

IDENTITY CRISIS

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TERMS FOR "JEW"

Strictly speaking, it is incorrect to call an ancient Israelite a "Jew" or to call a contemporary Jew an "Israelite" or a "Hebrew." The first Hebrews may not have been Jews at all, and contemporary Palestinians, by their own definition of the term "Palestinian," have to include Jews among their own people—although in choosing the name "Palestine" for their homeland, they have picked a name that originally signified the opposite: an enclave of foreigners. A "Zionist" in the strict sense is not an expansionist: the original "Zion" was only a single hill in Jerusalem, not a whole land, much less "from the Nile to the Euphrates," as the maximalists maintain.

How these curiosities of terminology evolved is a complicated and interesting bit of history. In a general sense all of these terms—"Hebrew," "Israelite," "Jew," "Palestinian," and "Zionist"—are essential ingredients in both Jewish and world history, and understanding their knotty interrelation can shed much light on contemporary events in the Middle East. But let the definer beware: original meanings of these loaded words are no guide to subsequent meanings. How people misconstrue a word is as much a part of its meaning as the "correct" meaning, and the history of these five terms has included a number of creative—and sometimes tragic—misconstruals.

HEBREW:

The word "Hebrew" (*'Ivri*) occurs in the early narratives of the Pentateuch to refer to an Israelite, but only in those narratives, such as the Joseph story (Gen. 39–48) and the Exodus story (Exod. 3–10), that are set in Egypt, where Israelites are regarded as foreigners. There "Hebrew" is either used by Egyptians to refer to Israelites or by Israelites to refer to themselves in the presence of Egyptians—among themselves, the

preferred term is *bene Yisrael*, "children of Israel," or "Israelites." A similar usage of "Hebrew" is found in the stories of the interaction between Israelites and Philistines in I Samuel and the interaction of Abram (Abraham) with Canaanites and other non-Israelites in Gen. 14 (see Gen. 14:13, where the Greek translator renders the term *'Ivri* by a word meaning "man of the yonder region"). Jonah, likewise, at sea with a crew of non-Israelites, refers to himself in their presence as a "Hebrew."

Since the term *'Ivri* is possibly based on the common preposition *éver*, meaning "across, beyond, yonder" (the suffix *i* is an adjectival ending called a gentilic, with the sense of "-ite"), the meaning of the term could have the general sense of "yonder-ite," i. e., "foreigner." But since a number of regions in the Middle East are designated by the term *Éver* (e. g., *Éver ha-Yarden*, "Transjordan," *Éver ha-Nahar*, "Trans-riverine," i. e., Trans-Euphrates), the term *'Ivri* could just as well designate a dweller of one of these familiar neighboring "Trans-" regions, with no connotation of foreignness—merely regional particularity. Confusion on the matter is compounded by the additional ambiguity in the frame of reference in which the designation "Hebrew" originated: were the "Hebrews" thought of as "those out yonder" from the standpoint of Mesopotamians or "those from out yonder" from the standpoint of Canaanites?

To complicate the matter further, a word similar in sound and meaning, *apiru*, *habiru*, or *khapiru*, occurs in extrabiblical ancient Near Eastern sources, where it may or may not designate an Israelite. The kings of the Canaanite city-states, in the land that was to become Israel, wrote many letters to the Egyptian Pharaohs, in the era just preceding the Israelite exodus from Egypt, complaining

about "those upstart *apiru*," who seem to be either bandits or guerrilla revolutionaries (one's judgment depending on one's socio-economic affinities), who, one way or the other, wrought havoc with the local garrisons of Egyptian and Canaanite armies. These kings also used the term indiscriminately to refer to *one another* in their territorial rivalries and skirmishes (much in the same way that "communist" and "Marxist" are bandied about today), so the meaning of *apiru* is still less certain. Probably, the Canaanite kings believed it would legitimate their cause with the Pharaoh to denounce their enemies as *apiru* rabble, but after the Pharaohs became preoccupied with their own slave uprisings back home, they washed their hands of the whole lot of squabbling petty princes in Canaan.

It seems likely that *apiru* did not designate a specific ethnic group, even though the cuneiform symbol for "people" often appears alongside the word. More likely, it referred to slaves, fugitives, mercenary soldiers, itinerant artisans, foreigners in general, or anyone without the normal rights of citizens or property holders. In these senses, a worthy translation of *apiru* might be "transient" or "immigrant," a sense which fits well with the Biblical term *'Ivri* (the Hebrew word *'avar* means "to cross, pass, ford a river"). But alternative meanings have been suggested for *apiru*, including "dusty ones" (related to the Hebrew *aphar*, dust), suggesting a bedouin or desert dweller; "confederates" (from a word related to the Hebrew *haver*, "friend" or "colleague"—compare the name of the town Hebron, which probably means "place of confederation"); and "riverbank dwellers" (from an Arabic cognate).

The Bible also implicitly makes "Hebrew" into an ethnic term by making Eber an ancestor of the Israelites (Gen. 10:21, 24). In general, however, biblical usage seems to support the nonethnic sense of "foreigner, immigrant, wayfarer," which, during the early period of Israelite history, when migrations of nationalities back and forth across the Near East were quite common, was very likely applied to many ethnic groups, sometimes by people who themselves had at some point incurred the same designation. Compare the attitudes in our own time of "older" immigrants toward immigrants more recent than they.

Because of a usage occurring for the first time in the writings of the second century B.C.E. Palestinian Jewish writer Ben-Sira, "Hebrew" came to be the designation of the language of the Bible, and so in general for the postbiblical Hebrew language. The Hebrew language had begun as a north-west Semitic dialect, influenced by the im-

migration of Aramaic-speaking ancestors of the Jewish people. It is as a term for the classic and universal Jewish language that "Hebrew" is most Jewish. The Hebrew alphabet was first disseminated by the Canaanite people known as the Phoenicians, a group closely related to Israelites linguistically, though not culturally or religiously. The particular form of the Hebrew alphabet used today is actually Syrian (or Aramaic) in origin.

Because of the occasional biblical references to Israelites as "Hebrews," the term became a normal alternative for "Jew" throughout the Middle Ages and in modern times. It has occasionally been preferred by Jews themselves as a euphemistic term for "Jew," when the latter term was felt to be embarrassing (the Reform movement in America called its synagogue organization the "Union of American Hebrew Congregations," and its seminary "*Hebrew Union College*"). But because of the emergence of the slang pejorative "Hebe," the advantages of the adaptation are now dubious.

ISRAELITE:

Jews are principally called "Israelites" in the Bible (*bene Yisrael*, "children of Israel") because of their descent from Jacob who, at a major turning point in his career, was renamed by God *Yisra'el* ("He who fights God"). The story that accounts for the meaning of this renaming (Gen. 32:22ff.) is by no means a clear explanation of the name: Jacob, having spent twenty-one years in hiding from his brother Esau, whose birthright he had stolen, returns to his homeland with his wives, children, and servants. Crossing the river Jabbok (a Transjordanian tributary of the river Jordan), he meets a mysterious stranger who accosts him after he has sent his entourage on ahead and stands alone in the river. The two men wrestle through the night, and Jacob refuses to let the stranger go until the latter blesses him (at its most literal level, the blessing is simply a pledge to renounce hostilities—an important ingredient in Middle Eastern diplomacy to the present day). As the sun comes up, the stranger sees he cannot prevail against Jacob, even after wounding him in the inner thigh, and he finally offers his blessing: "No longer shall your name be called Jacob, but rather 'Israel,' for you have fought with gods (or God) and men, and have prevailed." Jacob's subsequent reunion with his brother Esau is surprisingly benign.

There are several ways to explain this enigmatic story: (1) The stranger is Esau himself, who concealed his identity in the darkness, and the word "God" should be understood in some figurative or symbolic

way. (2) The stranger is a guardian angel of Esau, and the word "God" should be translated "angels." (3) The stranger is God Himself, or an angelic representative, who seeks to put Jacob through a final trial—indeed, his first real experience of direct combat—before reconciling him with his brother.

One way or another, this story is a folk etymology, and not a reliable guide to the original meaning of the name "Israel," which, depending on how its components are construed could mean "He-who-fights-God," "He-who-fights-for-God," "God fights," "God rules," or even, via corruption in pronunciation, "upright-one-of-God" (*yashar-El*) or "God is upright."

The name "children of Israel" is interchangeable throughout the Bible with "children of Jacob" or "House of Jacob" (*Bet Yaakov*); also synonymous with the poetic name *Bene Yeshurun*, "children of Yeshurun." The Jewish homeland is called *Eretz Yisrael* ("the Land of Israel"), which is sometimes also called *Eretz Canaan* ("the land of Canaan"). (The name "Canaan" has been variously explained as meaning "lowland," "merchant," or "purple dye," the last term referring to a key industry of the Canaanites, which is also the source of the name "Phoenician.")

The land and people "Israel" became a kingdom under the rules of Saul, David, and Solomon during the years 1100–900 B.C.E.. When King Solomon died, the kingdom split into a northern and a southern region, "Israel" and "Judah," respectively. The capital of the northern kingdom ceased to be Jerusalem (founded as a capital by David) and became Samaria (near the present-day Arab town of Nablus, the biblical city Shechem). Though the southern kingdom eventually became the bearer of Jewish identity in world history, the northern kingdom was closer in tribal composition to the old confederate league that had originally conquered the land. The kingdom of Israel was defeated by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E., and the inhabitants were deported to the East—the start of the legends of the "Ten Lost Tribes of Israel." (Judah, the southern kingdom, survived until defeat by the Babylonians and the Babylonian exile in 586 B.C.E.) A few northern Israelites remained around Samaria, intermarrying with Assyrians, and preserving a form of the Israelite religion based on the Pentateuch. These were the people later called "Samaritans," whose rejection of post-Pentateuchal Jewish tradition led them into frequent conflicts with latter-day Jews. The Samaritans survive today as an Arabic-speaking minority in Israel and the West Bank, not fully integrated into either Jewish or Arab society.

"Israelite," like "Hebrew," became a common synonym for "Jew" throughout post-biblical history down to modern times, with perhaps less adaptability to pejorative usage than the other terms. Since the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 the term has come to jostle against the newer term "Israeli," which is not synonymous; in general, "Israelite" means a biblical follower of the religion of Moses and descendant of Jacob; "Israeli" means a citizen of the state of Israel, whether Jewish in religion or not, though, of course, most Israelis are Jewish. "Israel," "children of Israel," "Assembly of Israel" (*Kenesset Yisrael*) and "People Israel" (*Am Yisrael*) have always been the terms preferred by Jews for their own peoplehood. In fact, early Christianity paid its respects to the attractiveness of these names by thinking of Christendom as a new "Israel."

JEW:

The term "Jew" is originally derived from the tribal name "Judah," the name of the fourth son of Jacob. Judahites, that is, descendants of Judah, were organized (along with some neighboring tribes) by their kinsman King David into a mini-kingdom centered in Hebron before David became the first truly pan-Israelite monarch. Prior to this time the Judahites were cut off from their northern brethren by encampments of Philistines. When David captured the city of Jerusalem from the Jebusites (a Canaanite people), he opened up a vital corridor connecting the northern and the southern tribes, thus permitting unification of the nation Israel. David was then made king over all Israel, in preference to the surviving sons of Saul. The tenuous union of northern and southern tribes worked well during the reigns of David and his son Solomon, but when Solomon died the two regions again split off from one another. It is likely that the social and religious character of Judah, the southern kingdom, was different from that of the north—more cosmopolitan, less rooted in tribal territorial claims, more suited for survival as a culture during exile; in short, more "Jewish" in the pre-1948 understanding of the term.

The exile of Judah came in 586 B.C.E., when large numbers of the inhabitants were deported to Babylon. From then on, "Judean" came to be the principle term for a follower of the Mosaic religion, and it has remained so to the present day. In the book of Esther, set in Persia, the Benjaminite Mordecai (technically a member of the "Ten Lost Tribes") is called "yehudi," Judean or Jew; the book even introduces the verb *mityahed* "becoming Jewish, converting to Judaism." Both factors suggest that the term,

though still rooted in ethnic considerations, had broadened its scope from tribal, territorial, and national terms to religious in a more universalistic sense. From the Hebrew *yehudi*, via Aramaic *yehudai*, Greek *ioudaios*, and Latin *iudaeus*, the term "Jew" passed into European languages.

The Second Jewish Commonwealth (440 B.C.E.–70 C.E.), founded under the Persian Empire, and ruled successively by the Greeks and the Romans, was called by the Romans "Judea." The Romans, in destroying the Temple in 70 C.E., sought for a time to abolish the Judean character of the Holy Land, and so renamed it "Philistia," after the Philistines who had inhabited the southwestern coastal plain. Titus and Vespasian, after their victories over Judea, were not given the title "Judaicus," which would have signified that Judea was a subjugated *land*—instead, "Judean" came to designate solely a religion, and in this restricted sense Jews came under the Roman Empire's protection as a "permitted religion."

Christians, in usurping the term "Israelite," began using the term "Jew" in a pejorative way. The Jews were "Judases," named after the man who betrayed Jesus, Judas Iscariot, and when the Church took over the Roman Empire, it withdrew Judaism from the category of "permitted religion." Jews were allowed to remain Jews, but non-Jews were forbidden, under strict penalties, to become Jews, and marriage of a non-Jew with a Jew was outlawed. Jews, moreover, were forbidden to seek converts to their religion.

Meanwhile, Jews themselves developed stricter standards for defining their religion. Originally, Judaism was somewhat loosely defined. The book of Ruth portrays Ruth the Moabite converting to Judaism by a simple statement of allegiance: "Your people shall be my people; your God, my God." Hillel the Elder is reported to have accepted a convert with the simple instruction "What is hateful to you, don't do to another—that is Torah; the rest is commentary; go and study." Eventually, however, several more specific criteria for Jewishness evolved. A person was Jewish by birth if born of a Jewish mother, regardless of the father's identity. A child of a Jewish father and gentile mother was not considered a Jew. A person was Jewish by conversion if he accepted the 613 commandments and became circumcized and baptized (the latter, a seemingly Christian practice, began as a Jewish purification ritual—it was required of converts on the assumption that non-Jews were ritually impure). Why converts should have to obey the commandments to be considered Jewish, while a born Jew could be a backslider or even an atheist, is one of the knotty

problems that even today govern the debate over who is a Jew. Jewish law is less stringent on this matter toward female converts (who are, for now at least, held responsible for fewer commandments) than toward male converts.

Jews in the days of the Second Commonwealth also made a distinction, according to some Hellenistic sources, between Jews living in the land of Israel (who were called Judeans) and those outside the land (who were called Hebrews). This terminological distinction passed out of use after the Temple was destroyed, but the conceptual distinction was preserved in Jewish law, reflected, among other things, in the development of both a Palestinian and a Diaspora (Babylonian) Talmud.

As the Christian churches gradually invested the designation "Jew" with demonic connotations, it came to be used by Christians even in denouncing each other. Church heresies were branded as attempts to "judaize" the faith, even when the heretics themselves were intensely anti-Jewish. During the Middle Ages, the term "Jew" also took on socio-economic connotations. "Jew" came to signify "merchant," at first without any negative implication; later, it came to signify a practitioner of usury, an exploiter, a swindler. In English there is even a verb "to Jew," meaning to bargain mercilessly.

The word "Jew" first appeared in written English texts around the year 1000 C.E., although it was probably in common use much before that. It is found spelled in a variety of ways—*leu*, *leuu*, *lwe*, *low*, *lue*, *lve*, *lewe*, etc.—before it came to have its present spelling. Many of the uses of the word are pejorative in connotation. The Oxford English Dictionary lists among its historical examples of usage the following: "I am a Jew; hath not a Jew eyes?" (Shakespeare's *Shylock*, 1596); "She shall have skin like a mummy and the beard of a Jew" (Sheridan, 1775); and "You forget, Lady Lilac's as rich as a Jew" (Byron, 1820). The Book of Common Prayer, in a slightly more charitable vein, includes a prayer: "Haue mercy upon all lewes, Turkes, Infidels and heretikes" (1548–9). The word also spawned a long, colorful list of compound words (some of which seem to have no apparent connection with Jews), such as: Jew's eye (a highly valued thing); Jew-bail (insufficient bail); jewbush (the milk plant); Jew carts (transports for stolen objects); Jew lizard (an Australian reptile); jewfish (fish of the family *Serranidae*); jew's mallow (a jute plant); Jew's myrtle (a species of myrtle); Jew's apple (an eggplant); Jew's ears (a Purim pastry); Jew's houses (smelting furnaces); Jew's tin (the metal smelted there); Jew's

money (Roman coins found in Britain); Jew's pitch (bitumen from the Dead Sea); and of course, Jew's harp (a twanging instrument popular in peasant culture).

PALESTINIAN:

As noted earlier, "Palestine" originated as a Roman designation, in the form "Philistia," for the whole land of Israel. The Philistines themselves were most likely a Greek-speaking people who invaded the land of Canaan about the year 1100 B.C.E., not long after (indeed, possibly simultaneously with) the Israelite conquests. They were part of a general migration of "Sea Peoples" that spread across the eastern Mediterranean and Asia Minor at the end of the Bronze Age. The Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, recount some of the political and social instability that led to these migrations, as does the Bible itself in the legends of the Israelite exodus from Egypt (the Egyptians, having their hands full with the invasions of the "Sea Peoples," were a pushover for a slave rebellion). The name "Palestine" occurs in the Bible as *Pileshet*, and the Philistines are called *Pelishtim*—possibly a corruption of the Greek word *pelasgoi*, "Sea Peoples," that is, inhabitants of the Aegean islands, from whence the Philistine invaders originated. King David hired himself out to the Philistines for a while, and once he became more powerful than they, hired some of them for his own mercenary army. In that situation they are called *keretim u-feletim*, suggesting possibly an origin in the island of Crete. The Philistines were harsh conquerors of the Israelites, who, for a time, maintained a rigid monopoly on the manufacture of iron weapons. Eventually the threat of their power galvanized the twelve Israelite tribes into uniting against them, and they were driven out or absorbed.

Their name survived, however, and the Greek historian Herodotus called the land of Israel "the Philistine Syria," which came to be shortened to *Palaistinei*. In Roman and talmudic literature this name designated a province of the land of Israel, and the term was taken over temporarily by the Arabs after the Islamic conquest in the seventh century C.E. It fell into disuse for a time, was revived by the Crusaders, then fell into disuse again under Saracen and Ottoman rule.

In 1922 the British revived the term to designate at least part of the area specified by the League of Nations Mandate; the original area included both sides of the Jordan river, but in practice, the land west of the Jordan came to be designated as "Palestine" par excellence. Legally "Palestine" includes the area both of the present state of Israel and

of the kingdom of Jordan. But present-day Palestinian Arabs refer only to the cisjordanian area as their homeland. The war fought in 1948 did not solve the question of Palestinian identity—the West Bank area and the Gaza Strip (the latter actually the original Philistine territory) were made part of Jordan and Egypt, respectively, while the rest of Cisjordan became Israel—and the 1967 war further jumbled up the respective claims of Jews and Arabs over the land. Palestinian Arabs of the P.L.O. persuasion claim that "Palestine" should include only children of the land's inhabitants—including Christians and Jews—prior to 1918. Jewish nationalists of the *Herut* persuasion (Menachem Begin's political party) likewise appeal to the status quo of the Mandate days but speak of "Palestinian Arabs" and "Palestinian Jews," the latter including Jews who have immigrated since that time, the former probably meaning Jordanians. Jordan itself is split ethnically: Palestinians comprise a majority of the population and dominate business, civil service, and intellectual life; the army and ruling royal family are Arabian bedouins.

ZIONIST:

The word "Zion" probably originally meant something like "promontory"; it is related to a Hebrew word *tziyyah*, meaning "dry place," or to the Hebrew adjective *metzuyan*, "standing out, distinguished." The hill of Zion is one of the highest places in the city of Jerusalem. King David, in capturing this area, insured Israelite control over the vital central region of the land of Canaan and so made possible the union of the twelve tribes into a nation. King David himself is buried on Mt. Zion, and the locale eventually became a prophetic and poetic designation for the whole land of Israel or for the Temple Mount that in turn signified the Holy Land. It was natural for this term to signify the movement that led to the creation of a Jewish homeland and a Jewish state, but strictly speaking, the name "Zion" refers to a focal point rather than to an expanse of territory, and a "Zionist" is not one who wants to take over the whole land of Israel, let alone the whole Eastern Mediterranean area, but one who champions the unity of the Jewish people and Jerusalem as the capital of the Jewish nation. In a way this conception fits with the whole tangled history of the terms for "Jew." While Judaism has intermittently been a nation, territory, and ethnic entity and has never strayed very far from that concept, it has always been a religion and a culture. This means that when political power failed, linguistic and spiritual faculties took over and helped to maintain continuity in Jewish identity. If we assume

that the very first Jews were those who wrenched themselves out of slavery in Mesopotamia and Egypt, then we must recognize that at least part of the Jewish community was a community of converts—people who voluntarily counted themselves in among the people Israel and accepted the contract of the Jewish covenant. That bond is a spiritual bond, and it has always transcended the vicissitudes of political power; that is why

Jews can define the center of their existence as the hill of Zion but must see the periphery as an ever-changing (and often creatively changing) boundary. As such, Jews will always have a claim on the land of Israel, whatever troubled battles rage around King David's citadel and however the sharing of power in this war-torn land comes to be defined.

—J.R.

LENNY BRUCE: ON JEWISH AND GOYISH

Perhaps at this point I ought to say a little something about my vocabulary. My conversation, spoken and written, is usually flavored with the jargon of the hipster, the argot of the underworld, and Yiddish.

In the literate sense—as literate as Yiddish can be since it is not a formal language—“goyish” means “gentile.” But that’s not the way I mean to use it.

To me, if you live in New York or any other big city, you are Jewish. It doesn’t matter even if you’re Catholic; if you live in New York you’re Jewish. If you live in Butte, Montana, you’re going to be goyish even if you’re Jewish.

Evaporated milk is goyish even if the Jews invented it. Chocolate is Jewish and fudge is goyish. Spam is goyish and rye bread is Jewish.

Negroes are all Jews. Italians are all Jews. Irishmen who have rejected their religion are Jews. Mouths are very Jewish. And bosoms. Baton-twirling is very goyish. Georgie Jessel and Danny Thomas are Christians, because if you look closely on their bodies you’ll find a boil somewhere.

To trap an old Jewish woman—they’re crafty and they will lie—just seize one and you will find a handkerchief balled-up in one of her hands.

I can understand why we can’t have a Jewish President. It would be embarrassing to hear the President’s mother screaming love at the grandchildren: “Who’s Grandma’s baby! Who’s Grandma’s baby!”

“. . . And this is Chet Huntley in New York. The First Lady’s mother opened the Macy’s Day Parade screaming, ‘Oy zeishint mine lieber’ and furiously pinching young Stanley’s cheeks . . .”

Actually, she bit his ass, going “Oom, yum yum, is this a tush, whose tushy is that?” The Jews are notorious children’s-ass-kissers. Gentiles neither bite their children’s asses nor do they *hahhh* their soup.

Gentiles love their children as much as Jews love theirs; they just don’t wear their hearts on their sleeves. On the other hand, Jewish mothers don’t hang gold stars in their windows. They’re not proud of their boys’ going into the service. They’re always worried about their being killed.

Celebrate is a goyish word. Observe is a Jewish word. Mr. and Mrs. Walsh are *celebrating* Christmas with Major Thomas Moreland, USAF (Ret.), while Mr. and Mrs. Bromberg *observed* Hanukkah with Goldie and Arthur Schindler from Kiamesha, New York.

—L. B. rep.