

Narratives

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Key Ideas

- Communities have dominant and subordinated narratives, stories that are “true” but not necessarily “factual.” These narratives are never fixed but shift over time. “Truth,” an operating system of ostensibly historical facts that serves to explain a people’s worldview, gives a group both legitimacy and credibility, and often describes the reasons behind a group’s practices and beliefs.
- Communal “truths,” or narratives, are reaffirmed through rituals.
- Dominant communal narratives—communal “truths”—often overlook subordinated ones. Just as the dominant American narrative can be said to be based in the “white” experience, the dominant Jewish narratives tend to be expressed through dominant Ashkenazi experiences. In point of fact, however, Jewish communal narratives are incredibly heterogeneous—culturally, ethnically, and racially.

Pesaḥ in Cairo

I was wearing one slightly torn, sunflower-patterned oven mitt when Cairo's March evening began to descend. In a pitiful attempt to counter the urban desert heat, a fan held together with a bent metal fork was channeling occasional waves of unbelievably hot air on me, a complement to the snail-paced breeze coming in through my windows. Before I'd moved to Egypt, the phrase "120°F in the shade" didn't mean much to me.

Now rounding out my tenth month in what locals lovingly call *'um al-dunyā* (mother of the world), I had adjusted to many of the city's unique flavors. One-time oddities had become normal, such as daily walks through Cairo's now world-famous *Midān al-Taḥrīr* (Liberation Square), a metropolitan epicenter bustling with echoes of the city's twenty million-plus occupants; bumper car-esque taxi rides on highways close enough to skyscrapers that one could literally step from a car into someone's living room; a 24/7 energy and intensity that put New York City to shame.

This was a special night. Friends were on their way over to celebrate Pesaḥ (Passover), a Jewish holiday commemorating the biblical Hebrews' miraculous journey from slavery to freedom. Spending the year in Egypt, or *Mitzrayim* as it's known in the Hebrew Bible, I was excited to observe this holiday in the same ancient land from which, ironically, my ancestors had purportedly fled with such little time for preparation that they had no food for the road, an image seared into my brain by family and teachers alike since my earliest days of childhood. More specifically, the biblical Hebrews couldn't wait for their bread to rise, hence the flat, crunchy cracker central to the holiday called *matzah*.

From as far back as I could remember, celebrating Passover with a Seder meal was one of my favorite Jewish rituals. But to have the opportunity to sing songs about Pharaoh a few miles away from *the* pyramids; to chant poems about swarms of frogs a few feet away from *the* Nile River; to be living less than one hundred miles from the Red Sea, *the* waterway that Moses wondrously parted to allow the biblical Hebrews to escape from their slave-owners and Pharaoh's soldiers: this was something the child within considered unimaginable. Even though Jews have been living in Egypt for centuries, spending Passover in the "wilderness" (one rabbinic interpretation of "Egypt") was exciting, even bizarre—all the more so for an American Jew who traces his Jewish bona fides back to Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Russia rather than the Middle East.

Over the next few minutes, my friends—Jewish, Chris-

tian, Muslim, and unaffiliated—arrived at my humble apartment. And after figuring out how to jam fifteen people into a room that could comfortably seat eight at most, we began the Seder's first formal ritual. Using a makeshift *Haggadah* (Pesaḥ prayer book; pl. *Haggadot*) that three of us had cobbled together, we recited a version of "*Kadesh, Orḥatz . . .*," an introductory song that lays out the table of contents for the night's festivities. The epic story of slaves voyaging to freedom had begun.

The Construction of a Narrative

I begin this book with an experience involving Passover because this Jewish holiday is the quintessential embodiment of *the* Jewish story: it is central to the Jewish collective identity. This is one reason why the Pesaḥ Seder, the ritualized meal held the first night(s) of the holiday, is among the most widely observed traditions for Jews around the world. Every spring Jews of all stripes and colors come together to recount the "Exodus from Egypt," the account of Moses and the biblical Hebrews journeying to the Promised Land. *Haggadot* commonly include the phrase, "In every generation one is obligated to see oneself as if s/he went out from Egypt," reminding participants that they are not only supposed to retell the Exodus story but must also make this ancient account personal, embracing it as if it is their own journey as well.

Individual and Communal Narratives

One of the ways a community's collective memory survives—especially over the course of tens of generations—is through the telling and retelling of a master narrative (or narratives), what scholar Ilana Paredes calls a "national biography." In the case of Jews, in recounting their story this group has reinforced its self-understanding while also shaping how the 99.8 percent of the world that is not Jewish sees them.

Storytelling in and of itself is not unique. Virtually all communities engage in this practice. In fact, all of us are storytellers—narrators—in our own right. As individuals we engage in this activity through daily routines, whether at work, school, or someplace else. We do it when meeting someone for the first time, such as on a date or when applying for a job. In all of these moments we recycle stories—scripts—about who we are. Sometimes we even make things up. Through media such as Facebook and Twitter, we craft a version of our lives and our thoughts.

We do this as individuals through basic statements we

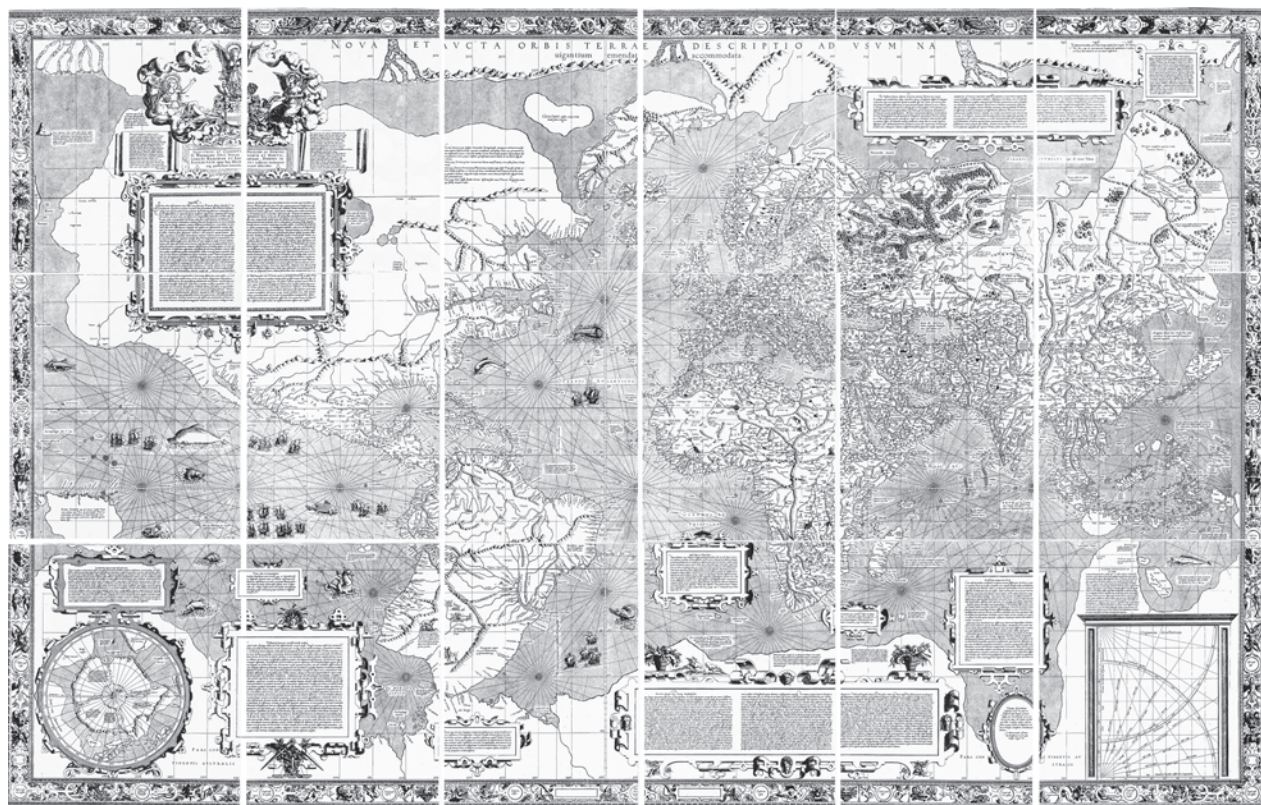


FIGURE 1.1. The Mercator Map. Most world maps found in North America and Europe are based on a sixteenth-century depiction of the world, in which Western Europe is in the center, drawn by Gerardus Mercator, a geographer and cartographer from an area now called Belgium.

make about ourselves: *I go to primary school. I am a college student. I bag groceries. I am a mechanic. I live on the street. I am an exciting person and you should spend more time with me. I am a skilled laborer and you should hire me.* We also do this as societies: *Our country fights for freedom. Our country protects us. Our country only protects some of us. Our country is built on a commitment to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Our country favors certain people over others.* Along the way, we edit these personal and communal narratives, adding pieces here, subtracting pieces there. The script is never fixed. Through this process, individual and group identities are created and re-created.

“Truth” and “Fact”

To better understand the phenomena of social identities and communal narratives, let’s bring in two terms to assist us: *truth* and *fact*. Through the process of storytelling we invent “truth,” which shapes a worldview or a dominant narrative. As opposed to “facts”—actual on-the-ground reality—“truth” is the construction of per-

ceptions. “Truth” can be related to facts, but more often than not it is shaped according to interpretations rather than precise historical evidence. “Truth” involves belief and trust, sometimes more than it involves concrete, scientific data.

Identities are constructs based on truth and fact. All communal identities have sets of “truth,” and all communal “truths” are ever-changing. In this sense, communal “truth” is an operating system of ostensibly historical facts that serves to explain a people’s worldview, thereby giving it both legitimacy and credibility. A community’s “truth” often describes the reasons behind that group’s practices and beliefs. It does not need to be factual, though it certainly can be. “Truths” are central to identities, whether individual or collective, because we orient toward the truth as if it is factual.

This explanation may seem counterintuitive, especially in relation to more common ways in which the term *truth* is used. Our definition of “fact,” too, implies that data exist irrespective of interpretation. So let’s go further.

People shape “truth”; more often than not it cannot

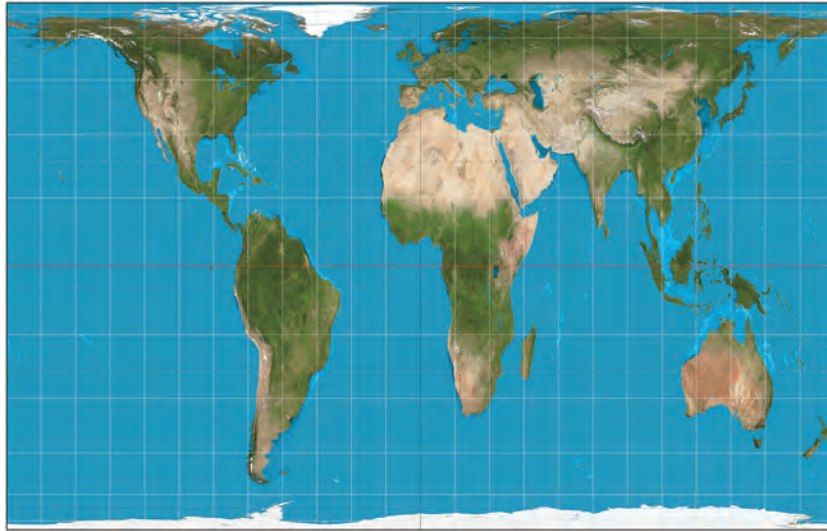


FIGURE 1.2. In contrast to the Mercator Map, the Galls-Peter projection is much closer to an equal-area map reflecting the actual sizes of the land masses found on Earth.

be proven. “Truth” is constantly created and re-created based on new information, changing perceptions, and shifts in interpretation. At any given time, a community has one or more dominant narratives, fluid stories based on the group’s “truth,” through which it explains and understands itself and those outside it. Communal stories can remain the same for decades, or they can change overnight. As opposed to “truth,” which cannot necessarily be argued away, facts can be grappled with, debated, and fought over. Most people are unrelenting in their loyalty to their “truth,” unwilling to accept other dominant ways of understanding particular events or the world at large. Many approach facts only through their understanding of “truth.”

The “Truth” of the Mercator Map

Take the following example: One standard map used to teach world geography in American and many European schools is directly based on a 1569 design made by a geographer and cartographer from an area now called Belgium, Gerardus Mercator (fig. 1.1).

Though scientifically advanced for its time, and arguably not used today as it was originally intended, like all maps the Mercator projection communicates a particular perception of the world in the form of a two-dimensional image. As we now know, Mercator’s portrayal of the world distorts the size of the earth’s landmasses; the actual dimensions are much closer to those depicted in an equal-area map such as the Galls-Peter projection (fig. 1.2).

More importantly perhaps, according to the Mercator

map Europe is the center of the world. This was Mercator’s “truth,” as well as Europe’s. It was key to their identities. (Maps made in other parts of the world similarly place themselves in the center.) Whether or not one argues that inflating Europe’s size while reducing Africa’s is Eurocentric or merely nonobjective, or even that Mercator isn’t to blame for the map’s depiction of the earth because he intended it to be used for navigation and not geography, maps reflect value systems. They teach not just spatial relations, but political ideas as well.

Using cartography to illustrate underlying problems with narrative construction is not a trivial exercise. As scholar Marshall G.S. Hodgson argues in his renowned treatise *Rethinking World History*, maps directly reflect groups’ biases. Hodgson calls the Mercator map—with its expansion of Europe and diminishment of Africa—a “Jim Crow projection,” an unsympathetic comparison that links it to the legalized racism present in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

“Truth” and Dominant American Narratives

“Truth,” 9/11, and Iraq

Let’s look at a different set of examples, more overtly connected to twenty-first-century Americans. Compare, for instance, the dominant American narratives of September 10 and September 12, 2001, or the dominant Iraqi narratives of March 20 and March 23, 2003. In each case, actual events changed, suddenly and radically, the collective worldviews—and “truths”—of millions of people. In each case, too, new subnarratives simultaneously

emerged that immediately reshaped the way the “other” was perceived.

Of course, there are facts on the ground regarding the individuals who died as a result of the events of September 2001 and March 2003. But these facts are often debated from the vantage point of one’s “truth” and one’s identity. Whereas Americans know not only the number (2,977) but also the specific names of those killed in the 9/11 attacks, in the case of the invasion of Iraq no precise number exists that accounts for the Iraqi civilians or militants who died; there are only estimates.

Further, the narratives regarding these events are different. Some think that the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks were affiliates of Al-Qaeda, while others do not. Some think that the primary reason the United States military invaded Iraq was to indirectly weaken Al-Qaeda; others think it was to protect the American government’s oil interests. There are definite facts regarding who did what in these situations. Similarly, there are definite facts regarding individuals’ stated and actual intentions. But sometimes such data cannot be gathered (or are not accessible to the public). Sometimes, even when data are gathered, people are unable to accept them as fact, writing them off using the logic of conspiracies.

As these examples demonstrate, communal narratives are seemingly cohesive stories, combining interwoven strands from a number of different sources. Sometimes they are manifested orally, through scripts passed down from one generation to the next, other times visually, in the form of symbols or photos of actual people. They are based largely on perception. Such “truths” cannot be reduced to simple correctness or incorrectness. In their complexity, they are core to identities and the stories we tell ourselves, both sacred and profane. Communal “truths” regarding events as momentous as 9/11 or the invasion of Iraq have played important roles in shaping individual and group identities.

“Truth,” Obama, and Racial Identities

Dominant narratives are always selective. Take President Barack Obama. Beginning in at least November 2008, subsequent to his winning the presidential election and continuing long after he was sworn in as the forty-fourth president of the United States in January 2009, the dominant American “truth” has been that in Obama the United States elected the country’s first African American president. Yet as many know—as the president himself shared in speech after speech during the 2008 campaign, and as laid out in his autobiography, *Dreams from*

My Father (2004)—although Obama’s father was black, his mother was white. Given this fact, some have argued that he is a member as much of the white community as of the black community.

Others think that “white America” has a vested interest in seeing Obama as black because, as writer Peggy Orenstein puts it, it is “more exciting, more romantic, and more concrete [a] prospect than the ‘first biracial president.’” She also probes further, asking: “Would Obama still be seen as ‘black enough’ if the wife by his side were white? And don’t get my husband started on why Tiger Woods—whose mother is three-quarters Asian and whose father was one-quarter Chinese and half African-American—is rarely hailed as the first Asian-American golf superstar.”

This isn’t to say that Obama is not black. Obama, like all of us, can identify any way he chooses. Indeed, on question nine of the 2010 American census, “What is Person 1’s race?” he selected a single box, “Black, African Am., Negro.” He could have chosen “White,” both “Black etc.” and “White,” or the last category listed on the form, “Some other race.” (Whether a community with whom one identifies accepts an individual as one of its own is another issue.)

The point is, social identities are a reflection of individual and collective “truth” more than of fact, more connected to perception than to reality. If Obama had been born in the United States when the infamous “one-drop rule” was in place—which legally defined a black as an individual with “any known African black ancestry”—he would not have had a legal choice as to identifying with a particular race; the government would have made the choice for him.

It is also clear that America’s history in dealing with race in centuries past continues to play a major role in identity formation today. If Obama had been born in another country, regardless of when, his racial identities would be understood differently. For instance, if he had been born in contemporary Brazil, he wouldn’t simplistically be called either black or white (i.e., in terms of whiteness and blackness, there are many more racial categories in Brazil than the United States). The manner in which America has de jure and de facto understood race is subjective, as are all constructions of identity, whether racially based or not.

We can make the same points about the legal definitions of other minorities in the United States, such as Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans. Though the civil classifications for what constitutes an American as a member of one of these two categories has changed over time, as have the legal rights one has or doesn’t have as a result, the fact that there have been, and continue to be, legal definitions for specific groups, defined by race or

otherwise, points to the juridical qualification and quantification of identities in America.

In other words, identities are imposed from without as much as from within. And although in twenty-first-century America identity-based laws and accompanying rights are more overtly linked to constructs around gender and sex than to race and ethnicity, legal definitions for particular ethnicities and nationalities continue to exist. Native American tribes are a case in point. The statuses of one's identities are often as much related to legal parameters as to de facto social perception, although sometimes the consequences of both can be the same.

Each of us plays a role in constructing a narrative that is more "truthful" than factual. All of our social identities—whether based in ethnicity, gender, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, or something else—emerge through this process. Simply because we identify as X does not guarantee that others in society will allow us to identify this way. There are many agents involved in the construction of identities, multiple players in the shaping of our individual and collective narratives.

Other American "Truths": Ross, Parks, and Robinson

Though Obama's identities are an ongoing example, the "truth" vs. fact about other aspects of the United States' collective identity is often tied up with America's historical past. Just as Americans *know* that Obama is the first black president, Americans also *know* that Betsy Ross designed the United States' flag; *know* that Rosa Parks moved the civil rights movement forward by being the first African American woman to refuse to move to the back of a public bus after being ordered to do so; and *know* that Jackie Robinson broke the racial barrier in professional sports by becoming the first black man to play major league baseball. To some degree, it is not important that none of these three "truths" is factual.

Betsy Ross did not actually play an important role in America's independence from England, let alone any role whatsoever in creating the country's flag. Rosa Parks was not the first African American woman to refuse to move to the back of a racially segregated bus. In July 1944, eleven years and four months prior to Parks's famous stand against bigotry, Irene Morgan refused to move to the back of a racially segregated bus traveling from Virginia to Maryland. The case eventually went to the United States Supreme Court: in *Morgan v. Virginia*, the court ruled for the first time that the segregation of buses on interstate trips was unconstitutional. As for

Jackie Robinson, he certainly might be the most famous black American of the mid-twentieth century to play major league baseball. But he was not the first to break baseball's "racial barrier." Fifty years earlier, before the Negro Leagues were even established, John "Bud" Fowler and Moses Fleetwood Walker played on integrated professional baseball teams with whites, starting in 1878 and 1884, respectively.

Truth and fact also manifest in dominant American narratives in terms of every day structures. One can make this argument regarding what commercial stores (e.g., Best Buy, Kmart, Home Depot, Staples, Target, Toys-R-Us, Walmart) or fast-food restaurants (e.g., Burger King, Domino's, KFC, McDonald's, Pizza Hut, Subway, Taco Bell, Wendy's) should be built in a shopping center, or even what the "must read" books should be for high school students studying English literature (e.g., Charles Dickens, Emily Dickinson, Shakespeare, Walt Whitman). All of these are conventional parts of dominant twenty-first-century American narratives. This is not the way the United States has always been, nor will it be the probable situation for decades to come. But all are currently dominant.

American Dominants and Subordinates

The above examples deal primarily with dominant elements of American narratives. They echo what is perhaps best framed as the master American narrative. America's communal identity is rooted in the story of how, despite being a pluralistic country made up of many different subcommunities, we are all one nation. As American religions scholar Catherine Albanese writes, "[American history books] generally tell one major story, incorporating the separate stories of many peoples into a single story line arranged chronologically." This way of organizing a large communal identity communicates a common culture, a shared bond among Americans of all stripes. Such an effort can bring people together in positive ways and can help give potentially chaotic societies order.

But this method often has a sticky underbelly. For starters, groups' identities and the histories they are based on are often not neat and orderly. Most of the time, says Albanese, events, and the impact they have on shaping identities, "unfold gradually, over centuries." Crafting simple "connect-the-dots" stories about complex histories is disingenuous. It discounts the ways in which communities recreate themselves time and time again, often not in isolation but through contact with the "other." As historian Lawrence Levine puts it, "To teach a history

that excludes large areas of American culture and ignores the experiences of significant segments of the American people is to teach a history that fails to touch us, that fails to explain America to us or to anyone else.”

More challenging is that a community’s dominant narratives marginalize other narratives, sometimes even relegating or disregarding these minority subnarratives to the point of rendering them invisible. This is one reason why dominant narratives—and identities—are directly linked to power (see chapter 10). The voices of those with less power are typically pushed to the periphery or ignored; their identities and accompanying stories become much less important. Take the notion that the United States of America is the most multicultural and multiethnic nation in history, which reflects the country’s deep tolerance for the “other.” Such a “truth” exists hand in hand with the disregarding, and even concealment, of subnarratives, in particular as related to historical atrocities that took place in this land even before the United States was officially established.

Specifically, not until the 1960s did state-sanctioned high-school textbooks begin mentioning the horrors of American slavery or the genocide of Native Americans, and then it was in only the most cursory of ways. Prior to this time, mainstream American history textbooks either discounted or justified these monumental components of America’s past. Some argue that American textbooks continue to shape inaccurate communal narratives, one that persists in marginalizing minorities and their stories in an effort to sanitize American identities.

Others say that the exclusion of current events, including genocides taking place internationally, similarly cleanse the American government’s role in history, often focusing instead on lauding the United States for fighting on behalf of the underdog, despite evidence to the contrary. This isn’t to say that present-day historical revisionists trump historians who preceded them. Rather, there are multiple ways to construct communal narratives, countless ways to dissect communal identities. Most commonly, communities—including national entities such as the United States—paint themselves in a positive light, choosing to leave the parts of the story they are not necessarily proud of on the cutting room floor.

Marginalizing specific subnarratives also creates the problematic binary of “normative” vs. “fringe.” Those subnarratives put into the basket of “normalcy” are given more credence and credibility. They effectively become endorsed, which leads them to be concretized further. The opposite takes place for those subnarratives thrown

into the “fringe” basket. They are scoffed at, discussed as if they are fictitious and maybe even deceitful, leading to further ostracization. As historian Thomas Tweed puts it, “Historical narratives . . . are never ‘just’ history. There is always a great deal at stake for narrators and readers, always much to gain and lose in power and meaning.”

“Truth” and Dominant Jewish Narratives

Like dominant American narratives—or dominant German narratives or dominant Chinese narratives, etc., which are all exceptionalized versions of history—dominant Jewish narratives are ethnocentric: they reflect self-interest. Similarly, dominant Jewish narratives—again, like any other communal narrative—reflect the Jewish people’s “truths” and are not always factual.

A Common Jewish Narrative

One common Jewish narrative—one that is often taught in Jewish parochial schools, supplementary Jewish educational programs (i.e., “Hebrew schools”), Jewish adult education and conversion classes, and elsewhere—goes something like this:

Contemporary Jews are descendants of the biblical Hebrews, who, starting with Abraham, were the first people to accept monotheism, the belief in a single God. Tracing their lineage through the Bible, from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob (later named Israel) and his twelve sons (a.k.a. the Children of Israel), and continuing on through Moses and Joshua, the Hebrew and Israelite slaves escaped to freedom, going on to wander in the desert wilderness for forty years. This epic tale involves an evil emperor (Pharaoh), a miraculous escape (through a major body of water that splits into two, creating a pathway), a revelation from God (Mount Sinai), receipt of a set of moral codes (the Ten Commandments or Directives), and passage to a land promised to them by God, a geographical area loosely correlated with the current borders of the State of Israel.

Throughout history Jews have been persecuted, oppressed, and murdered simply for being Jewish. Exiled from their homeland, the Holy Land, a number of times—most significantly in 586 BCE and 70 CE, when their First and Second Temples were destroyed—this resilient community has persevered and survived over and over again, against all odds. Though there have been many attempts to annihilate them, most notably the Holocaust or Shoah—the European Jewish genocide of World War II—they wondrously returned to their birthplace, the Land of Israel, in the twentieth century and, in 1948, established a new country, a Jewish state, where they continue to fight for their existence today.

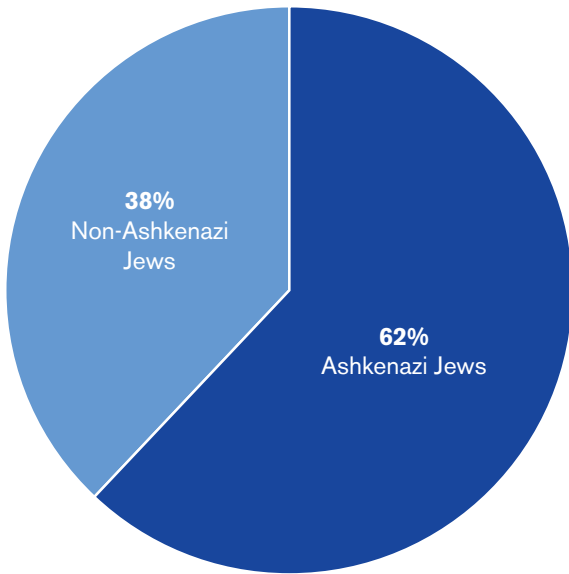


FIGURE 1.3. Worldwide population of twenty-first-century Ashkenazi and non-Ashkenazi Jews (the latter group includes African American, Chinese, Ethiopian, Indian, Mizrahi, and Sephardi Jews). In approximately 1500 CE, the proportions were reversed.

Many Jews are familiar with this story; it is core to their Jewish identities. Even Jews who shun Jewish ritual of all kind typically *know* about the Exodus from Egypt. Even Jews who do not believe that there ever was a group of Hebrew slaves accept this account as their narrative. It is their “truth.”

Ashkenazi Jewish Ascendancy

The Jewish community is no different than any other group so far as shaping its own “truth” goes. Just as dominant historical American narratives largely reflect the experiences of whites (though this is in the process of changing as we speak), today’s dominant Jewish communal narratives largely reflect the experience of one particular subgroup: Ashkenazi Jews in Israel and the United States, those Jews who trace their lineage back to Eastern European and Russian, Christian-majority places. Of course, the Ashkenazi subgroup can be broken down into smaller subdivisions, just as we can do with “white America.”

Putting a significant point to the side for a moment—i.e., male, heterosexual supremacy, a form of domination that abounds in communal narratives well beyond those of the Jewish community—there are a number of possible explanations for the rise of Ashkenazi hegemony within dominant Jewish narratives, four of which are addressed

below. Though none of them validates the lack of focus on non-Ashkenazi Jews, each serves as a window into better understanding this trend, both within the Jewish community in particular and in other communities more generally. Such understandings are also important because Ashkenazi dominance is only a current trend in the Jewish community; it is not the way it has been throughout this centuries-old community’s history, and may not be the future trend among Jews either.

It is important to add that hegemony—the dominance of one social group over others—does not necessarily imply malevolent intentions. Nor does it mean that one group undoubtedly concocts a master plan to dominant all other subgroups within a given community. Although this may be the case in some situations, it is certainly not always the case. Exclusionary practices related to the construction of narratives are often unplanned. Nonetheless, for subordinated groups, they are commonly perceived to be problematic at best and immoral and violent at worst. In such cases, dominant groups’ intentions lose their importance.

MOST JEWS TODAY ARE ASHKENAZI

Although being a majority member of a community neither ensures dominance nor pardons the discounting of minorities, sometimes there is a relation between mass and power, population numbers and authority. In this case, a considerable number of twenty-first-century Jews worldwide identify as Ashkenazi. Of the world’s roughly fifteen million Jews (0.2 percent of the world’s population), about 40 percent (6 million) live in the United States, 40 percent live in Israel, 10 percent (1.5 million) live in Europe, and 10 percent live elsewhere. Given that approximately 80 percent of American Jews (4.8 million), 50 percent of Israeli Jews (3 million), and most European Jews self-identify as Ashkenazi, we can safely say that a majority of Jews worldwide are Ashkenazi (about 9.3 out of 15 million, or 62 percent; see fig. 1.3—though some estimate that as many as 80 percent of all Jews are Ashkenazi.)

In 1500 CE, however, Ashkenazi Jews made up only 33 percent of the world’s Jewish population, a number that increased to 40 percent by 1800 and 90 percent by the turn of the twentieth century. (This rapid population increase is commonly attributed to higher birth rates and lower death rates, especially in comparison to non-Ashkenazi Jewish communities.) Their numbers then decreased as a result of the Shoah (Holocaust). Some contend that in 1070, Ashkenazi Jews made up only 7 percent of the world’s Jewish population. In short, whether or not

current dominant Jewish narratives are rooted in Ashkenazi experiences because Ashkenazi Jews are the largest single subgroup of the Jewish community, for most of the last thousand years Jewish narratives were not dominated by Ashkenazi Jews, nor were most Jews Ashkenazi.

INTRA-ASHKENAZI HOMOGENIZATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Over the last century, in particular the last fifty years, the Ashkenazi population has become more homogeneous. In this process disparate Ashkenazi subgroups have blended together to form a much larger group. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most Ashkenazi Jews relocated to the United States and Israel (prior to 1948 more commonly called Ottoman Palestine and then British-occupied or British Mandate Palestine). Although Ashkenazi standardization was gradual, as of the twenty-first century very few Ashkenazi Jewish Americans under forty can discern any differences between Ashkenazi subgroups.

For example, if two random twenty-something Ashkenazi Jewish Americans found out that their respective family backgrounds were German and Russian, chances are they would not be able to point to key differences in their familial customs or histories, especially if they were third- or fourth-generation Americans. In contrast, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and well before, in Europe, what is now Israel, and the United States, such differences among Ashkenazi Jews were incredibly important. Even differences within a single group, such as German Jews—for example, speaking German versus Yiddish (a Jewish dialect that combines elements of German and Hebrew) as their first language—were central to one's Jewish identity. It was also not uncommon for such subgroups to consider marriage between them to be a form of intermarriage (as opposed to intra-group marriage).

Take a minor controversy involving the first synagogue established in the Western United States. To this day, two different synagogues stake this claim: Congregation Emanu-El and Congregation Sherith Israel, both located in San Francisco, about 1.5 miles from one another. What we know definitively is that these two synagogues were founded around April 1851. At this time, at least two subgroups of Ashkenazi Jews began to meet regularly for prayer, one that identified as Bavarian (later called German) and another that identified as Prussian Poles (later called Poles). Although both communities spoke German, there were multiple subcultural differences between them. For decades thereafter, these two Ashkenazi subcommunities remained at odds because

of their ethnic differences. Today, there are no tensions between members of these two synagogue communities; and even if there were, they would not be due to any intra-Ashkenazi differences.

By approximately 1920, two dominant groups emerged from American Ashkenazi Jewish communities nationwide: “Germans” and “Russians.” (I use quotation marks because many of those with German citizenship were ethnically Polish and many of those with Polish citizenship were ethnically Russian, etc.) Within these subcommunities, some individuals affiliated with different religious denominations—such as Reform, Orthodox, and somewhere in between—and some did not, often affiliating instead with socialist groups (e.g., Jewish Labor Bundists). Ashkenazi Jews were quite active in an array of politically identified Jewish organizations; by one count, in New York City alone more than 3,600 such affiliations existed in the early 1920s. In other words, aside from differences in Ashkenazi Jewish Americans' cultural backgrounds, they were also heterogeneous in multiple other ways.

However—and this is the most important point for the topic at hand—by the second half of the twentieth century a shift was already under way, such that now, in the twenty-first century, Ashkenazi Jews under forty whose families have been in the United States for three or more generations, can rarely differentiate themselves from other Ashkenazi Jews in terms of intra-Ashkenazi ancestry. There might be differences in terms of affiliation with distinctive denominations, political orientations, or socioeconomic status; but whether or not one is of German, Polish, or Russian descent, for example, is largely irrelevant. Instead, the dominant binary in the U.S. is Ashkenazi/non-Ashkenazi (see below).

THE SHOAH, THE STATE OF ISRAEL, AND ASHKENAZI JEWS

A third phenomenon that helps explain the current situation of Ashkenazi hegemony is that, for many Jews, the two most significant Jewish events of the twentieth century were the Shoah (Holocaust) and the establishment of the State of Israel, both of which are intrinsically linked to the Ashkenazi communal experience. World War II's genocide of six million Jews (two out of every three Jews in Europe and one out of every three in the world) predominantly affected Ashkenazi Jews.

As for the founding of the Jewish State, most late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Zionists were Ashkenazi, especially those who took key military and administrative positions in the years leading up to and

immediately following Israel's establishment as a new country. The Ashkenazi imprint on Israel—a country based on a particular social identity (i.e., the self-proclaimed Jewish State)—has predominated ever since.

ASHKENAZI JEWS AND WHITENESS IN THE UNITED STATES

A fourth trend in the growth of Ashkenazi hegemony, especially as it now exists in the United States (and parts of Europe), is that, over the course of the twentieth-century, Ashkenazi Jews “became white.” Like many other minority groups, Ashkenazi Jews were not born into whiteness but gradually transitioned into this position as their Americanness (and Europeanness) became increasingly accepted. Earlier in Jewish American history—as recently as the late nineteenth century—Jews were considered by some to be black, both metaphorically and literally. Because whites, as a collective, have more power and privilege than any other group in the United States, once Ashkenazi Jews were perceived to be white, their power increased in turn, particularly in the spheres of academia, government, media, and popular culture (i.e., movies, music, and television; see chapter 10). Much of the time non-Ashkenazi Jews, in contrast, have been perceived as nonwhite or “people of color” (see special topic 1.1).

Ashkenazi/Non-Ashkenazi: The Dichotomization of Jews

Ashkenazi ascendancy in Israel and the United States occurred in different historical contexts, especially in terms of whiteness, blackness, and racial construction. But in both countries, since at least the 1950s, there have been dominant and subordinated Jewish identities, and in both countries Ashkenazi Jews have been dominant. Perhaps as a result, the most common Jewish Israeli and Jewish American ethnic self-understanding has revolved around the binary of Ashkenazi/non-Ashkenazi, with those in the latter category usually referred to as Sephardi or Mizrahi (lit., Easterner), even though these two latter terms actually mean different things (see below).

If we look at Israel in particular, in the years immediately after its establishment in 1948 these two overarching identity categories emerged to represent myriad heterogeneous groups of Jewish immigrants. As in the United States, those generally from Christian-majority communities in Europe and Russia were called Ashkenazi. But there was also an influx of hundreds of thousands of Jews from Muslim- and Arab-majority countries

SPECIAL TOPIC 1.1

ASHKENAZI-NESS AND BEING WHITE

In twentieth- and twenty-first-century America, whiteness is a privileged social identity. Much more than a biological fact, it is a construct, an idea that, at least in the American context, has largely been understood in terms of blackness: i.e., what it is *not*. Whiteness, like all racial constructs, exists relationally—in relation to other racial constructs—and can manifest differently across time and place. This is similar to the idea that no group can be understood without respect to an “other.”

Similarly, Ashkenazi Jews exist in terms of what they are not; they are *not* “Jews of color.” Further, just as the superficial term “people of color” is problematic in its homogenizing of all nonwhites, categorizing non-Ashkenazi Jews as a single group is equally problematic. Of course, the term *white* homogenizes distinct groups under a single name as well, but because “whites” have a disproportionate amount of societal power, especially in the United States and Israel, this conflation is arguably less problematic.

in the Middle East and North Africa, many of whom were arriving at the same time (specifically in the 1950s). The latter, representing diverse communities, were usually grouped together as Sephardi or Mizrahi, or, in some situations, under one of more than twenty other terms, such as Arab, Levantine, Middle Easterner, or Oriental.

What Is Dichotomization?

Scholar Aziza Khazzoom calls this type of ethnic formation “dichotomization.” She explains that in Israel, initial economic disparities linked to ethnic identities became embedded in the fabric of society such that they still exist today, more than sixty years after the country was established. Although the country's founders may not have intentionally created social inequalities based on immigrants' countries of origin, she says, they clearly marginalized non-Ashkenazi Jews, starting with the use of overt labeling. Those more severe in their analysis of this issue, however, argue that the process of “othering” happened quite purposefully (see chapter 10), and call it just as inaccurate and unjust as the American white/black duality.

Sephardi Jews

Intentionality and agency aside, Khazzoom notes that dichotomization has been problematic on other lev-

els, including the fact that, like the expression “people of color,” neither the term Sephardi nor Mizraḥi has a clear definition. For starters, Jews immigrating to Israel from the Middle East and North Africa—coming from such diverse places as Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen—had much less in common, in terms of tradition and ritual, than did Ashkenazi Jews arriving from Poland, Russia, or elsewhere in Europe, due in part to their relative lack of physical interaction. There were also many differences between subcommunities of Jews arriving in Israel from the same country (see chapter 7).

Further, rather than claiming the ethno-cultural heritage of the country they had left, some non-Ashkenazi Jews, including some of those immigrating to Israel from Europe, chose to identify with the place their ancestors had been expelled from as far back as the fifteenth century, Spain and Portugal. These Jews called themselves Sephardi, tracing their family lineage to *Sepharad*, the modern Hebrew word for Spain.

During the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions of the late 1400s and prior, on a number of occasions Jews in the Iberian Peninsula were given three explicit choices by their Christian rulers: death, expulsion, or conversion to Christianity. Among those who chose conversion, a small number of families identified as Catholic publicly but continued to practice Jewish rituals in private. (An even smaller number went this route but returned to Judaism publicly a few generations later.) Such Jews have been called by various names, including Conversos, Crypto-Jews, and Marranos.

As for those who were expelled, many ended up in countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea. Their descendants have generally identified as Sephardi ever since, despite the disconnect from fifteenth-century Spain and Portugal. Due to the diversity of communities self-identified as Sephardi, when contemporary Jews in Israel or America claim this identity, it commonly tells less about an individual’s background than does claiming to be Ashkenazi.

Case Example: Moroccan Jews

For example, take the case of Moroccan Jewry. Some fifteenth-century Jews fled from Spain and Portugal to nearby Morocco. But not all of today’s Moroccan Jews identify as Sephardi. In fact, Moroccan Jews can be divided into a number of subgroups. Some trace their lineage in Morocco to before the first century CE, including some—particularly Moroccan Berbers—who maintain that their proto-Jewish ancestors migrated from Jerusalem follow-

ing the Babylonian Exile of 586 BCE (see chapter 3). Others migrated to Morocco after the Arab Muslim conquest of North Africa in the seventh and eighth centuries.

Still others are descendants of Conversos who fled to Morocco from the Iberian Peninsula in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, having spent several centuries practicing Judaism in secret. Some arrived in Morocco after fleeing Russian pogroms in the nineteenth century. Some came from France during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when Morocco was under French colonial rule. A small number reside in Ceuta and Melilla, Spanish-controlled cities located in mainland Africa (in what looks to be part of Morocco from a bird’s eye view), and travel to and from Morocco on a regular basis for business. In short, even if you learn that an individual identifies as a Moroccan Jew, a great deal of ambiguity remains as to what this actually means.

Further, if we look at just one subgroup of Moroccan Jews, those identifying as Sephardi whose ancestors fled the Iberian Peninsula during the Inquisitions of the 1490s, there is a considerable lack of homogeneity. Indeed, evidence suggests that fifteenth-century Iberian Jews had multiple subidentities. A number of scholars, in fact, argue that the term Sephardi wasn’t used until centuries *after* the Inquisitions, adopted to describe previous generations. According to this argument, the “original” Sephardi Jews—i.e., from whom today’s Sephardi Jews descended—would not have applied that term to themselves. (Initial uses of this moniker may have pointed to a geographical designation and not a particular culture.)

Sephardi, Mizraḥi, or Non-Ashkenazi?

It has been historically problematic to homogenize Jews immigrating to Israel or the United States (or wherever) from the same country, let alone multiple countries. Nonetheless, masses of non-Ashkenazi Jews arriving in Israel in the 1950s and 1960s were usually labeled simply Sephardi. Scholar Ella Shohat says that if we are to understand this phenomenon, we must look at agency—that is, the subgroup influencing the discourse. According to Shohat, non-Ashkenazi communities did not choose the terms to describe themselves; Ashkenazi Jews named them on their behalf.

As for what word should be used for Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent if not Sephardi or Mizraḥi, Khazzoom contends that it is not that important what non-Ashkenazi Jews are called, whether it is either of these names or something else entirely, such as *Edot ha-Mizrah* (Communities of the East). Much more impor-

tant is how one particular Jewish subgroup, Ashkenazi Jews (in her research, specifically in Israel) has dominated others, a phenomenon connected to the nonfactual, but “true,” dichotomy of Ashkenazi/non-Ashkenazi Jews.

Pesaḥ in Cairo

Upon reaching the core eating part of the Passover Seder, I went to the kitchen to bring out the night’s first course, matzah ball soup. For some American Jews, this dish is as central to a Jewish holiday like Pesaḥ as fireworks are to an American Fourth of July celebration. But it is more precise to say that this is “Ashkenazi Jewish food” (or even “Ashkenazi American Jewish food”) as opposed to saying it is a “Jewish food.” Those 1.2 million American Jews and 3 million Israeli Jews who don’t identify as Ashkenazi may not want to be told this is *their* food. The same can be said for bagels, *bab-kah*, borscht, gefilte fish, ḥallah, and kugel—all foods commonly used to symbolize Jewish food in American pop culture at large, despite being historically Ashkenazi.

At my Seder, as soon as the soup came out some of my guests smiled and said: “Of course! What else would you serve on a *Jewish* holiday!” Countless Jews and non-Jews alike *know* that matzah ball soup is quintessentially Jewish—even non-Jews living in Egypt. This is a “truth.” Similarly, many people—especially Americans—are familiar with words such as *chutzpah*, *glitch*, *mensh*, *schlep*, *schmooze*, and *schmuck*, even if they don’t know that these words were Yiddish before they also became part of American parlance. One would be hard pressed to find a word derived from a non-Ashkenazi Jewish community that has worked its way into modern American English in a similar fashion.

Narratives and Rituals

For me, eating matzah ball soup is a basic Jewish ritual. In my family, which is Ashkenazi, one would not think of serving anything else on Passover or Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. Ritual customs are one way that communities reinforce and pass on their narratives, especially to future generations.

Dominant Narratives and Dominant Rituals

To an outsider, such ceremonial observances may seem strange. To an insider, they are likely to be seen as normal. Such practices can take the form of placing one’s right hand over one’s left breast and pledging allegiance to a country or sitting cross-legged in meditative thought while quietly saying a single word or phrase repeatedly.

Similarly, Jews have an annual ritual involving the drinking of four cups of wine while chronicling their communal journey from imprisonment to liberation. Each spring Jews commonly come together with family and friends to retell the majestic and powerful saga of hundreds of thousands of people fleeing slavery, who are just about to be recaptured and returned to captivity by battalions of angry soldiers when their humble leader, a man of so few words that his brother must speak on his behalf, raises his shepherd’s crook high in the air and divides a vast sea into two, thereby creating a path that the slaves can cross through. Ergo, the Pesaḥ Seder.

There isn’t anything intrinsically problematic about me, an Ashkenazi Jew, serving an Ashkenazi dish on a Jewish holiday, nor would there be anything wrong with a non-Ashkenazi Jew (or non-Jew) doing so (or an Ashkenazi Jew serving a non-Ashkenazi dish, for that matter). A more fundamental challenge emerges, however, when a single subgroup’s identity—in this case, Ashkenazi expressions of Jewish identities, manifesting here in matzah ball soup—becomes symbolic of the larger group’s identities. Among Jews specifically, this process moves non-Ashkenazi rituals and rites to the side, which not only conceals them but in fact replaces them with something else. Like most forms of dominance, this is more problematic for non-Ashkenazi Jews than Ashkenazi ones. As is the case with most subordinated groups, these non-Ashkenazi subcommunities already know the dominants’ narratives; the opposite is rarely the case.

Lesser-Known Narratives and Lesser-Known Rituals

As with most Jewish practices, a variety of customs are brought into play in the ritual performance of the Passover Seder (figs. 1.4 and 1.5). For example:

- Afghani and Persian Jews have a tradition of gently whipping one another with long scallions during a celebrated Passover song (“Dayenu”), symbolizing the Egyptian slave masters’ treatment of the biblical Hebrew slaves.
- Ethiopian Jews have a tradition of breaking all of their household’s earthenware dishes and making new ones during their pre-Passover preparations, a practice based on biblical verses instructing the Hebrews to remove (as in “not possess”) and not eat any non-kosher-for-Pesaḥ food during the holiday.
- Jews from Cochin, India, have a custom stricter than that of the Ethiopians, whereby they keep a room in

FIGURE 1.4. Bnai Israel Indian Jews preparing homemade *matzah* (flat, crunchy cracker) for *Pesaḥ* (Passover).



FIGURE 1.5. A Yemenite Jewish family, originating from the city of Habban in eastern Yemen, celebrating a Passover Seder in their new home in Tel Aviv (c. 1946), then occupied by British military forces.



their home—year round—solely for *Pesaḥ* utensils, ensuring these eating tools don’t come into contact with non-kosher-for-*Pesaḥ* food. (Fig. 1.4 illustrates another Indian Jewish tradition).

- Some Jews from Gibraltar, Greece, and Italy mix clay dust into their *ḥaroset*, a dish commonly served on *Pesaḥ*, symbolizing the mortar biblical Israelite slaves used when building. A group of Jewish Union soldiers in the American Civil War reappropriated this ritual by putting an actual brick on their Seder table because they did not have the ingredients to make *ḥaroset*.
- Hungarian Jews have a tradition of decorating their Seder table with the most expensive gold and silver that they own, symbolizing the jewels the biblical Hebrews asked their Egyptian neighbors for before fleeing.
- Moroccan Jews have a tradition of eating a sheep’s head the first night of *Pesaḥ*, symbolizing the

ancient lamb sacrifice that the biblical Hebrews were instructed to perform.

- Some Yemenite Jews keep their door open throughout the Seder in anticipation of the Messiah’s return. In contrast, Jews from Tunisia (specifically, Djerba) and Libya have a custom of prohibiting “strangers” from entering their homes or benefiting from their belongings during the first two days of *Pesaḥ*. (Fig. 1.5 shows a Yemenite Passover Seder.)
- As for more dramatic theatrics, in a number of Jewish communities (including Iraqi, Kurdish, Libyan, Moroccan, Syrian, Tunisian [Djerban], and Yemenite) attendees put on costumes or use props, either during or right before the Seder, and reenact the Exodus narrative, playing specific biblical characters.
- One ultra-Orthodox sect, the Gerrers, who trace themselves back to the pre-World War II Polish town of Góra Kalwaria, have a tradition of pouring a barrel of

water on the ground and crossing over it, symbolizing Moses's parting of the Red Sea as described in the Torah. (This ritual takes place on the seventh day of Pesah and not during the Seder itself.) Other communities have similar variations of this ritual.

Although there are countless Pesah rituals, the Passover Seder—in the United States, at least—has become quite Ashkenazi-fied. For example, in television shows such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Family Guy*, *Gossip Girl*, *The Nanny*, *The Rachel Zoe Project*, and *Rugrats*, or movies such as *Family Business*, *It Runs in the Family*, *Marjorie Morningstar*, and *When Do We Eat?*, characters perform Seders using Ashkenazi-specific customs, reflected in the songs and melodies that are integrated into the evening and the types of food eaten, among other things.

This doesn't mean that communities such as Afghani and Persian Jews aren't free to practice their own Passover rituals on this holiday. Even so, while the consequences of cultural dominance are potentially less damaging than legal dominance, to those subordinated the end result is still problematic. Cultural influences often shape a community's worldview. Dominant ideas, whether originating within a cultural context or not, are often internalized, a process that habitually becomes externalized and further normalized, especially in today's interconnected world. Such ideas are also frequently used to justify legal practices. Through this process, dominance can lead to the withering and expunging of subordinate identities and practices.

An Orange on the Seder Plate

Of course, Ashkenazi hegemony isn't the only form of intra-Jewish dominance that plays out through the Passover Seder—as an interesting contemporary example illustrates. A core Pesah ritual is to place a dish on one's Seder table that is filled with various ritual foods, a custom dating back to the first few centuries CE (fig. 1.6).

In the early 1980s, scholar Susannah Heschel suggested adding an orange to the Seder plate as a symbol of the fruitfulness gained when Jewish lesbians and gay men are active in Jewish life. By spitting out seeds from the orange, one could ritualize the rejection of homophobia within the Jewish community.

Sometime thereafter, however, she learned that the meaning behind the ritual she created had been rewritten. "Somehow . . . the typical patriarchal maneuver occurred: my idea of an orange and my intention of affirming lesbians and gay men were transformed. Now



FIGURE 1.6. A Seder plate containing both centuries-old symbols, such as *haroset*, *maror*, and *karpas* (explained in note), and more recent ones, such as an orange; a ceramic egg (traditionally, an actual egg is used), symbolizing spring as well as new life; olives, symbolizing peace in Israel and Palestine or an end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza; and *zeroa*, or beetroot (traditionally, a roasted shankbone), symbolizing the sacrifice of a Paschal lamb. Substituting a ceramic egg, seeds or flowers, and beetroot allows people to observe both traditional customs and vegan or vegetarian practices.

the story circulates that a man said to me that a woman belongs on the *bimah* [the stage found at the front of some synagogue prayer halls] as an orange on the seder plate. A woman's words are attributed to a man, and the affirmation of lesbians and gay men is erased. Isn't that precisely what's happened over the centuries to women's ideas?"

The Tribe vs. Diaspora

THE TRIBE

Depictions of Jewish rituals—and Jews—that represent an Ashkenazi identity as *the* Jewish identity, as opposed to presenting an Ashkenazi identity as *an* Ashkenazi identity (or *a* Jewish identity), are found in other parts of American popular culture, including those explicitly created by Jews. Take, for example, the difference between two visually based art forms produced in the early twenty-first century. The first is the acclaimed 2005 short film made by artist Tiffany Shlain, *The Tribe*, self-described as addressing what it means "to be an American Jew today."

Weaving together archival footage, animation, and

graphics, the film, though interesting, engaging, and well crafted, is resoundingly Ashkenazi-centric. For example:

- the background music is largely Klezmer, a type of music imported to the United States in the late nineteenth century by Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi immigrants;
- American Jewish history is limited to immigrants who came from Eastern Europe and Russia;
- almost all of the photos of Jews from outside the United States are similarly Euro-centric;
- a list of historically violent episodes carried out against Jews focuses mainly on European and Russian Jewish communities (a few ancient Middle Eastern events being the exception).

Even the way that biblical characters are presented—in the form of Barbie dolls (Barbie’s history is central to the movie as well)—is akin to portraying Jesus as a white European male.

This is not to say that 20 percent of the film’s footage should have focused on the 20 percent of American Jews who are not Ashkenazi. Indeed, the film includes several minor pieces of information that are not rooted in Ashkenazi experiences. However, in its portrayal of American Jews, Israeli Jews, and even biblical Hebrews, *The Tribe* embodies Ashkenazi subnarratives and not the larger Jewish communities’ narratives, thus reinforcing Ashkenazi—and white—dominance in an effort, ironically enough, whose ostensible goal is to illustrate how diverse the Jewish community is. The movie even says that the quintessential American doll, Barbie, with her blonde hair and blue eyes, doesn’t “look Jewish” (in the film’s own words: “All [Jewish] subtribes can agree Barbie doesn’t look Jewish”)—a problematic claim in its own right. In other words, *The Tribe* reinforces the very message it is attempting to critique, contending that there are set ways that Jews should and should not look at the same time it is supposedly shattering this formula.

DIASPORA

Not all artists focusing on the Jewish community stereotype Ashkenazi Jews as *the* Jews. Photographer Frédéric Brenner, for example, explicitly shapes a far different perspective. One of his most famous projects, *Diaspora*, took him around the world for twenty-four years to photograph Jews from tens of countries. When asked about his goals, he said: “I would say that if there is one thing that I would like to achieve, it is first and fore-

most to break an emblematic representation of the Jew.” He wanted to bring the margins to the center in order to show the reality of Jewish diversity, adding that although he started his quest believing in the “oneness” of Jews, he now believes in the “many-ness.”

His project leaves the audience with a lingering question: If Jews are so different from one another, if they are *not* all Ashkenazi but in fact much more diverse than even the multilayered photographs of *Diaspora* suggest, what actually connects such diversity? To quote Brenner:

What do all these people that I have photographed have in common, if not their differences? When you take out ideology, religion, all those scaffolds that we have imported in our life, what remains? One of the sentences that is going to be one of the excerpts of my book is this sentence of Kafka in his *Diaries* where he says, “What do I have in common with the Jews? I have so little in common with myself.” And the very idea of discontinuity is at the heart of my project. I would say that the three key words are really paradox, ambivalence, and discontinuity, and to say that this very discontinuity starts within ourselves.

By presenting us with images of Jews from Argentina, China, Ethiopia, India, Morocco, Portugal, South Africa, Yemen, and beyond, *Diaspora* rejects the idea that Ashkenazi narratives aptly represent *the* Jewish narrative. In so doing, it complicates dominant Jewish narratives, destabilizing such “truths.” Other photography projects, such as *Scattered Among the Nations’ Jews of Color: In Color*, similarly challenge the dominance of the Ashkenazi Jewish archetype in focusing on relatively unknown, non-Ashkenazi Jewish communities.

Yet such projects are the exception to the rule. Even when Jewish community centers have exhibits focusing on non-Ashkenazi groups, they commonly present these groups as strange, further distancing them from more dominant forms of Jewish “authenticity.” “Truth”-wise, they are exotic; factually, they are not.

Pesah in Cairo

Our Cairene Pesah Seder lasted about ninety minutes, much shorter than at home with my family. But considering that most of the guests were first-timers, I considered it a success. The topics of discussion ranged from the freedom narrative of Passover to modern-day struggles for human rights, such as the American civil rights movement of the 1960s. We also spoke about social justice issues closer to where we were sitting, such as those related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

As the evening concluded, I reflected on how meaningful it was for me to experience this Jewish tradition with other Jews and with non-Jews. But I also noted some of the minor discomfort I felt over how a few specific passages in the *Haggadah* might be understood by my guests, most of whom knew very little about Jewish ritual practices of any kind.

The narrative of the Passover Seder reinforces itself. It is a ritual in which *the* Jewish narrative—for those identifying as Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, Sephardi, or another Jewish subgroup altogether—is explicitly retold, year after year, in countless different ways. With each retelling, Jews' dominant stories gain strength, creating internal, Jewish-centric storylines that play in a loop.

Despite my momentary pangs of unease, I also knew that it is almost impossible to find a community that does not teach its narrative ethnocentrically. Perhaps that very tension—acknowledging dominant Jewish narratives while also holding onto the wider, richer corpus of Jewish narratives writ large; staying loyal to one's particular identities while never straying from a steadfast commitment to the universality of humanity—is the challenge.

Even though many Jews act as if there is a single way to practice Judaism, there has never been one Judaism, only Judaisms; never one type of Jew or Jewish identity, only Jews and Jewish identities.