Politics and the writing of history have always been interconnected realms. It is clear that the great political question of the present day—the so-called “clash of civilizations”—has highlighted and rendered us more sensitive to themes and problems of historiography that previously were not regarded as particularly central or urgent. This may explain why so much of contemporary post-9/11 scholarship is so intent on studying the origins, conflicts, connections, and constructed nature of categories such as Islam, Europe, the “Judeo-Christian” tradition, the “secular” and the “religious.” In related fashion, the study of Jewish history is increasingly focusing on the critical interplay of “East” and “West” as both a formative and problematic force in the multivalent Jewish engagement with the modern world. Much of this work has been characterized by shrill polemics and dogmatic ideology, but new, often provocative, perspectives have also been opened up by viewing these matters through postcolonial paradigms. Rather than engaging this debate in partisan manner or seeking to smooth out the ambiguities, I want to examine the ways in which these frameworks help us to illuminate the continuing complex ironies and tensions of the Oriental–Occidental dichotomy and the seminal role that notions of the “East” and the “West” have played in modern Jewish politics, culture, and identity.\(^1\)

The Oriental-Occidental divide is, of course, a general ontological and epistemological cut that runs through millennia of Western history. The power-driven stereotype of the distinction between Asia and Arabia, the decayed, voiceless Orient and the progressive, articulate Occident—a paradigm inextricably associated with the work of Edward Said and which, despite many critical necessary qualifications and modifications, retains some essential truths—has its origins as far back as antiquity.\(^2\) As a major (though certainly not exclusive) binary marker of identity, of self and Other, its roots go back deep into ancient times.\(^3\) Despite its \textit{longue durée} and apart from present political conflicts, its contemporary sting, our own particular inscriptions and encodings of the East-West
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dichotomy, cannot be comprehended without reference to the Enlightenment, in all its magnificence and biases.

It is against this larger backdrop that much of the modern Jewish experience can be framed as one of multiple contradictory negotiations with Orientalist and Occidentalist discourses that were—and continue to be—constructed both for and against the Jews. In numerous ways, Jews internalized and deflected these narratives as variously self-defining, self-deprecating, and self-asserting instruments. Aziza Khazzoom has suggestively labeled these strategies and responses as “the great chain of Orientalism,” in which respectively “Westernizing” Jewish groups constructed and affirmed their own modern identity by appropriating secular, Enlightenment norms and creating negative mirror opposites, foisting “Oriental” stereotypes and characteristics upon other Jewish groups, putatively lower in the “civilizational” line.

There is much to be said for this scheme, but it leaves little room for other more subtle deployments, the ways in which these discourses could be transformed, mediated, undermined, or resisted. I would therefore prefer the image of an Orientalist web, a kind of all-enveloping thematic in which modern Jewish history in almost all its permutations has been and continues to be entangled and which has produced any number of ironic and debilitating but also creative moments.

Why is this so? It flows almost inevitably from the ambiguous status of Jews in the Western world. Jews were seen to inhabit a kind of liminal, hyphenated condition, regarded, as Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek J. Penslar have perceptively pointed out, “variably and often concurrently as occidental and oriental.” Here I want to examine a few major strands of this dialectical tension.

Let us begin with the Age of Emancipation. As Western and Central European Jews were allowed to leave their ghettos, they were regarded in many ways as local foreigners, emerging from dark, mysterious, and precivilized cultures. It would not be too great an exaggeration to state that as “French” or “German” Jews sought to enter into society, they were often represented as a species of internal Orientals. Their integration was predicated upon the demand that their alien Jewish traditions, their exclusive ghetto mentality, and their ugly disposition and manners undergo radical reform and regeneration in a manner consistent with progressive modern standards and the moral and aesthetic refinements of Bildung. There were, of course, many components to this transformative imperative, but it was also certainly informed by an extant and broader Orientalist discourse: Jews, could easily be represented as strangers to Europe, backward, Eastern and Asiatic. Their own account, of course, located their origins in the biblical lands of the Middle East.

These were widespread convictions. Jonathan Hess has recently shown that the anti-Semitic notions of the late eighteenth-century Christian theologian Johann David Michaelis and his Orientalist scholarship on Mosaic law were inseparable from his colonialist vision that Jews—as an unmixed, degenerate, southern race, products of the climate of the ancient