. This is not to suggest that during the Holocaust itself Jews anywhere had any significant measure of influence over the outcome of the German war against them. It *is* to suggest, however, that that lack of influence ought not to be dismissed *a priori* either as the inevitable, predetermined outcome of the exilic condition or as the product of a singularity whose sheer magnitude made it simultaneously unavoidable and overwhelming.

And yet these are precisely the conceptualizations to which the exilic and diasporic figurations of Jewish history respectively lead. Thus as long as historians of the Jews frame their work primarily with reference to the clash between these two figures, they will have little incentive to contribute to the exploration of how the fateful encounter developed from the Jewish side. For this reason, too, and not only because this frame of reference militates against the possibility of considering the Holocaust as a central feature in the ongoing story of the Jewish group, the study of modern Jewish history at present demands a basic paradigm shift.

Time will not permit me to discuss in more than telegraphic fashion how I think a new paradigm might look. Briefly, I would suggest the following: whatever the degree of physical adversity Jews may have experienced prior to the late eighteenth century, it was widely assumed, by Jews and non-Jews alike, that in the world ushered in by the American and French revolutions such adversity would be reduced to a minimum. That assumption was based upon the fact that the rules of engagement between Jews and non-Jews had changed fundamentally: through the institution of citizenship in a world of sovereign states Jews were to be given a chance, as George Washington put it in 1790, “to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants, while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig-tree and there shall be none to make them afraid.”³⁸ In order to play under the new rules, as it were, Jews needed to discover the most effective way of gaining and retaining the widest possible non-Jewish approbation while simultaneously rendering harmless whatever incurably malevolent elements might linger among the non-Jewish population. Ever since the new rules went into effect there was considerable disagreement, both among Jews themselves and between Jews and non-Jews, over how these goals ought to be accomplished. Some proposed arrangements were implemented, either by Jews alone or, more often, in cooperation with powerful non-Jewish elements who viewed security for Jews as essential for the general peace; others were debated and fell by the wayside. The success of those that were implemented in promoting physical

well-being varied widely over time and space. The Nazi Holocaust clearly represented the most conspicuous and extensive failure of arrangements for Jewish safety, but that failure was not total: in some areas within the Nazi orbit (most notably Denmark, but also arguably Bulgaria, Finland, the territories under Italian occupation, and Belgium to an extent) the revolutionary rules of engagement were at least partially preserved, and a significant majority of Jews remained alive. Moreover, even in the territories that witnessed the greatest Jewish losses during the Holocaust, the foundations of Jewish life had not always been as unstable as they were to become under Nazi occupation. Jews had not been always and everywhere as utterly powerless as they were to appear during the Nazi era, with seemingly no one outside the Nazi orbit prepared or able to assist them, while on the other hand many non-Germans within that orbit were prepared to abet or take part in the slaughter in one way or another. Powerlessness and instability were rather the products of a particular historical moment, brought about in significant measure by Jewish successes and failures in negotiating both the shifting sands of European domestic and international politics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the vicissitudes of the Jews' relations with their non-Jewish neighbors in the thousands of cities, small towns, and villages throughout Nazi-dominated regions, where Jews and non-Jews had lived for decades or centuries, as the title of a recent book put it, simultaneously "together and apart."³⁹

Thus historians of the Holocaust and historians of modern Jewry are confronted by identical challenges—to plumb the various modern mechanisms upon which Jewish security and the constancy of Jewish life depended, to reconstruct their operation over time, and to account for their successes and failures in different times and places. Because those mechanisms were born and functioned as a result of ongoing political and social interactions between Jews and non-Jews, meeting those challenges requires exploration from the perspective of both sides. Hence the story of how those mechanisms came into being and operated ought to form an essential part of the narrative framework of both modern Jewish and Holocaust history. For historians of the Jews, the Holocaust is an invaluable entry point for exploring the broad range of factors that made not only for this episode of extreme *instability* in Jewish life but also for the many instances of *stability* observable throughout the modern period. For historians of the Holocaust, modern Jewish history constitutes an indispensable part of the broad historical context out of which the Holocaust emerged.

And one final observation: if the Holocaust represents, in Yehuda Bauer's words, "a meeting point between the history of the Jews and the history of other peoples,"⁴⁰ then the paradigm that I have limned here telegraphically can be applied to an even broader range of

historical problems. Under the modern state system, especially in its nation-state variant, Jews were not the only group needing to negotiate and maintain arrangements for physical and material well-being; a range of linguistic, ethnic, and religious minorities found themselves facing similar challenges. Indeed, the problem of adjusting majority-minority relations so as to minimize intergroup friction and maintain the general peace is no less pressing at the beginning of the twenty-first century than it was throughout the twentieth. The successes and failures of the various arrangements that have been attempted with regard to Jews thus stand to reveal much that can inform continuing efforts toward a general solution. The modern history of the Jews, like the history of the Holocaust, should be a matter of broad human interest.

It has become something of a cliché among scholars of the Jews when setting forth a program of study to quote the second-century sage Rabbi Tarfon, who supposedly said, “The day is short, and the work is great; you are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.”⁴¹ Cliché it may be, but it is appropriate to this inaugural occasion, as I thank Maurice and Corinne Greenberg, New York University, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum for helping me stretch my working day to the maximum and for providing me with the conditions to undertake a weighty and vital task.

Notes

1. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, 1989), pp. viii–x. Emphasis in source.
2. See Friedländer’s introduction to the conference proceedings: Saul Friedländer, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), pp. 1–21.
3. Paula Hyman, “The Ideological Transformation of Modern Jewish Historiography,” in *The State of Jewish Studies*, S. J. D. Cohen and E. L. Greenstein, eds. (Detroit, 1990), pp. 151–52.
4. “The Holocaust in Jewish History: A Roundtable,” sound recording no. AJS 211216-5.2, Audio Archives, La Crescenta, CA.
5. *Ibid.*
6. For example, during 1990–1999 *Zion*, the journal of the Historical Society of Israel, published only two articles that focused principally on an aspect of the history of the Holocaust. *Jewish History*, published by Haifa University, included only one such article between 1987 and 2000. In the United States, *AJS Review*, the research organ of the Association for Jewish Studies, has not published a single article on the history of the Holocaust since that journal’s inception in 1976. The first four volumes of the new series of the journal *Jewish Social Studies*, inaugurated in 1994, published one such article (along with four pieces on aspects of Holocaust memory and literary representation). In Europe, the prestigious *Revue des Etudes Juives*, in existence since the nineteenth century, has never published a historical article on the Holocaust (although it has dealt with the Holocaust in its religious, philosophical, and artistic dimensions), while the last 230 issues of *European Judaism* include only two articles of this type. For examples of comprehensive histories that treat the Holocaust peripherally and do not integrate it into the overall narrative, see H. H. Ben-Sasson, ed., *A History of the Jewish People* (Cambridge, MA, 1976); Robert Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History* (New York, 1980); Lloyd P. Gartner, *History of the Jews in Modern Times* (Oxford, 2001). Representative syllabi of university-level survey courses from around the world can be found in Jack Wertheimer, ed., *The Modern Jewish Experience: A Reader’s Guide* (New York, 1993).
7. For a fuller explication of the themes developed in this lecture see my forthcoming book, “*Temunah madbirah mamash?*” *HaSho’ah veRishumah baHistoriografyah shel Am Yisra’el*.
8. *Bereshit Rabba*, 31: 9.
9. *Devarim Rabba* 1.
10. B. T. *Ketubot* 111a.

11. Quoted in Shmuel Feiner, *Haskalah veHistoriyah: Toledoteha shel Hakarat-heAvar Yehudit Modernit* (Jerusalem, 1995), p. 27.

12. On contemporary conditions for Venetian Jewry, see S. W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 2nd ed., vol. XIV: *Catholic Restoration and Wars of Religion* (New York and Philadelphia, 1969), pp. 78–80, 100–104.

13. Berr Isaac Berr, “Letter of a Citizen to His Fellow Jews,” quoted in Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1995), p. 119.

14. Salo Baron, “Ghetto and Emancipation: Shall We Revise the Traditional View?” *Menorah Journal* 14 (1928): 515–26. Subsequently Baron wrote often of the need to overcome “the lachrymose conception of Jewish history.” He made his vision of a historiography that would overcome lachrymosity explicit in a letter of 21 March 1960 to Y. Amir, a scholar who had undertaken to translate the second, expanded edition of Baron’s *Social and Religious History of the Jews* into Hebrew: “What I really object to [in the lachrymose conception] is the exaggerated emphasis upon the suffering and outbreaks of violence visited upon Israel throughout the generations. Obviously I do not deny that there were violent outbreaks, expulsions, and other sorts of persecution. But in my opinion one should emphasize even more the nicer sides of our history, especially the contributions Jews have made to social and economic relations and in intellectual matters.” Stanford University Libraries, Division of Special Collections, Record Group 580, Box 83, Folder 1.

15. S. W. Baron, *Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York, 1937), 1: 16–17, 23.

16. *Ibid.*, 1: 3.

17. Yehezkel Kaufmann, *Golah veNechar: Mehkar Histori-Sotsiologi beShe’elat Goralot shel Am Yisra’el miYmei Kedem ve’ad haZeman haZeh* (Tel Aviv, 1928), 1: vi.

18. Jizchak Fritz Baer, *Galut* (Berlin, 1936), p. 101.

19. Since migrating to Palestine in 1930 Baer had effectively ceased writing in German. He returned to his native tongue, he later recalled, “out of the need to send, with my very modest powers, a word of comfort and emotional encouragement to my brethren [in Germany], who saw before their eyes a terrifying death.” Baer to H. A. Reinhold, 18 January 1948, quoted in David N. Myers, *Re-Inventing the Jewish Past: European Jewish Intellectuals and the Zionist Return to History* (New York, 1995), p. 120.

20. Yitzhak Baer, “HaHistoriyah heHevratit vohaDatit shel haYehudim (He’arot leSifro shel Sh. Baron),” *Zion* 3:4 (1938): 299.

21. Yitzhak F. Baer, *Galut*, translated by Robert Warshaw (New York, 1947), p. 122.

22. Indeed, Baron noted “remarkably, it was the first introductory chapter which underwent the least change. The fundamental aspects of Jewish history have changed somewhat less than the

approach to and appreciation of individual links in that millennial evolution. By far the greatest changes occurred, naturally enough, in the bibliographical documentation.” Baron, *Social and Religious History*, 2nd ed., vol. I: *To the Beginning of the Christian Era* (New York and Philadelphia, 1952), pp. vii–viii.

23. Salo W. Baron, “The Modern Age,” in Leo W. Schwarz, ed., *Great Ages and Ideas of the Jewish People* (New York, 1956), p. 316. For his discussion of Nazi anti-Jewish persecutions and responses to them in other countries see pp. 347–50, 401–402.

24. Robert Liberles, *Salo Wittmayer Baron: Architect of Jewish History* (New York, 1995), p. 7.

25. Salo Wittmayer Baron, “Introduction,” in Philip Friedman, *Roads to Extinction: Essays on the Holocaust* (New York and Philadelphia, 1980), p. 1. For documentation of Baron’s role in Friedman’s postwar career see the correspondence in Stanford University Libraries, Division of Special Collections, Record Group M580, Box 28, Folder 5.

26. Ben Zion Dinur, “Problems Confronting Yad Washem in its Work of Research,” *Yad Washem Studies* 1 (1957): 7–30.

27. Ibid., p. 23. For an extended discussion of Dinur’s involvement in these matters see Roni Stauber, *HaLekah laDor: Sho’ah uGevurah baMahshavah haTsiburit baArets beShenot haHamishim* (Jerusalem, 2000), pp. 82–95, 171–81.

28. Baron, “Introduction,” p. 1; cf. Dinur, “Problems,” p. 23.

29. Ben Zion Dinur, “Galuyot veHurbanan,” in idem., *Dorot veReshumot: Mehkarim veIyunim baHistoriyografiyah haYisra’elit* (Jerusalem, 1978), pp. 175–92.

30. Ibid., pp. 175, 176, 181.

31. Ibid., p. 175.

32. Salo W. Baron, “European Jewry Before and After Hitler,” *American Jewish Year Book* 63 (1962): 1.

33. Baron, “The Modern Age,” p. 350.

34. Salo W. Baron, “Newer Emphases in Jewish History,” *Jewish Social Studies* 25 (1963): 240.

35. For one among many statements by Baron concerning the practical advantages to postwar American Jewry of continuing to reject the lachrymose conception of Jewish history, see Salo W. Baron, “At the Turning Point,” *Menorah Journal* 33 (1945): 1–10.

36. These themes are explicated more fully and documented in Engel, “*Temunah madbirah mamash?*”, Chapter 2.

37. Yehuda Bauer, *HaSho’ah: Hebetim Historiyim* (Tel Aviv, 1982), pp. 7–8.

38. Letter to the Jewish community of Newport, RI, quoted in Raphael Mahler, *A History of Modern Jewry 1780–1815* (New York, 1971), p. 5.

39. Shimon Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzezany: Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians, 1919–1945* (Bloomington, IN, 2002).

40. Bauer, *HaSho'ah: Hebetim Historiyim*, p. 8.

41. Avot 2: 20–21.

