INTRODUCTION

THE FRONTIER AS A MODEL FOR JEWISH HISTORY

THE PROBLEM OF A CENTER OR CORE-PERIPHERY MODEL

NINETEENTH- AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY ZIONISM promised to solve the “problem” of Diaspora Jews. The problem was defined as the inevitable alienation experienced by Jews attempting to become citizens in nations that designated them inherently unassimilable. Zionism promised to provide a constant, unconflicted identity for them by making them citizens of a new nation state during an age in which national citizenship provided the primary point of identification. At the beginning of the twenty-first century this promise has now been shown to be problematic. We live in an age where national states themselves are of lesser importance for identity formation. The very fabric of state-based identity has been shown to be a composite resulting from the willing or unwilling movements of people over time and across space. All individuals create their sense of themselves out of this composite whose global scope is now quite evident. The promise of a stable identity for all Jews rooted in a specific Jewish (but also democratic and multiethnic) state has given way to the renewed importance of a complex Diaspora identity. Israeli identity is just as
conflicted as any other national identity with its various undercurrents and tensions. Indeed, part of the Diaspora in the twenty-first century is the new presence of Israeli Jews, with all their conflicted, multiple identities (secular, religious, ethnic, class) throughout the world.¹

Let me share an epiphany with you. I found myself one day at Bet-Ha-Tefutzot, the Museum of the Diaspora in Israel, a space devoted to the documentation of the cultural achievements of the Diaspora. It is a self-conscious parallel to Yad Vashem, the memorial and museum of the Shoah, which documents the victimization of Diaspora Jews. Inscribed at the entrance of the Museum of the Diaspora, as Arnold Eisen in Galut: Modern Reflections on Homelessness and Homecoming imagines, is the implicit admonition: “Remember where you stand. Only the Land around you is real. The rest is not. If you come from a Diaspora of the present, know that sooner than you think, your community too will be part of our past, a room in our museum.”² When I first experienced this, my sense was that the foundation of the state of Israel had made the life of Diaspora Jews somehow simpler, if more stressful. Today this epiphany of a Diaspora Jew reading such a statement in what still claims to be a non-Diaspora, Zionist space brings home to me that the overarching model for Jewish history has been that of the center, or core, and the periphery. Used extensively by sociologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this model had been reinforced by the role that Israel has had in reshaping the narrative of Jewish history. It was (and remains) the model of “you” and “us.” It is the imagined center that defines me as being on the periphery. Israel, the lost Garden of Eden, the City on the Hill, is the center; all the rest of Jewish experience is on the periphery. Recently the so-called revisionist historians of Israel (such as Zeev Sternhell and Yael Zerubavel) have pointed to the necessary mythmaking that went into the construction of the very idea of Israel in the course of the twentieth century.³ But even they still assume a central role for this