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## Introduction

A good friend in college once told me a story about his parents' search for an apartment while his father was stationed at an army base in Louisiana during World War II. After much looking and many dead ends, the young couple found the perfect place and were wrapping up a congenial conversation with the prospective landlady when she came out with her final question: "You're not *Jews*, are you? I don't rent to *Jews*." Without missing a beat, my friend's father, so I am told, replied, "We're Hebrews," a response that apparently satisfied the landlady. A few days after having signed the long-term lease and moved in, the young couple were startled by a loud banging on their front door. They opened it to find the landlady, quite beside herself, fuming and sputtering in furious agitation. "A Hebrew is a *Jew*! You're *Jews*!" she spat. Again, without missing a beat, my friend's father nodded and replied, "Yeah, how 'bout that?" as he closed the door in the landlady's face.

Another, more bemusing, anecdote: A number of years ago, in an undergraduate course I was teaching on Jewish ethics at a university in California, a Jewish student born and raised in Israel, whose parents were Israeli expatriates, insisted in class—unequivocally and unselfconsciously—that *Jew* is a derogatory term. The assertion was challenged by another Jewish student—this one American born and bred—who countered that *Jew* is a "neutral" descriptor, like *Buddhist* or *Canadian*, and that she, for one, was proud to call herself a *Jew*. Unmoved, the young Israeli held his ground, insisting that *Jew*, like every other ethnic slur, is never merely descriptive but always demeaning.

So who decides what the word *Jew* means and connotes? Who gets to "own" it? We tend to think that bigotry ought not determine the meaning or content of identity terms; that those who identify by a particular name should, instead, be able to establish its meaning—or at least have the final say in determining its primary connotations. But can this ever be the case for the name *Jew*? Has it ever been so?

*Jew* is no simple ethnic slur—in fact, it need not, in itself, be a slur at all, despite its ready and recognizable uses as such. As the above anecdotes illustrate, *Jew*, for some, is a term of deep pride or desire; for others, it is a term of deep loathing. Is it ever "neutral," in the way that my American

student presumed *Canadian* or *Buddhist* to be? Were one to see *Jew* spray-painted on a wall almost anywhere in the world, in almost any language, would its impact not be measurably different from the same treatment of these other terms? And yet the words *Jew* and *Jews* are also stock-in-trade in the mundane world of academic Jewish studies, where they regularly serve as descriptors whose meaning is often treated as self-evident. Context, although key, is not everything when it comes to the word *Jew*.

To further parse the classroom exchange described above: The young Israeli's assertion is entirely comprehensible within the context of a strain of Zionism that, from early on, drew on images of *Jews* "in Diaspora" as degraded and unhealthy in order to encourage immigration by those who might, in their own nation-state, become wholesome, muscular "Hebrews" and, later, "Israelis" settling, working on, and defending the Homeland.<sup>1</sup> Stereotypes of unwholesome and corrupt *Jews* came ready-made from the nationalist narratives, related folklores, and racialized "science" of emerging modern Europe and were put to use by both Jewish nationalists and Jewish Communists. It would be far too simplistic, then, and not terribly enlightening, to label people on one or another side of these campaigns as "self-hating," just as it would be far too facile to characterize the fraughtness of the word *Jew* as purely a "Gentile issue," or a function of Jewish assimilation (or of a lack of Jewish assimilation), or in the terms of any of a number of superficial, reductive analyses proffered by various scholars and cultural critics over the years.

What is it about this particular identity term—*Jew*—such that it can be made to convey so broad a range of often diametrically opposed meanings? *Jew* has served as a cipher for materialism *and* intellectualism, socialism *and* capitalism, worldly cosmopolitanism *and* clannish parochialism, eternal chosenness *and* unending curse—and the list goes on. What is the fascination and phobia of *Jew*, and whence does the word derive such persistent malleability and power throughout history and across continents—even to the modern "Far East"? In *Chinese Perceptions of the 'Jews' and Judaism*, Zhou Xun recites a litany of opposites very similar to the above, of "definitions of 'Jew' [*Youtai*] in modern China." She concludes with the wry observation that "anything which is not Chinese is Jewish, at the same time anything which is Chinese is also Jewish; anything which the Chinese aspire to is Jewish, at the same time anything which the Chinese despise is Jewish."<sup>2</sup>

This book seeks to offer a coherent and sustained study of this key word, *Jew*, that lies not only at the heart of Jewish experience and Jewish studies but, indeed, at the heart of Western civilization and beyond. No attempt is made here to survey and catalogue all the many ways in which the term has been and is used, nor the full variety of meanings assigned it

in the myriad contexts, languages, locales, and time periods in which it appears, for that would be an impossible undertaking. In any case, many excellent studies of the meanings and images associated with *Jew* in various historical contexts are already available. David Nirenberg's *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, for example, has recently sought to proffer a kind of global "history of thinking about [and 'with'] 'Judaism'" from ancient Egypt to Nazi Europe.<sup>3</sup> Neither do I directly engage the "who is a *Jew*?" question, except to reflect on the phenomenon as a way to illuminate some of the cultural dynamics out of which the question arises and to which it gives shape. Rather, the project of this book is to explore the significance and implications of a single key insight regarding the word *Jew*.

### Owning the Word

Those identified as *Jews* have not, in fact, owned the word *Jew* or controlled the discourse about it—or even much used the term—for most of the past two thousand years. There is a striking paucity of *Jew* as a self-designation from the second century CE to the cusp of the modern era.<sup>4</sup> *Jew* does not feature in the traditional service of the *siddur* (Jewish daily prayers) or *machzor* (Jewish Holy Day liturgies). It rarely appears in midrash or Talmud (the classical postbiblical Jewish canon). In the vast majority of writing by *Jews* before the modern period—a body of literature largely comprising commentary on the biblical and classical texts, liturgical poetry, sermons, and responsa (ethical and legal deliberations)—one is hard pressed to find much use of the name *Jew*. There are, of course, exceptions to this generalization. Most significant is the Yiddish word *yid* (or *yeed*), a word whose functions in Yiddish vernaculars can be strikingly different from those of *Jew*—much less "Yid"—in dominant Western languages (see chapter 2). Instead, *yisrael* or *b'nei yisrael* (*bar yisroel* in Yiddish, from talmudic Aramaic)—"sons/son of Israel"—was the common self-referential identity term, a name that is now more or less confined to liturgical or Orthodox use, while *Israeli* names a citizen of a modern nation-state who might or might not identify as a *Jew*. Even for much of the past few centuries of Jewish usage, the term *Jew* has often been strategically exchanged for "Hebrew." Such exchange appears in the above account of the angry landlady or, more familiarly, in the names of such public institutions as the YMHA and YWHA (founded in 1854 and 1888, respectively), the Jewish (or "Hebrew") counterparts to the "Christian" YMCA and YWCA. "Israelite" has often functioned similarly, as in the French organization Alliance Israélite Universelle, whose 1860 founding charter juxtaposes "*israélites idéalistes et militants*" to "*juifs ou tous ceux qui sont victims de préjugés*" in a fashion not unrelated to the Zionist usages described above.<sup>5</sup>

By contrast, for most of two long millennia, the word *Jew* has been predominantly defined and delimited as a term for *not-self*. It has often signified an absolute *other*, the very antithesis of the Western Christian *self*. Almost all modern Western forms of the word—*Jew*, *Jude*, *juif*, *Judio*, *giudeo*, *jood*, *Zsidó*, etc. (and even the Yiddish word *jid*)—came into being in decidedly Christian-dominant societies and geopolitical contexts, and, with the exception of *jid*, they seem often to have taken their earliest written form in commentaries, translations, and sermons on the New Testament by Christians for Christians. In fact, the word *Jew(s)* appears with far greater frequency in the Christian New Testament and bears far greater significance there than it does in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, where it is rare.

The most persistent meanings and force of the term *Jew(s)* derive, then, from an antique Christian worldview in which *the Jews* functions foundationally as a kind of originary and constitutional alterity, or otherness. *The Jews* serves as the alpha to the Christian omega; the “Old” to the Christian “New”; the “particular” to the Christian “universal”; grounded and bound materialism to visionary, redeemed spirituality; deicide to self-sacrificial love—at best, the sainted or moribund “ancestor”; at worst, the evil “spawn of Satan” to a godly, good, and triumphantly immortal Christianity. *The Jews*, in other words, serves instrumentally to name the key *other* out of which *and* over against which the Christian *self* was and is constituted. *Jew* is Christian cultures’ signifier for the fraught, debased, material primordially *out of which* spiritual and moral stature must *arise*, *from which* it may *free itself*, and *back to which* it is always in danger of *falling* (a threat or condition commonly labeled “Judaizing”). Hence, *Jew(s)* becomes a key element in formulations of Christian identity through narratives of origin, aspiration, and liberation, as well as of abjection, rejection, and otherness.

Part of what this means is that *Jew(s)*—signifier and signified, word and connotations—has become a constant element not only in the historical formation and formulation of Western (Christian and post-Christian) identities but also of the categories by which the contours of identity are articulated. Some key examples may serve to illustrate this observation.

To begin with, Saint Augustine, in his biblical commentaries, sermons, and letters, is among the most significant articulators of Christian uses and meanings of *Jew*. “*Jew*, *Jewish*, *Judaism*, *synagogue*, *Israel*: These words and their cognates appear countless times in Augustine’s writings, as in the writings of most patristic authors,” notes Paula Fredriksen in *Augustine and the Jews*.<sup>6</sup> That these earliest formulators of Christian doctrine made such heavy use of *Jew(s)* and related words speaks volumes about the words’ centrality to the historical creation of Christian identity and worldview. For Augustine, as for many Christian theologians before

and since, *the Jews* names “a miserable enslavement of the spirit” that manifests an inability “to lift the eye of the mind above what is corporeal and created, that it may drink in eternal light.”<sup>7</sup> Mortal and moral blindness characterizes both the condition of all humanity before the coming of Christ and the subsequent affliction of all those who remain unenlightened by Christian virtue and proper biblical interpretation. “Pagans” might be converted, enlightened, and assimilated into the “us” of the universal Christian community. Errant “flesh” might be tamed and disciplined to give way to the higher aspirations of an eternal “spirit.” *Jew*, by contrast, represents an affliction unsusceptible to remedy and, hence, like flesh to spirit, an ongoing danger to the spiritually striving “we.”

Developed to combat the wide diversity of belief and practice among *Christians* of his, and prior, centuries, Augustine’s formulations about *Jews* were not clearly directed toward persons identified by that name. Rather, they were directed at his own Christian ecclesiastical colleagues and opponents and served to delineate, in his terms, *what it meant to be a proper Christian*.

In a doctrine that came to have profound effect on subsequent generations of Christian theologians and heads of state, Augustine insisted that *Jews*, as afflicted affliction, as self-perpetuating “miserable enslavement,” as inherent other, *must be sustained* in service to orthodox Christianity as emblem and assurance of the truth of the Church’s theological claims. *Jews* names eternal “signposts” along the historical path that leads to Christian Truth; indeed, it names the very “desk” upon which those Christian Truths are recorded, read, and studied. *Jews* signifies simultaneously the chosenness and antiquity to which emerging orthodox Christianity laid claim and the visible abjection, degradation, and suffering to which all enemies of God and Truth are eternally condemned. *Jews* signifies all this and more to Augustine, his colleagues, and his heirs. In this sense, *Jews* becomes the very substrate upon which the towering edifice of Christendom is founded.

Later on, *Jew* as foundational mirror-opposite is strikingly distilled in the images of Synagoga and her twin, Ecclesia, that appear in medieval art throughout Europe. In one of the better-known examples of the genre, on the western portal of the thirteenth-century Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, the two figures flank the central, enthroned Christ in perfect symmetry: Ecclesia (Church) at the right hand of Christ, Synagoga on the sinister (left) side. Ecclesia wears a crown; Synagoga’s lies fallen at her feet. Ecclesia looks forward; Synagoga bends under the weight of abjection, the Edenic serpent wound about her head rendering her blind. Ecclesia bears an upright Eucharistic chalice and cross-surmounted standard with wind-filled pennant; Synagoga’s lance-shaped standard is

broken, her pennant furled, and the upside-down tablets of the “Old Law” dangle in her limp grasp. From Ecclesia’s full waist hangs a pilgrim’s flask; Synagoga’s emaciated midsection is cinched by an ever-tightening belt. The number and placement of such twin figures—upon the portals, windows, and altarpieces of Europe’s cathedrals, as well as in the ornamentation of Christian holy books from as early as the ninth century—bespeak the vital role of haunted reflection or counterpart assigned to *the Jews* throughout millennia of Christian self-representation.

The modern rise of secularism and the nominal separation of church and state saw no diminution of appeals to *Jew(s)* as an antithetical key to the formulation of Western cultural identities. Although the “final solution” of the Nazi Reich is the most obvious and shattering modern instance of such appeal, rhetoric from the French Revolution provides earlier examples, including the following, composed in a somewhat different key.

On December 23, 1789, Stanislas Clermont-Tonnerre famously proposed to the Revolutionary French National Assembly: “We must refuse everything to the Jews as a nation and accord everything to Jews as individuals.”<sup>8</sup> The declaration is emblematic for the way in which it invokes (*the Jews*) to grapple with larger fundamental questions regarding the relationship between collectives and individuals in a modern democracy. *The Jews* is here identified as “a nation,” but the larger speech in which this declaration occurs also refers to the collective as a “religion” or “creed”; a “people,” “organization,” or “association.” “They should not be allowed to form in the state either a political body or an order,” concludes Clermont-Tonnerre in a statement that points to—and beyond—*Jews*. “They must be citizens individually. It is repugnant to have in the state an association of non-citizens and a nation within the nation.”<sup>9</sup>

Clermont-Tonnerre’s speech is notable, as well, for the way in which *the Jews* stands as “they” in opposition to the presumptive “we” of French democracy and nation; the seemingly particular exception to an otherwise universal humanity and the declaration of individual rights made in its name. *Jews* becomes the key *other* whose relationship to the collective French *self* will determine the authenticity of the Revolution’s democratic claims. “Few people treated the debate on the Jews as concerning only ‘a part of society,’” observes Gary Kates, who continues: “Non-Jews chose to address this issue because the emancipation debate was not really about the Jews at all. Since there were so few Jews in France, and since they played little role in the Revolution, they were easily turned into symbols of something else. . . . The debate over Jewish emancipation was . . . a debate over what it meant to be a French citizen.”<sup>10</sup> The French revolutionary debate about *Jews* was a debate about the constitution of

the Western democratic subject or self. The Dreyfus affair a century later might be characterized in a similar fashion.<sup>11</sup> The ability of *Jew(s)* to serve this function on the modern European political stage owes no small debt to Augustine's much earlier utilization of *Jew(s)* in constituting his primordial Christian subject in the Roman imperial era.

A crucial element of the modern emancipation debates—one that will be explored in greater detail in chapter 1—concerns what have become, in our era, two of the chief categories by which Western identities are formulated: ethnicity and religion. The two are opposed in Clermont-Tonnerre's speech, which contrasts nation/people to religion/creed as divisible, self-evidently discrete, and mutable attributes of individual identity. Here again, *Jew(s)* serves as the axis around which this particular distinction takes shape (a shape that emerges long before the European Enlightenment, as we shall see). The discrete and opposing nature of these categories has since that time become a given in the articulation of late modern and postmodern identities—especially *Jewish* ones: "I am a *Jew* by ethnicity," goes a familiar assertion, "but I don't practice the religion."

The question of what *Jew* signifies, then, is embedded in very particular ways in the construction and negotiation of foundational categories and concerns of Western identities and cultures. In part this is because *Jew* also comes to signify the confusion or insufficiency of emerging or established categories. One of the more pointed readings of this dynamic is offered by Zygmunt Bauman, who coins the term "allosemitism" to describe what he perceives as a Western cultural gestalt that goes beyond the simple dichotomy of antisemitism versus philosemitism. (*Semite* is a peculiar modern euphemism for *Jew*.)<sup>12</sup> Allosemitism, for Bauman, names "a radically ambivalent attitude" associated with *Jew*, a kind of "apprehension and vexation related not to something or someone disquieting through otherness and unfamiliarity, but to something or someone that does not fit the structure of the orderly world, does not fall easily into any of the established categories . . . [but] tend[s] to sit astride all the usual divides and elide all the criteria normally deployed to draw them."<sup>13</sup>

An unexpected illustration of this singular quality associated with *Jew* may be found in twenty-first-century Turkey, where the term is applied to people who would not self-identify as *Jews*. In the first decade of this century, according to Mesut Yeğen, the doubled name "*Jew* Kurds" (*Yahudi Kürtler*) began to appear in Turkish popular media, along with all manner of reports about the crypto-Jewishness of Muslim Kurds, their suppressed genetically Jewish ancestry, and their purported ties to Israel.<sup>14</sup> The phrase "*Jew* Kurds" appears to belong to a complex Turkish nationalist narrative that figures all Kurds as unassimilable, transnational, internal

aliens in modern Turkey and Iraq who “do not fit the structure of the orderly world” (a world of recognized nation-states, of Turkish republican values, of “mainstream” Islam, of enlightened modernity, etc.), which they thereby disrupt, destabilize, and call into question. Although *Kurd*, alone, would appear to function, in this context, in a fashion that resonates with Bauman’s claims about *Jew*, the wedding of the two names in Turkish nationalist discourse evokes much larger frames and claims than the regionally specific *Kurd* could evoke on its own.

An ironic counterpoint to this phenomenon is found in the international frenzy over an opinion essay published in a Turkish newspaper in 2008 by the former director of the Essen Center for Turkish Studies in Germany, Faruk Şen. In what Şen understood to be a gesture of solidarity with Turkish *Jews* and, in particular, with Turkish Jewish businessman İshak Alaton, who had publicly criticized what he had identified as Turkish state-sponsored antisemitism, Şen reportedly wrote: “Five million two hundred thousand Turks live in Europe, which once attempted to rid itself of Jews through acts of extreme horror. They [Turks] have become the new Jews of Europe . . . they suffer discrimination and exclusion just as the Jews did—though to a different degree and with different outward appearances.”<sup>15</sup> He concluded the essay: “We, as European Turks, know your value to our country. As Europe’s new Jews, your 5.2 million comrades in Europe understand you the best. Don’t allow the anti-Semitic attitudes of certain groups in Turkey to upset you, we, as the Turkish nation and Europe’s new Jews[,] are behind you.”<sup>16</sup> When Şen’s words were translated from Turkish to German and reported in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, his German executive board forced his resignation from the institute he had helped to found and had overseen for twenty-three years. The board reportedly accused Şen of inciting “racial friction” and suspended him despite pleas from Alaton and the general secretary of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Stephan Kramer, who insisted that “he is neither a Holocaust relativizer nor an anti-Semite,” but he “had always been a friend to the Jewish community.”<sup>17</sup> Comments in the German press at the time, according to Şen, asserted that “Jews were being insulted in the article.”<sup>18</sup> In referring to Turks as “Europe’s new Jews,” Şen was hardly introducing a novel formulation. He was, in fact, participating in a popular discourse that had begun to emerge years before and that continues to this day. In chapter 3, I explore this discourse, and others, built around conceptions of *new Jews*.

*Jew* often functions, then, on the one hand, as a malleable tool for constructing, testing, clarifying, and challenging ever-changing and ever-evolving cultural forms and analyses and, on the other, as a bedeviling and anxiety-provoking violation of all such forms, boundaries, and

classifications. *Jew*, in Western vernaculars, has long been a name for the internal and constitutive other, as well as the persistent fly in the ointment of grand cultural projects and narratives. What it has *not* long been is a name for the (collective or individual) self. The historically recent appropriation of *Jew*, in dominant Western vernaculars, as a term of self-identification is the result of a centuries-long process. It is one that is inescapably (and intriguingly) fraught, not only because of the term's history, but because even now—perhaps especially now—the name *Jew* defies all claims to proper possession or exclusive ownership.

A case in point is the popular maxim that, “after Auschwitz, we are all *Jews*.” In John Biguenet's short story “I Am Not a Jew,” for example, the lead character's wife insists: “After Hitler . . . what choice do we have? We have to be Jews, all of us.”<sup>19</sup> This impassioned assertion follows on the American tourist-protagonist's run-in with German neo-Nazi skinheads who address him as *Judenschwein*—to which he replies, sincerely, if ungrammatically, “*Ich bin nicht Juden*.” Not so, his wife insists, for when “they split the world into Jews and Nazis,” not choosing to be a *Jew* means winding up “on the wrong side.”<sup>20</sup>

That's all very well and good, others would contend, but such people are not *real Jews*, and for those of us who are *born Jews*, it is not a choice. Yet Shawn Landres, cofounder and CEO of Jumpstart, “a thinkubator for sustainable Jewish innovation,” would seem to disagree.<sup>21</sup> “Today,” he says, “we [who identify as *Jews*] are all Jews by choice because we have the opportunity to choose something other than Judaism [or Jewishness] every day.”<sup>22</sup>

The foregoing varied and contradictory assertions highlight a key aspect of modern appropriations and arbitrations of claims to *Jew* as a name for self: namely, a veritable explosion in modifiers. “Real” *Jews*, for example, are presumably distinguishable from “imaginary” or “figural” or “pseudo” *Jews*.<sup>23</sup> And yet, when the title character of Woody Allen's film *Annie Hall* tells her suitor Alvy Singer, “You're what Grammy Hall would call a ‘real Jew,’” the utility of the modifier “real” for clarifying or distinguishing much of anything is shown to be illusory, at best.<sup>24</sup> Allen pushes the point further when Alvy joins Annie and her family for an Easter dinner of ham with all the trimmings and finds himself imagining Annie's Grammy Hall picturing him in the seventeenth-century garb and barbering of an Eastern European Hasid—Alvy's vision of a “real” *Jew*. This example may illustrate why—at least, in scholarly writing—“real” (as well as *Jew*) frequently appears in quotation marks, signaling a recognition that reality has many dimensions, aspects, and interrelations, not all of which manifest on the same order but which all have measurable effect in the perceptible world.

*Jew* “by birth” is frequently juxtaposed with *Jew* “by choice” or “by religion.” But, again, the genealogical modifier can carry radically different meanings and implications in different contexts (medical versus halachic versus nationalist or racist, for example), at least as much as do the phrases “by choice” or “by religion,” to which it is commonly set in opposition. Moreover, “according to the [Reform Judaism] movement’s decision on patrilineal descent, the supposition of Jewishness conferred by birth must be authenticated by the individual’s commitment to Judaism. Thus the born-Jew also becomes a Jew by choice.”<sup>25</sup> “New *Jews*,” a phrase that, as previously noted, has been employed in a variety of contexts at the turn of the newest millennium (and only sometimes as a label for recent converts to Judaism), carries a startling echo to the phrase “New Christians” coined centuries ago to describe Christianized *Jews*, as well as their generations of descendants in a Europe marked by state-enforced conversions and a conformity to Christianity policed by the Inquisition. The multiplication of modifiers for *Jew* is itself an intriguing modern phenomenon inviting exploration and analysis, and one that I take up at various points throughout this book.

In offering the above handful of examples of *Jew(s)* in modern discourse, I intend merely to observe that the use of the term (and its variations) in each and every such statement conveys understandable meaning laced with complex, historically and ideologically laden connotations. Each appropriation of the name as a self-designation—collective and individual, with and without modifiers—may be subject to contention and contestation while explicitly serving as an act of identity construction and empowerment. There are, certainly, institutionalized arbiters of who and what count(s) as *Jew(s)* in many different contexts—Jewish Federations, day schools, and synagogues are among such arbiters, as were the Nazi Reich and its erstwhile neo-Nazi spawn; as are the legislature and courts of Israel and many other nation-states; as is Halacha (rabbinic jurisprudence), variously determined; as is the *Oxford English Dictionary*, among others. Yet, ultimately, no one person, group of people, or institution has, or can have, a lock on this deceptively simple but powerful key word, *Jew*.

Tracking the term *Jew* through diverse eras, contexts, and genres, it turns out, can provide a way of seeing—with depth and nuance—the ongoing construction and negotiation of “the West” and of the westernized self in a wide array of registers.

### *Jews, Jew, the Jews, the Jew, Jewish, Jewess*

If you recently used Google to search for the word “Jew,” you may have seen results that were very disturbing. . . . If you use Google to search

for “Judaism,” “Jewish” or “Jewish people,” the results are informative and relevant. So why is a search for “Jew” different? One reason is that the word “Jew” is often used in an anti-Semitic context. Jewish organizations are more likely to use the word “Jewish” when talking about members of their faith.<sup>26</sup>

This “explanation of our search results” appeared prominently for years (although no longer) on the first results page when one searched the word “Jew” using Google’s Internet search engine. The explanation continued, “Someone searching for information on Jewish people would be more likely to enter terms like ‘Judaism,’ ‘Jewish people,’ or ‘Jews’ than the single word ‘Jew.’”

Assuming these assertions to be true—and Google’s search algorithms presumably bore them out—why is it the case that “Jewish organizations” and genuinely inquisitive people “would be more likely” to avoid the singular noun *Jew* in favor of the adjective *Jewish*, or even the plural *Jews*, whereas “anti-Semites” would be more likely to gravitate to the singular *Jew*? What accounts for these patterns—patterns that go well beyond the particulars of Google searches or broader Internet practices and might be found throughout popular culture and common usage? No similar disparities between singular and plural or noun and adjective seem to obtain, for example, for terms like “Christian(s)” or “Swede/Swedish”—either as Internet search terms or as general identity labels. Nor have such predilections regarding the grammar of *Jew* always been in evidence.

For the writer of the Gospel of John, as for later theologians like Augustine and Martin Luther, *the Jews*, definite plural, names a problem and an evil seldom condensed or essentialized into the singular. An individual *Jew* like Jesus, Peter, Paul, or Mary can even escape all association with the ills attributed to the collective category. That said, the character of the betrayer in the Christian Gospel narratives, *Judas*, bears the name from which the noun *Jew* itself derives. The identification of this singular *Judas* with *Jew* persists as a trope through centuries of Christian anti-Jewish art and literature.<sup>27</sup>

By the time Christopher Marlowe writes *The Jew of Malta* (featuring a character named Barabbas, after the criminally militant foil to the imprisoned Jesus in the Gospel narratives) and Shakespeare creates, in *The Merchant of Venice*, his Shylock, “*the Jew*” (shadow double to the Christian “Merchant,” for whom *the Jew* is both life’s blood and death threat), the singular noun has come fully to stand for a potent distillation of the collective. The exemplum- or specimen-like nature of such a *Jew* receives further emphasis through application of the definite article: *the Jew*, in particular, becomes the facilitating device for a host of ideological

projects. *The Jew* takes its place among other iconic figures and tropes (the witch, the devil, the fool, the king, etc.) that populate medieval and modern morality plays, fables, folktales, and other phantasmic productions. It is largely from this *Jew*, especially in its guises as “moneylender,” “peddler,” or “-monger,” that the verb “to jew”—defined along the lines of “to cheat or overreach . . . to drive a hard bargain . . . to haggle”—derives.<sup>28</sup> Deadly renderings of *the Jew* by the likes of Henry Ford (*The International Jew*, 1920–1922) and Joseph Goebbels (*Der Jude*, 1929, and compare the 1940 Nazi propaganda film *Der Ewige Jude*, “The Eternal Jew”) are well known and continue to be widely disseminated. Thus, *the Jew* as a longstanding popular signifier for the contemptible goes some way toward explaining the persistent discomfort of many with the grammatically singular *Jew*, its particular appeal to bigots, and hence some “very disturbing” Google search results.

*The Jews*, like *the Jew*, can and does function in a similar fashion, as described above, most often in polemical contexts. But unlike “*The Jew of Malta*,” plural phrases like “*the Jews of Malta*,” “*the Jews in antiquity*,” “*the Jews under Ottoman rule*,” or “*Cultures of the Jews*” tend to appear less burdened by the essentialism that prevails in the absence of such accompanying, qualifying prepositions.<sup>29</sup> Such appearances, however, are deceiving. As Andrew Bush observes about the latter phrase, “*Cultures of the Jews*,” the title of a multivolume project hailed at the time of its publication for its innovative approach to historiography of *Jews*, “Biale [the editor] rewrites ‘the culture’ as the plural ‘cultures’ in his title, but it will require a new key in Jewish Studies to learn to eliminate the ‘the’ that so frequently universalizes some Jews as ‘the Jews.’”<sup>30</sup>

Whereas many now use the term *Jew* casually, unpointedly, and without a second thought, *Jew* is nonetheless often avoided in day-to-day speech by others who perceive that avoidance to be a gesture of politeness or social sensitivity. “Hebrew” or “Israelite,” as previously noted, have sometimes been substituted for *Jew* in English, and *Evrei* is now widely used this way in Russian, having replaced the abused and abusive *Zhid*. *Ebreo* is now standard in Italian. *Musevi* (from *Musa*—that is, Moses; hence, “Mosaist”) serves the same “neutralizing” impulse in Turkish, where it can take the place of the often derogated *Yahudi* (from the Arabic). Yet such avoidance can clearly have the effect of reinforcing the sense that there is something inherently distasteful or despicable in the identification *Jew*. In other words, avoidance can let bigotry have the final say. This dynamic is perhaps most complicated in places like contemporary Germany, where *Jew*—*Jude*—bears a particularly heavy burden. In common parlance there, one might hear, instead, *Israelitische*, or the careful circumlocutions *Deutsche mosaischen Glaubens* (“a German of Mosaic

faith”) or *unsere jüdischen Mitbürger* (“our Jewish fellow citizen”).<sup>31</sup> English-to-German dictionaries commonly offer a different translation for *Jew*: *Person jüdischer Abstammung* (“a person of Jewish descent”)—a phrase that likewise avoids the noun but introduces a host of sticky assumptions and resonances regarding genealogy.

The phrase “of Jewish descent” (or “extraction” or “ancestry”), among other things, would seem to provide a polite distance allowing a person thus characterized the freedom either to claim as meaningful a heritage associated with that “descent” or to disregard it as irrelevant. Such politesse, though, seems often to be employed when the heritage in question is perceived to be somehow problematic, a “background” from which one may wish to “extract” oneself.

The adjectival form *Jewish*, by itself, is another matter. As a personal identifier—“I am Jewish; she is Jewish”—the word presumes a larger collective in which the designee’s membership is acknowledged: persons or citizens, for example—forms of status at times withheld from those labeled *Jews*. The German phrase *unsere jüdischen Mitbürger*, cited above, surrounds the adjective *Jewish* with both another adjective (“our”) and a noun (“fellow citizen”) associated with belonging, while *Person jüdischer Abstammung* anchors the adjective *Jewish* to the respected and respectful noun *person*. “The Jewish community” similarly names one of a number of imaginable (if essentialized) communities that thereby are understood to share some commonalities with one another. That relative inclusiveness, it seems, can serve to “soften” or dissipate many of the sharper associations and exclusions that haunt the noun form *Jew(s)*. It is also somewhat more difficult to essentialize a singular adjective: “the Jewish man of Malta” is no murderously demonic fiend, and Shylock “the Jewish *person*” would hardly need to ask, “If you tickle us do we not laugh?” Nonetheless, as a form of the word *Jew*, the adjective *Jewish* also remains susceptible to use as a term of opprobrium and is no more stable than the noun.

Tellingly, in some of its earliest historical appearances in the singular form, the word translated as *Jew*—*yehudi*—functions as a kind of adjective. It is found in the appellation *ish yehudi*, “a Jewish man” (or “a man [who is] a *Jew*”), a phrase appearing in Zechariah 8:23 to describe a prophetic vision and again in Esther 2:5 to describe Mordecai, advisor to King Ahasuerus and kinsman to Queen Esther. The singular noun, *yehudi*, and the collective form, *yehudim*, appear multiple times in this latter book, as well, and even a verb form—*mityahadim*—“to act as, or become [like] *Jews*”—appears once. The book of Esther is among the small handful of books in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament in which these words are found at all. Only in the late, postexilic books of Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah,

and Daniel (and the deuterocanonical Maccabees) is *Jew(s)* found with any frequency.

In the book that bears her name, Mordecai's kinswoman Esther shares his Jewish identifications and loyalties, but she, herself, is never termed *isha yehudit*, the feminine form of the appellation that describes Mordecai. In English, as well, one does not tend to call Esther a *Jewess*—at least, not anymore. Many English-language dictionaries will advise that that term is always, often, or usually “offensive” (without explaining why this should be so—although the diminutive, derivative, and zoological associations of the suffix *-ess* might provide some clues).<sup>32</sup> Online search results at the time of this writing consist principally of such dictionary definitions, along with blogs and zines reclaiming or exploiting the word.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, in contrast to *Jew*, to my knowledge, no apologia has ever appeared for “very disturbing” search results for *Jewess*. *Jewess* is different from *Jew* in more ways than this. It has its own intriguing attributes related to, yet not entirely congruent with, those of *Jew*. Although I touch on some of these, briefly, later in this book, *Jewess* calls for a book of its own.

### Outline of This Book

The present volume, like other volumes in the Key Words in Jewish Studies series, is divided into three major parts: “Terms of Debate,” “State of the Question,” and “In a New Key.” Chapter 1, “Terms of Debate,” engages current scholarly debates about the origins of *Jew(s)* and how best to understand and represent what the term signifies in its pre-Christian and Christian-era appearances. These debates are particularly informative in highlighting, on the one hand, the extent to which the earliest *Jew(s)* are both products and vital components of modern identities and imagined communities and, on the other, the extent to which our modern identity categories and conceits are, themselves, still quite beholden to antique discourses about *Jew(s)*. Chapter 2, “State of the (*Jew*[ish]) Question,” takes as its framework the complex challenges and potentialities inherent in appropriating the term *Jew*—a term that for so long, and so virulently, signified abject otherness—as a term for self. It explores a rich tapestry of discourses about *Jew(s)* whose common threads include multilayered reflections about owning and belonging, unity and difference, memory and loss. Chapter 3, “In a New Key: New *Jews*” considers some of the newer genealogics of *Jew* in an age of Internet cultures, genetic sequencing, precarious nationalisms, and proliferating identities.

One final word on *Jew*: there is, of course, no final word on *Jew*—much less is one to be found in the pages of this book. This volume is a decidedly

partial and intentionally slender one. What I do not know or have not said here about *Jew* (including about those aspects I have engaged) could obviously fill numberless volumes (and, indeed, has done and will do so). But if I contribute any useful formulations or insights, or if my work provokes any questions about this key word, *Jew*, that others take up and fruitfully pursue, then I will have done here what I set out to do.