Jews began arriving in Poland in the twelfth century. Many had been expelled from countries in Western Europe for refusing to convert to Christianity. Poland was one of the few places in Europe where they were free to enjoy the customs, traditions, and beliefs that set them apart from their neighbors. There, over many centuries, they built a civilization—a way of life that still shapes our ideas of what it means to be a Jew.

Chapter 1 considered some of the factors that shape our identity. This chapter explores questions of membership and belonging by focusing on the factors that define a group’s identity. That definition has enormous significance. It indicates who holds power in a place and how individuals and groups within the larger society define their “universe of obligation”—the circle of individuals and groups toward whom it has responsibilities, to whom its rules apply, and whose injuries call for amends.

For much of history, birth determined a person’s place in a community. In a traditional society, children inherit their status from their parents. Rights, privileges, even occupations are passed from mother to daughter, and father to son. Chapter 2 explores what happens to outsiders in such a society. How do newcomers make a place for themselves? How secure are those places? In reflecting on the ways his ancestors answered such questions, Arnold Zable came to realize that Jewish communities during the Middle Ages were never “entirely secure.”

Arbitrarily, a charter or privileges they had been granted could be repealed, and their function, place of residence, and status redefined. There was always the threat of a sudden whirlwind, a madman on the rampage full of drink and misdirected rage, inciting the mob to join in and take out its frenzy on these peculiar people who had settled among them with their private God and the countless prayer-houses in which they worshipped Him. So [Jews] maintained their talent for movement, traveling within the prescribed boundaries as itinerants, eking out a living from limited opportunities.¹

By the 1700s and 1800s, ideas about membership and belonging were changing. Both centuries were a time of upheaval almost everywhere in the world. Nowhere were those changes more unsettling than in Poland. After a series of wars that tore the country apart, Poland’s name disappeared from world maps. Its land and people were divided among the Austrian, Prussian, and Russian empires. Most Jews found themselves living under

¹ Arnold Zable, Jewels and Ashes, (Harcourt Brace, 1991), 12.
Russian rule. In the past, the Russians had not permitted Jews to settle anywhere in their empire. Now they gave Polish Jews the right to live in Russia but only in the far western section of the empire, in an area known as the Pale of Settlement.

Other changes were inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment. In the 1700s, a group of thinkers in France began to emphasize reason over faith and the rights of the individual over the state. They believed that every person has a right to work out his or her own destiny. These ideas had enormous appeal for young Jews eager to escape the narrow confines of their village and explore the larger world. Suddenly birth no longer determined one’s place in the world. Talent, skill, even perseverance seemed to matter more. Religious identity was also becoming a matter of choice. There were now many more ways to be a Jew.

By the early 1800s, Eastern Europeans were also feeling the impact of the Industrial Revolution. It began in England in the 1700s with the invention of machines powered by steam. That innovation quickly led to thousands of others. The Industrial Revolution changed not only the way goods were made but also where they were made. More and more people left the countryside for jobs in urban centers. For some, these changes were so unsettling that they looked for someone to blame for all that was new and disturbing. Increasingly in the 1800s, Eastern Europeans blamed the Jews. In doing so, they drew on a long history of violence against Jews.

This chapter and those that follow do not provide a complete history of Polish or Eastern European Jews. Rather they use autobiographies, official documents, literature, and other primary sources to explore the ways Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors responded to questions of difference at various times in their shared history. Those sources help us “draw conclusions from what we see to what we do not see” and “recognize ourselves in the past, on the steps to the present.”