

Rethinking Exile, Center, and Diaspora in Modern Jewish Culture

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Over the course of multiple centuries prior to the modern era, Jewish culture was shaped in various ways by the concept of 'exile' and by the practical circumstances that corresponded to this concept. This conference aims to explore ways in which inherited Jewish culture has been reshaped and affected by the presence of non-exilic or anti-exilic dynamics in more recent and contemporary Jewish history.

Historically, the Jewish concept of exile entailed the idea of living in a world without an active geographical center. While Jerusalem and the Land of Israel played a role of such a center in terms of the ancient past and the envisioned messianic future, the present world was understood as one in which, broadly speaking, Jews and Jewish culture possess no geographical center. That is to say, while the Land of Israel constituted a present liturgical focus and a present hope for messianic return, there was not a prominent sense of living 'outside of' a geographical center that existed elsewhere in the world. From this perspective, the establishment of the State of Israel marked a significant change: now, a geographic location had arisen that laid claim to a new role of a special 'center' for Jewish culture and identity.

This conference thus asks: how was Jewish culture, previously predicated on a conscious absence of an active geographical center, affected by this emergence of this influential new state of affairs? How did the cultural inheritance of Jewish identity as exilic/diasporic continue to shape the ways in which Jews, both in the State of Israel and in other countries, conceived of Jewishness?

In exploring this question, the conference also seeks to explore ways in which Jewish exilic cultural identity was reshaped and affected by additional aspects of modernity *other than* the establishment of State of Israel. For instance, if another key element of Jewish understandings of exile involved political exclusion and subservience, in what ways did the experience of life in America, with its promise of liberty, citizenship, and freedom of religion, reshape Jewish conceptions of 'being in exile'? Did the American experiment already functionally constitute an 'end of exile' or 'negation of exile' even prior to the rise of Zionism? Did life in America cause just a profound a reshaping of Jewish exilic identity as the establishment of the State of Israel? If so, can one trace a similar reshaping of exilic/diasporic identity in other liberal-democratic countries such as France and the United Kingdom?

In what ways does the tension between the exilic cultural inheritance and these modern non-exilic elements manifest itself? How does this tension impact political,

ethical, literary, artistic, or religious patterns among Jews today? How do the dynamics of 'belonging' or 'non-belonging' in other countries affect the attitudes of Jews towards the reality and/or imagined fantasy of the State of Israel? What are the challenges involved in trying to understand past orientations from the very different circumstances of the present? Do notions of center, diaspora, and exile mean something very different in Jewish culture today than they meant 250 years ago? Likewise, do they mean something different today than they meant 100, 50, or even 10 years ago? Quite apart from its desirability or non-desirability, is it even *possible* to remove the notion of 'exile' from Jewish culture?