

JEWISH CIVILIZATION BETWEEN RISE, THRIVING AND DECLINE

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SUMMARY

This paper is a “thought experiment”, stimulated by the main postulate of the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, which is that the Jewish people is somewhere “between thriving and decline”, with some trends moving in positive and others in negative directions.

A Review of Fifteen Historians of Rise and Decline

Historians, philosophers and political scientists have asked such questions for a long time and developed theories about rise, thriving and decline. This report explores the theories of fifteen authors, with an eye to what they might contribute to the understanding of the history and future of the Jews. Six are Europeans (Thucydides, Edward Gibbon, Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee, Fernand Braudel, Bryan Ward-Perkins), one an Arab (Ibn Khaldun), one a born Russian who became American (Pitirim Sorokin), and eight are contemporary Americans (Paul Kennedy, Arthur Herman, Jared Diamond, Joseph A. Tainter, Peter Turchin, Christopher Chase-Dunn/Thomas D. Hall, Mancur Olson). None is known to be Jewish or a Judaic scholar, although several of them show interest in the history of the Jews. But many of their general observations are likely to have universal validity and could apply to the Jewish people as well.

Dividing Lines between Historians

The criteria for rise, thriving and decline are not fixed, because they reflect value judgments that vary between civilizations and also because they can change over time within the same civilization. Although there is a certain ideological component in the definition of “rise” and “decline”, these notions do describe objective realities.

Two major intellectual fault lines divide the reviewed authors. Until the early 20th century, historiography was political, military, religious or cultural, or it was the story of “great men”. But Karl Marx undermined a consensus that had dominated historic thought for centuries. The history of civilization was now seen as primarily driven by socio-economic and other material factors. It became “quantitative” history. All contemporary Americans in our selection belong to this second group, except for Sorokin. While the first group generally acknowledges the existence of a Jewish civilization, the second does not. Some American authors go to great length to cover the smallest remote Stone Age, pre-Columbian and Pacific island civilizations, but do not see the Jews because their civilization is not visible on a geographic map and has no easily identifiable economic sub-structure.

There is a second intellectual fault line. Some authors believe that the history of civilization is open to policy and human intervention; others believe that rise and

decline are driven by deep, long lasting forces and cannot easily be changed. The two dividing lines do not run parallel. For example, some historians agree that material structures determine long-term developments, but also believe that human will and leadership can change the historical trends.

Drivers of Rise, Thriving and Decline

The authors propose a great number of theories and observations on the causes of rise and decline. We have chosen fourteen of these explanations which appear to be particularly relevant to the Jewish people. They belong to four different categories:

LESSONS OF HISTORY

1. Decline has multiple reasons

No single mono-causal reason can explain the decline and fall of a wide-spread and multi-faceted civilization. The Jewish people were saved more than once by its global spread and fragmentation. This means that a monolithic Judaism concentrated in one place will have a smaller chance of survival than a multifaceted Judaism present in different parts of the world.

2. The reasons of decline are internal – with exceptions

Virtually all authors assert that civilizations are declining and falling for internal, not external reasons. This is not true for all of them. Scores of civilizations have been wiped out by genocide since ancient times. The Jewish people escaped extinction several times. In addition to geographic dispersion, the thriving of the Jewish people will for a long time require military strength.

3. Challenge and response

Jewish history knows at least three periods of major transformation that are responses to severe external challenges. These responses have assured Jewish survival until today: the transformations that both followed the destruction of the First and Second Temples, and that began with the Enlightenment, culminated in the *Shoah* and led to the creation of Israel. A fundamental, long-term policy aim is to strengthen the Jewish people's capacity to respond to new challenges.

Strengthening Drivers of Thriving

4. Creative leadership and elites

Rise and thriving of civilizations can depend on creative leaders and elites. Often, leaders and elites lose their creativity after a number of major challenges. Throughout its long history, the Jewish people have had both great and bad leaders, and paid a heavy price for the latter. The current leadership situation in Israel and parts of the Diaspora is a cause for concern and may call for new ideas to encourage change.

5. Numbers and critical mass

Numbers count - the stagnation of Jewish population numbers is a sign of weakness. But there is no absolute number for the “critical mass” that would be necessary for the thriving of the Jewish or any other people. Other factors must be considered. Apart from demographic policies, there are ways to make up for small numbers. For example, a better use of cyberspace would go some way to improve internal Jewish cooperation and defend the Jewish people against external hostility. This is calling for a more systematic and coherent Jewish people policy with regard to cyberspace and a professional organisation to fund and implement it.

6. “Magic consensus” or “the particular secret of every civilization”

Civilizations depend on more than clearly quantifiable factors and objective interests. Historians have groped for words to describe these qualitative, emotional factors which are the “particular secret of every civilization” (Braudel). Spengler called the Jewish people a “magic consensus”. This invisible marker of Jewish civilization and identification has been weakened and is changing. Educational and other cultural policies might be able to strengthen it again.

7. Economic foundations of long lasting civilizations

Long lasting civilizations have essential socio-economic foundations that change only very slowly. Because Jews lived in so many different countries and centuries, no permanent economic basis of Jewish longevity can be identified. But some economic achievements of Jews have been similar across countries and centuries, which may point to competitive advantages. Jews created important international networks of exchange based on Jewish connections and knowledge of foreign languages and customs. In modern times, Jews contributed to technological and industrial development (e.g. in Germany and the United States) by making innovative economic use of new technical and other knowledge. Knowledge-based entrepreneurship could in the future be a major economic basis of Jewish civilization in the global economy. The education systems should provide the skill basis for this future.

8. Science and technology: drivers of the future

Science and technology are the core of the ongoing global knowledge revolution, and the main long-term sources of intellectual, economic and military power. The geopolitical re-alignments that lie ahead will be greatly influenced by the scientific and technological standing of the major countries. The 20th century saw the emergence of widely acknowledged Jewish excellence in nearly all fields of science and technology. This has helped the Jewish people, and particularly Israel, in many ways. The signals concerning future Jewish interest in these disciplines are ambiguous. It is essential to maintain a high degree of Jewish involvement in the advancing frontiers of science and technology.

Coping with Challenges and Threats

9. Internal dissent

According to the consensus of most historians, civilizations are destroyed by dissent, conflicting customs, a collapse of value systems etc. Internal conflicts about values and different interpretations of tradition and truth, however, seem to be integral to Jewish civilization. These can stimulate creativity as long as they do not lead to civil war. Jewish arguments today might be less emotional if Jews were more aware that they are a continuation of the turbulent spiritual history of the Jewish people.

10. Hidden decay and remote, external dangers

Civilizations can be in danger because they do not notice internal decay or external threats that are geographically too remote. Jews are aware of the dangers of internal decline, but an understanding of the many forces in the world that could affect them is more difficult. With a few exceptions, Jews never had a forward-looking geo-political vision of the world and their place in it. It is essential to develop such visions.

11. Decline of the West or the end of civilization

Many authors warn of a decline of the West or an end to our industrial civilization. Jews have watched and survived the end of many civilizations, but a real decline of the West, particularly the United States, would have dramatic consequences for the Jewish people. Jews can do little to affect the mega-trends of Western civilization, but they should strengthen cultural links with non-Western civilizations, particularly China and India. The Chinese and Hindu cultures know no antagonism to Judaism based on holy books. Jews have done much too little to create more links with these civilizations.

12. Natural and health disasters

Dangers to civilization raised by geological, environmental or health catastrophes have become a subjects of popular and scientific debate. No catastrophe in Jewish history was triggered by such events, but this is no guarantee that there will be none in the future. Global warming is predicted to lead to more water starvation in the Middle East and to rising Mediterranean Sea levels. The Middle East remains prone to severe earthquakes for which Israel is not well prepared. A short-term danger is the risk of pandemics by natural events or biological warfare. Jews could be particularly exposed to the latter. This calls for more foresight and crisis preparation.

CONTENTIOUS FACTORS

13. Religion and its controversial impacts

The role of religion in the rise, thriving and decline of civilizations has been enormous but also controversial. Religion dominates the history of the Jewish people and remains the key issue in all discussions about its future. Demands are increasing to make conversion to Judaism easier. In the 1960s Toynbee appealed to the Jewish people to become an actively missionary religion again and seek converts. Is this the idea of an eccentric? Some Jewish leaders raised it in the late 1970s but it seems that it has since disappeared from Jewish agendas.

14. War and its diverse consequences

While war created empires and strengthened civilizations, it also destroyed them. The impact of war on rise and decline is as diverse and controversial as that of religion. Jews were often passive victims of war, but large numbers of them also fought and died in the wars of their respective host countries. They fought for themselves only in ancient and modern Israel. A comprehensive assessment of the impacts of war on Jewish thriving and decline would be a difficult task.

JEWISH CIVILIZATION BETWEEN RISE, THRIVING AND DECLINE

A.) Comments on the Notions of “Rise”, “Thriving” and “Decline”.

We do not know when men became aware that history was not a repetition of identical events, but a sequence of different periods, some good and some bad. Neither do we know when men began to believe that they lived once in a “Golden Age”, which was better than their own age. The Ancient World thought that history was moving in cycles. Such cycles of rise, thriving and decline appeared to be predetermined by some organic laws of nature, or the movements of the stars. Cyclical notions of history survived and continued to influence the philosophy of history until the 20th century.

The Babylonian Talmud discusses the question of whether the Jews are subject to the same immutable laws of history as non-Jews. One opinion says yes, they are. But the majority opinion, quoting among others the Prophet Jeremiah, strongly rejects the antique belief in predetermination as far as the Jewish people is concerned. “Ein mazal le-Jisrael” – the laws of the stars do not apply to Israel. But Jews recognised at the same time that their history was fluctuating, going through ups and downs. The Jewish people are compared to the moon, says the Midrash: it keeps going down and coming up again. Clearly the whole issue was extensively debated because it was important and controversial. Few nations commemorated both rise and decline, and particularly the catastrophes that struck them, with equal fervour as the Jews. Thus, if we reflect today on the history and future of the Jews with a particular focus on rise, thriving and decline, we continue a very old tradition. The purpose of such a reflection is to identify the possible causal factors of rise, thriving and decline, and define policies that will encourage thriving and protect against decline.

These three notions are complex, however, and should not be used uncritically. Are there universally valid and objective criteria for rise, thriving and decline? Can one define these terms? Historians have given more attention to decline than rise because the beginnings of a civilization are often shrouded in the mist of pre-history, but also because decline and fall are more dramatic. But these notions are not independent from each other. The idea of decline implies an idea of thriving. “Thriving” is the standard against which “decline” can be detected and perhaps measured. The quest for objective criteria cannot easily be satisfied, but the following observations may be useful:

- a.) There is no single criterion for rise or decline. Often there will be a cluster of symptoms that together can show the rise or decline of a civilization.

- b.) However, some symptoms can also be contradictory because rise, thriving and decline can occur simultaneously and find expression in different manifestations or geographical regions of the same civilization. Victorious empire building and cultural productivity do not always go hand in hand. There can be political and military rise together with cultural decline, or vice versa. There can be rise in one region of an empire and decline in another.
- c.) It is a frequent error of later generations to believe that periods of national or cultural thriving are also periods of personal happiness and prosperity. Sometimes they are, but often they are not.
- d.) Criteria for rise and decline cannot be universal because they often depend on cultural values that vary greatly between civilizations. The pre-Columbian Aztecs measured their thriving, among other factors, by their conquests and the numbers of prisoners of war they could sacrifice to their gods. The Spanish *conquistadores* were horrified when they discovered these practices and considered their perpetrators as a sub-human and depraved civilization that they were religiously obliged to wipe out.
- e.) Criteria vary not only between civilizations. Even within a single civilization, criteria change over time. What was rise and thriving to contemporaries might in retrospect appear to their descendants as the beginning of decline and fall, and vice versa. Civilizations do not always reach consensus on their respective pasts. This is particularly true when radical changes, such as the end to imperial rule or foreign occupation, or revolution and civil war, leave lasting discords in the collective memory of a people. Frenchmen who participated in the French Revolution and the victorious Napoleonic wars saw these periods as a time of rise and glory. Later generations judged them differently.
- f.) Identifying a historic trend as rise or decline depends to some degree on the time line chosen by the observer. The very idea of rise or decline is a function of time. Traditional historians saw the decline of the Roman Empire as a process that lasted centuries. But this was too long for some of their modern colleagues who questioned the whole concept of decline and replaced it with the much happier notion, “transformation”. In other cases, decline can occur very fast. The two thousand year old history of the Jewish people in Europe was virtually terminated in little more than two years, between early 1942 and late 1944. But then, the post-war years saw an almost equally fast rise of the Jewish people, with the establishment of Israel and the emergence of a powerful American Jewish community. Nobody can tell how future generations will see these upheavals: as two short, exceptional and radically different sets of events; as part of a continuum with dramatic ups and downs; or as the end of a long historical period and the beginning of a new and perhaps equally long one.

In spite of all of these *caveats*, the notions of rise, thriving and decline do describe real, historic trends and provide a useful analytic framework for macro-historic comparisons as well as policy suggestions. The following chapters will try to make this clear.

B.) A Review of General Theories about Rise, Thriving and Decline of Civilizations.

Introduction

The night before he was defeated and killed in battle, King Saul called the ghost of the prophet Samuel back from the dead to question him about the future of Israel. We will ask similar questions of the ghosts of several non-Jewish “seers” and include a few living ones as well. Chapter B. reviews a number of historians and philosophers of history who have written about rise, thriving and decline of civilizations. The authors chosen include famous names but also contemporary historians and political scientists. Thucydides, Edward Gibbon, Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee, Fernand Braudel, Bryan Ward-Perkins and Ibn Khaldun, six Europeans and one Arab, are mostly well known. Most, except of course the early Thucydides, wrote also about the Jews who were of great interest to them. The modern historians are Americans, with the exception of Pitirim Sorokin, an American who was born and educated in Russia. Most of the eight who were reviewed, Jared Diamond, Paul Kennedy, Arthur Herman, Christopher Chase-Dunn/Thomas D. Hall, Mancur Olson, Joseph A. Tainter and Peter Turchin, are investigating large numbers of living and dead civilizations, but ignore Judaism and Jewish civilization. The reasons for this omission will be discussed in Chapter B.12.

The verdicts of the more famous historians of civilizations with regard to the Jews are not discouraging. Except for Spengler, they have no doubt that the Jews will survive as a people and civilization. More significant than their direct references to the Jews, however, are their general theories about rise, thriving and decline, and the possibility of applying these theories to the Jewish people. This may seem a rather circuitous way to inquire about the past and future of the Jews, but there are insights that can come only from a comparative approach and not from treating Jewish history as a singularity as rabbinic tradition as nearly all Jewish and Judaic historians have done. There are, however, three limitations to this comparative approach:

- a.) The first limitation is that Jewish history is continuing. Every generation will interpret Jewish civilization anew whereas the best-known histories of empires and civilizations have been written toward their end, or long after. “The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only after dusk has fallen”, said

Friedrich Hegel. The sharp-eyed bird surveys the landscape of history only after sunset.

- b.) The second, no less serious limitation comes from the Christian, Moslem or liberal or left-wing background of many of the reviewed historians. None of these three cultural environments is indifferent or neutral with regard to Jews. It is admitted that Jews cannot be completely objective and dispassionate with regard to their own fate. But it is not sufficiently admitted that persons raised in any of these three cultural environments are often no more objective towards Jews because the longevity and continuation of Jewish history often raises ideological problems to each of them. Arnold Toynbee, who had first dismissed Judaism as a “fossil” but later changed his mind, recognized this limitation in an extraordinary confession that has few parallels in historiography: “It is difficult for anyone brought up in the Christian tradition to shake himself free of the official Christian ideology. He may have discarded Christian doctrine consciously on every point, yet on this particular point he may find that he is still being influenced subconsciously...If I had happened to be brought up in the Muslim tradition instead of the Christian one, no doubt my outlook would have been affected correspondingly. When Jewish critics accuse me of seeing Judaism, not through Jewish eyes, but through those of the Christian Church...I have to plead guilty to the charge”.
- c.) The third limitation lies in the gaps and objective divergences that separate civilizations. Not all mainstream theories on rise, thriving and decline can be applied to Jews, and not all characteristics of Jewish civilization are shared by other civilizations. The text of Chapter C. will emphasize some of these divergences.

1.) Thucydides

Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* is the earliest, and to this day one of the most compelling descriptions of the decline and fall of a great civilization, that of classical Greece, precipitated by the mutual destruction of Athens and Sparta and their empires. Thucydides (ca. 460-400 BCE) does not write a theory of rise, thriving and decline, but all three themes are present in his work. He begins with the rise of Athens, which he attributes to the attraction that the originally poor province of Attica exerted on many good people who were driven out by strife in other cities. He glorifies the thriving of Athens during its apogee, using the words that its greatest statesman, Pericles, spoke in 431 BCE in his famous funeral oration for the war dead. Pericles says that Athens flourished because of its unique democratic constitution, which ensured that public prestige and power went to persons of merit rather than good connections or birth. Other conditions for thriving were Athens's tolerance of foreigners and its citizens' respect for the rule of law. .

Thucydides' main effort is his analysis of the war and how his beloved city and its power and glory were destroyed. He is searching for the hidden motives that drive the belligerents. He shows how the strains and cruelties of war are corroding the traditional ethical norms. Thucydides dwells extensively on the civil war in Kerkyra and the terror and massacres that accompany it. He emphasizes the subversion and corruption of language - the propaganda war as we would say today - as one of the main symptoms and causes of Kerkyra's moral collapse: "And they changed arbitrarily the hitherto valid sense of the words for various things". The Athenians could have won this war, he asserts, had they only followed the advice of Pericles who warned them to remain cautious and not to expand their empire while the war lasted. But they did the opposite. Greece fell by its own fault, not foreign aggression. This war was fought within the same civilization, by people speaking the same language and worshipping the same gods.

Thucydides is convinced that there are permanent laws of history because human nature, unchangeable as it is, will ensure that similar reasons will always have similar consequences. His analysis of the human passions, deceptions and illusions, of the fear and greed, but also of the sheer luck that determined this war from beginning to end, had a long-lasting effect on historic thought. He is the master of political and moral history. Thomas Hobbes praised him as the "most politic historiographer that ever writ." Socio-economic and religious factors interest him only as instruments or pretexts of power politics. Thucydides refers to no other nation than Greece, except to Persia, and only rarely so.

2.) Ibn Khaldun

Many consider Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) as the greatest Arab historian, and also as the philosopher of history who developed in his *Muqqadimah* the first coherent theories of the rise, thriving and decline of civilizations. Ibn Khaldun uses a very broad definition of civilization. It is identical with social organization without which humans could not live. Men create civilization when they pull together out of need. The heart of civilization is "group feeling" or "group consciousness". The greater the group feeling of a people, the stronger its power and its chance of dominating other peoples.

The life and thriving of a civilization is comparable to individual, physical life. There is a beginning and an end. Every civilization has "a limit that cannot be overstepped". Ibn Khaldun's view is cyclical and organic, like that of many others. Only the rulers can maintain civilization because they enforce social cohesion. This is why dynasties or states emerge. "Royal authority...is absolutely necessary to mankind". The quality of leadership is vital for a thriving civilization because the customs of each people depend on those of its rulers. But no great dynasty can

last longer than three or four generation, after which it will decay. Political and religious rule must be concentrated in the same hand so as to facilitate the waging of Holy War.

Ibn Khaldun gives several reasons for the decline and fall of civilizations. The most important is social and economic injustice that drives people to despair and rebellion. Another reason is variations in customs—when one people take over another but both want to keep their own customs. Ibn Khaldun does not ignore natural causes. He mentions the destruction wrought by the plague in East and West in his own lifetime; both his parents had died of the pest. He does mention the Mongol invasions and growing Christian power in the Mediterranean as challenges to Arab civilization, but not as causes of decline and fall. The true causes are internal.

Ibn Khaldun emphasizes science and scientific scholarship as a basis of civilizational thriving. More than one-third of his main work is devoted to the physical sciences, and mathematics and medicine, but also to scholarship in agriculture, jurisprudence, theology, philosophy, linguistics, calligraphy and poetry. He scolds those who do not understand the scientific method, which is very different from simply “memorizing knowledge”. No historian before Ibn Khaldun and few after him have shown the same insight into the importance of science and knowledge for civilization.

His insight is born in his despair about the state of Arab civilization, which he sees dying because it has abandoned science and scholarship. Ibn Khaldun, an Arab from an illustrious family himself, has a dim view of the Arabs. Where they conquer, civilization collapses. His scorn focuses on the decline of the scholarly and scientific spirit among the Arabs. Their scientific activity has disappeared save for a few remnants “controlled by orthodox religious scholars”.

Ibn Khaldun and the Jews

Ibn Khaldun refers to Jews, Judaism and the Bible more often than to any other non-Moslems. His views are split, almost schizophrenic. On one hand, his work contains two summaries of the old history of the Jews and of Jerusalem that are quite fair and unbiased, though not always accurate. In addition, there are respectful references to the glory of David and Solomon, recognized as great Jewish kings, and to the prestige of the Hebrew language and script in which the Torah is written. Ibn Khaldun mentions more than once that Jews are knowledgeable and skilled in many crafts and disciplines. On the other hand, he is not free of Moslem bigotry. He finds Jewish pride unacceptable. He cannot stand Jewish “self-delusion” regarding belonging to a great civilization even in his time. Their nation is defeated. Their royal authority has vanished, and so has their

civilization. As they fell into the yoke of others, they have acquired a “bad character”: “insincerity and trickery”.

3.) Edward Gibbon

The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire by Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) is the longest lasting “best seller” of all history books in the English language. It contains occasional glimpses at the reasons for Rome’s rise and thriving, but only as a contrast to the long history of Rome’s decline and fall, which is Gibbon’s main subject. He dates Rome’s rise and expansion to the four or five centuries before the Common Era, the period of thriving to the first two centuries of the Common Era and the decline lasting from approximately 200 to 476 if the end point is the fall of the Western, and 1453 if it is the fall of the Eastern Empire. A decline period of more than 1200 years seems exorbitant, and compels the reader to think about the dependence of the rise-and-decline concept on notions of time. Gibbon’s reflection about the end of Rome had great influence on later historic imagination. No empire lasts forever. “Instead of enquiring why the Roman Empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it has subsisted so long”.

There can be no mono-causal reason for the decline of such a vast, varied and long-lasting entity, only a changing combination of reasons. Gibbon would have mocked simplistic, modern explanations that claimed to find the cause in malaria or lead poisoning. Also, the true reasons were overwhelmingly internal. No foreign enemy, no unexpected catastrophe, destroyed Rome. Ultimately, it destroyed itself. Gibbon discusses a large number of reasons. His opinion evolved during the twenty years while his work was in progress. Different causes operated in different centuries:

- a.) The most prominent reasons are political and linked to social and cultural issues. The quality of governance, of Rome’s rulers and elites, was the overriding source of rise and decline. The corruption and despotism of the rulers and the lack of freedom explains the decline of Rome to a large degree.
- b.) Internal divisions proved to be the most dangerous of the political problems. The most important split, that of the Empire into two halves, was in the end fatal for both sides.
- c.) The expansion of Roman citizenship to the inhabitants of the entire Empire brought contradictory manners to Rome. As a consequence, the old Roman virtues disappeared. “Multi-culturalism” – though Gibbon does not yet know the term – ruined Rome.

- d.) Military reasons played a role as well. The replacement of Rome's old patriotic citizens' army by an army of mercenaries contributed indirectly to the demise of the Empire.
- e.) Although religion was a major factor, Gibbon is hesitant and ambivalent. Christianity, and particularly the fanaticism, corruption and lust for power of some of its early protagonists, brought the empire to the brink of destruction. But Gibbon was also forced to recognize that Christianity, once it had become state religion, sustained the empire. No hesitation was necessary in the case of Islam. Its impact was entirely destructive.
- f.) The role of the Barbarians was ambiguous, like that of Christianity. It is true that the Barbarian invasions threatened everybody, but when they had become the majority, they ended up speaking Latin and wanted nothing more than to be good Romans and maintain the Empire.
- g.) Hidden and remote causes of decline and fall deserve a particular mention. The Romans were often not aware of their decline and did not understand what was happening to them, which by itself was a cause of decline. Also, they were not able to detect some of the geographically more remote dangers.

Gibbon writes about economic, agricultural and financial developments, but does not consider the economy as one of the causes of decline and fall. He also records natural catastrophes but is convinced that "man has much more to fear from the passions of his fellow-creatures than from the convulsion of the elements". Gibbon is a political and moral historian, like Thucydides.

Gibbon and the Jews

Gibbon reports on Jews in many chapters, particularly in the context of Christianity. He mentions their persecution at Christian hands and for an 18th century author, is quite free of prejudice. But he adds nothing of substance on Jewish civilization.

4.) Oswald Spengler

The *End of the West* (wrongly translated as *Decline of the West*) by Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) was a widely discussed and influential book between the two World Wars in Germany and beyond. It reflected the pessimistic mood of the time. Spengler adheres to an extreme form of the cyclical theory of history. Every culture (the German "culture" has the same meaning as "civilization" in other European languages) emerges spontaneously and without external stimulus, from a people's "soul". All cultures, ours too, are organisms that grow and die, all have to go through the same cycle like a plant or animal. What happens to one culture must happen to all others. By studying the rise, thriving and decline of earlier

cultures, we can accurately predict, but cannot change what will happen to ours. The end of a culture is inevitable. All we can do is become better aware of our place in this inexorable process.

Spengler sees eight important “High Cultures”, most already dead. All are of similar construction and have identical developments. The manifold manifestations of a culture are closely linked with each other but not with those of other cultures. Art, music, religion, science, statecraft and even military organization are animated by a singular spirit that belongs to one culture alone, but not to others. Relations between these cultures are coincidental and have no lasting influence.

The last, terminal stage of a culture is called “civilization”, which expresses itself in dictatorship, imperialism, militarism, materialism, giant cities etc. Every culture ends in civilization. The Western World’s civilization has already begun, and with it the decay of the West. Its end will come within approximately two hundred years (counted from today, a century after Spengler wrote, in one hundred years). After this period, no Western culture and nation will continue to exist. Spengler is too cautious to predict what will follow and replace the West, but he says that the Arab culture seems very solid. He ignores modern China and India – he was not alone in his generation to consider them as dead cultures. He makes a number of specific forecasts for the West’s last, terminal period. For example, he predicts that people will become more religious again, that different sciences will increasingly converge, that the Western media will undermine the original sense of “freedom of expression” and create their own type of dictatorship, and more. Thus far, events seem to confirm some of his intuitive predictions.

Spengler and the Jews

Spengler was greatly interested in and sympathetic to the Jews, notwithstanding his right-wing political ideas. His knowledge of Jewish scriptures was vast. The Jew of whom he speaks with the deepest affection is the Baal Shem-Tov, the founder of Chassidism. He calls the Jewish people a “magic consensus”, which explains their “silent and self-evident cohesion”. The magic consensus is without a land and free of geographic limitations. It is magic because it is deeply believed but not based on rational or measurable criteria: “a completely unconscious metaphysical drive”. “This silent cohesion contained the idea of a magic nation; it was state, church and people at the same time”.

But the Enlightenment corroded and poisoned this magic consensus. Spengler’s predictions for the Jewish people are grim. The Jews will disappear; this is historically inevitable. He asserts that Western Judaism, which dominates all of Judaism, got entangled with Western civilization and will die with it. “The fate of

Judaism is completed". Spengler did not believe in Zionism and saw no future for it.

5.) Arnold Toynbee

Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975) wrote a history of the world as a succession of civilizations. His *Study of History* in twelve volumes is one of the longest that was ever written. Toynbee counts twenty-one (or twenty-three) civilizations, most of them extinct, but five (or seven) still living: the West, Islam, the Far East (mainly Japan and Korea), Hinduism and orthodox Christianity. In the early stages of his work, Toynbee did not count Judaism, modern China, Africa and Ottoman Turkey as genuine or living civilizations.

Toynbee believes that civilizations are subject to certain laws of history based on shared patterns of behavior, but these laws are not coercive and do not have to lead to identical outcomes. Although he is strongly influenced by Spengler, he rejects his mentor's contention that the end of the West is inevitable. Man can always change his fate. The progress or thriving of a civilization does not show in material, but in spiritual progress. Likewise, the decline and breakdown of a civilization is not due to economic factors but to political mistakes and spiritual changes. To his end, Toynbee was holding out against the influence of Karl Marx's ideas on historians of civilization. In contrast to many other historians and philosophers, Toynbee is greatly interested in the rise and growth of civilizations, not only in their decline. The contribution for which he is best remembered is still his theory of the genesis of civilizations.

- a.) *The genesis of civilizations* - the working of "Challenge-and-Response": Civilizations emerge not because of any genetic predisposition of a people, or easy and inviting natural conditions, but as a response to external challenges. These can come from the physical or the human environment and include hard geographic or natural conditions, foreign pressures and attacks, and social or religious discrimination.
- b.) *The thriving of civilizations* – the working of creative leaders and minorities and the movement of "withdrawal-and-return": For a civilization to grow, it needs more than a single stimulus. There must be a momentum, a continuous impulse. Thriving can be explained by tiny creative minorities and personalities who are followed by the majority. There is regularity in the appearance of creative individuals that Toynbee calls the movement of "withdrawal-and-return". Such individuals need to disappear and withdraw for some time from their milieu, and then return to it, transfigured.

- c.) *The breakdown of civilizations* – the transformation of “creative” into “dominant” minorities: Toynbee rejects deterministic explanations of decline. Civilizations do not have to die; they usually die by their own fault. The moral responsibility for the breakdown of a civilization is upon its leaders. The reason is a loss of creative power in the soul of once creative individuals and minorities. These then turn into merely “dominant” minorities. Other, connected reasons are the rejection of necessary changes by old institutions, militarism (Toynbee was a life-long pacifist) and the “intoxication of victory” which can lead victorious nations and religions to commit grave mistakes.
- d.) *The disintegration of civilizations* – “schisms” in the social body and the soul: Disintegration is the terminal phase in the life of a civilization. It is provoked by “schisms” or deep splits in the population but also in the soul of people, when different and contradictory ways of behavior and feeling are emerging. Toynbee abhorred not only wars, but conflicts and confrontations.

Toynbee was a Protestant Christian. He believed that spiritual and religious forces were driving and should continue to drive history, but not science, technology and industry. He understood little of the latter and deplored their importance in the modern world. After World War II, he feared for the future of civilization and argued for the establishment of a universal state or a world government. A spiritual recovery and return to religion seemed to him essential to create a better world.

Toynbee and the Jews

No other non-Jewish historian of civilizations of modern times was as interested in the Jews and the Bible as Toynbee. Chapters and paragraphs on Jewish history are spread across his work and could fill several hundred pages. Toynbee denied during most of his life that Jews had a genuine civilization. He argued with his Jewish detractors that Judaism was a “fossil”, comparable to the Parsees in India. Even in Biblical times, their civilization was not truly authentic and independent, but part of an over-arching “Syriac” civilization. After the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans, they became “debris”, “drifting about in the world down to this day”. He mentions with admiration Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai who transformed Judaism after this catastrophe and helped it to survive. But he refuses to see that Judaism, which survived so many catastrophes, provides one of the most convincing examples for his “challenge-and-response” theory. He deplored the *Shoah* in more severe terms than most others before the Eichmann trial and promised the Occident “lasting infamy” for having allowed this crime to happen. But he also condemned Israel for the injustices allegedly committed against the Palestinians. His anti-Zionist statements of the 1950s and 1960s, often associated

with attacks against America and the Jewish lobby there, are almost identical to the hostile statements that were made again, particularly in Europe, during the 2000 – 2005 period.

But in parallel, and prior to 1961 when the last volume of his *Study of History* appeared, something happened that made him overturn many of his old convictions, except for his anti-Zionism. There is no explanation for his radical reappraisal of the Jewish people. No longer are the Jews a “fossil”, they are now commended for having created an alternative model for civilizations that is no less important than the Chinese and Hellenic models. The Jews were the first to show how a people could maintain themselves after being uprooted. The world needs the Jewish Diaspora model: “this pioneer achievement has proved to be the wave of the future”. But there was more to come. Toynbee now calls on the Jewish people to seek converts, to address itself to the entire world and make it Jewish. This would be “Judaism’s achievement of its destiny”. Toynbee hopes a Jewish prophet will appear to convince his people of their universal mission: “The world has been waiting for this prophet for 2500 years” – which can only mean that Jesus was not the right prophet. By then, the Jews had stopped reading Toynbee.

6.) Pitirim Sorokin

Pitirim Sorokin (1889-1968), Russian by birth, sentenced to death after the Communist Revolution but pardoned by Lenin, was teaching sociology in Harvard from 1930 on. His *Social and Cultural Dynamics: A Study of Change in Major Systems of Art, Truth, Ethics, Law and Social Relationships* was influenced by Spengler, but also by religious Russian eschatology predicting the end of the world.

Sorokin’s notions of rise, thriving and decline are determined by his theories of civilization (which he called “culture” like Spengler):

- a.) All expressions of culture, thought and ways of life belong to one of two fundamentally different categories. One is spiritual or idealistic (in Sorokin’s term “ideate” or dominated by the spirit), the other corporal or materialistic (in Sorokin’s term “sensate” or dominated by the senses). There is also a mixed or intermediary category where spiritual-idealistic components often predominate. Sorokin’s theory postulates a complete separation of mind and body, a dualism propagated by Christianity and philosophers such as Plato and Descartes. Today’s neuro-sciences reject this dualism as a flawed religious ideology refuted by scientific facts.
- b.) Cultures are “living unities”, like organisms. Their main components, such as art, music, science, philosophy, law, ethics, and even social, political and economic organization, are in harmony and change simultaneously and in

the same direction. They are not an agglomeration of independent compartments accidentally placed side by side. Sorokin concedes that economic conditions are less closely associated with the other components.

- c.) History repeats itself. There are no continuous, linear trends, but cycles. History moves in “fluctuations” or “alternations” where periods of idealistic and materialistic culture change and replace each other. One fluctuation can last a few decades or hundreds of years until the tide begins to turn. Sorokin asserts that he can empirically substantiate these fluctuations, but he chose and developed his data himself.
- d.) Socio-cultural change, from one category of culture to another, results from immanent laws, not external challenges. A culture “bears in itself the reason of its change”.
- e.) Thriving is always associated with idealistic cultures and fluctuations (the spirit), decline with materialistic cultures and fluctuations (the senses).
- f.) The last five hundred years have been dominated by a growing materialistic fluctuation in all sectors of life and culture. This wave is now reaching “the end of the road”, heralding a great crisis of materialism. The West is heading into “one of the deepest and most significant crises of its life”. But the inevitable breakdown will not be terminal. On this point, Sorokin diverges from Spengler. After a “fiery ordeal”, a “resurrection” will follow – the Christian eschatological terms are no coincidence – and a new spiritual culture will emerge.

Sorokin draws parallels with the equally deep crises that have shaken the Near East, Greece, India and China in the 5th and 6th centuries BCE. These crises were followed by the appearance of great teachers, prophets and philosophers who changed the spiritual outlook of mankind forever. This is the thesis of the “Axial Age” developed by Karl Jaspers and others.

Sorokin mentions *Jews* only rarely. Certainly, the history of the Jews, who were associated with so many different cultures but also remained faithful to their own, had little to offer to confirm Sorokin’s theories.

7.) Fernand Braudel

Fernand Braudel (1902-1985) is considered the most influential French historian of the 20th century. His vast work includes books on French, Mediterranean, and universal history and civilization. Braudel’s main emphasis is not on rise, thriving or decline – he barely uses the terms. What attracts his attention is how, and through which material foundations, civilizations can survive, re-emerge and

transform themselves. In his own words, he studies their “long duration”. His eye is less on the decline and fall of the Roman Empire than on its “survivals” and “permanencies” in later European civilizations.

Braudel tries to show that the past explains the present and even the future, because the present is not so much the result of the passing “events” and personalities that have made the news, but of long-lasting, deep developments. The historian’s task is to uncover this history of long duration and separate it from the myriads of circumstantial events that float on the surface. All historic events, political, military and cultural, have a material basis that can be determinant. Social and economic structures are essential for the understanding of civilizations. This is why the historian must pay great attention to quantitative facts: geography, population, distances, climate, trade, migrations etc. Braudel is a master and one of the founders of “quantitative history”. He is Catholic and a French patriot, but his work is a quiet recognition of the intellectual revolution that Karl Marx has set off in Western thought. However, by over-emphasizing material factors, Braudel also runs the risk of underestimating the importance and independence of spiritual, cultural and religious trends.

Braudel tried in 1960-1962 to apply his principles to an assessment of the probable future trajectories of the main contemporary civilizations. He took their history of “long duration” as the basis of his assessment. The result was a mixed success at best. The last half of the 20th century generated more historic ruptures and surprises than Braudel could anticipate.

Braudel and the Jews

The application of Braudel’s principles to Jewish history raises particular difficulties because the material basis of Jewish life changed so often from century to century and from country to country. Also, this material basis is less well recorded than the spiritual and religious trends that seem to determine Jewish history. When Braudel says that “civilizations...can always be located on a geographic map”, he seems to exclude the Jews. He does not see or consider the “long duration” of Jewish civilization. It is the more interesting that his master work *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II* contains a thought-provoking chapter on Jewish civilization: “One Civilization against the Rest: The Destiny of the Jews”. For the 16th and 17th centuries, Braudel could finally identify the material basis of Jewish civilization, at least in the Mediterranean world. He found that Jews “formed the leading commercial network in the world”, which sustained their cultural and religious thriving, communal self-government and political influence. Braudel makes a number of detailed observations that could be significant beyond the age of Phillip II. The Jews were essential intermediaries between civilizations. They spoke all the relevant languages of East and West and helped to diffuse sciences, technologies

and even military arts. Intermarriage and conversions were frequent, mostly with gain to Judaism: in Portugal e.g. Jews tended to marry members of the local aristocracy. But Jewish influence and power were based on very small population numbers. Numbers were not decisive. Almost to the contrary: smaller communities had a larger proportion of members with wealth and influence than bigger communities. Although the Jews were widely dispersed, they made contact and established coherent networks, linked through education, travel and a flow of letters and books: "Printing served Jewish quarrels but it served the cause of Jewish unity even more".

Braudel's conclusion is that "there was quite undoubtedly a Jewish civilization, so individual that it is not always recognized as an authentic civilization. And yet it exerted its influences, transmitted certain cultural values, resisted others, sometimes accepting, sometimes refusing... True it was not or was only notionally rooted to any one place; it did not obey any stable and unvarying geographical imperatives. This was one of its most original features, but not the only one".

8.) Paul Kennedy

Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers – Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, was published in 1987 and written during the presidency of Ronald Reagan (1981-89). Kennedy wanted to show, in line with other liberals, that Reagan's growing military spending for the "Star War" initiative was "outstretching" America's economy and was leading the country to decline and ruin. He asserted that the signs of decline were already visible.

Kennedy reviews each European war from the early 16th to the 20th century and draws a conclusion of apparently universal validity. His data, some of which are disputable, show that victory in war goes to those who have the more flourishing productive base. The outcome of all great wars reflects the economic shifts between the main players. While great economic power is not always converted into military power, great military power cannot be maintained if it is not sustained by corresponding economic power. Spain, the Habsburgs and Napoleon lost because they were over-extended and could not maintain the economic underpinning of their military machine. Victory in both World Wars went inevitably to those who had the greater economic resources – it was a predictable outcome. Kennedy does know that some wars, e.g. the Vietnam War, have been won by the economically weaker party, and is puzzled that the French revolutionary armies defeated in 1793-95 the combined, hugely superior forces of the European monarchies. But this does not moderate his mono-causal economic explanation of the thriving and fall of empires.

Kennedy's exclusive focus on the material basis of empires is shared by other American policy scientists, but he knows that the economy becomes the cause of

downfall only when leaders make grave political and military mistakes that put too heavy burdens on the economy.

9.) Arthur Herman

Herman (*The Idea of Decline in Western History*, 1997) does not write about the decline of civilization as an objective phenomenon, but about the idea or ideology of decline in Western thought: “The idea of decline is actually a theory about the nature and meaning of time”. In the 19th century, the idea of progress was still defended by Hegel, but became increasingly discredited. It made place for the idea of decline, expressed in various value-loaded terms: “decay”, “decadence”, “degeneration”.

Racial (Gobineau, Chamberlain) and cultural pessimists (Nietzsche, Burckhardt) predicted the decline of European civilization in which they detected fatal flaws. From then until today, capitalist-bourgeois society was seen as condemned to self-destruction. The 20th century saw a tremendous upsurge of ideological pessimism. The racial variants comforted the extreme right and led straight to Nazism. The cultural variants stimulated French and German radical writers, often left-wingers if not Communists, but also philosophers of history such as Spengler and Toynbee, and in the United States, Afro-centric black writers and white radicals. For all of them, America became the main target. E.g. the call for “multi-culturalism” was heard first in an American Afro-centric milieu, not as a call for mutual respect, but as a springboard for a new wave of anti-Western ideology.

Herman does not dispute that decline can be an objective reality, but insists that there are no inevitable laws of progress and decline, and regrets that earlier Enlightenment and humanist traditions are not much in evidence today. He concludes with a chapter on the latest philosophy of decline: eco-pessimism.

10.) Jared Diamond

Jared Diamond’s *Collapse – How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, 2005, is a lasting American bestseller. It responds to the growing public and professional alarm about the consequences of environmental destruction and global warming. Diamond warns that the world is on a non-sustainable course and that many of us will have to make drastic life-style changes lest environmental over-extension will trigger a global catastrophe.

Diamond reviews a great variety of countries, societies and tribes, both dead and living ones, for their environmental status. Some are huge (China, Australia); others are tiny islands in the Pacific. Some have made grave environmental mistakes and are trying to correct them and others cannot agree on an appropriate

course of action. Some societies have vanished long ago because their policies were suicidal from an environmental point of view (Easter and other Pacific islands, Anasazi Indians in the United States, classical Mayas), be it through sheer ignorance, value-based refusal to adapt to new conditions or pursuit of short-term gains for selfish rulers. In all cases of collapse, environmental degradation, often including deforestation, was the only reason for the extinction of the society. We can avoid collapse by learning from the mistakes of others. “The parallels between Easter Island [a short-lived and vanished stone age civilization of a few thousand inhabitants] and the whole modern world are chillingly obvious”, and the crash that destroyed the Mayas can befall the most advanced societies as well – bold assertions, to say the least.

Diamond concludes that ecological catastrophes are always the result of major decision-making failures. There is no ecological determinism, “a society’s fate lies in its own hands”.

11.) Bryan Ward-Perkins

Ward-Perkins’ *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*, 2005, is the latest of many books written on the fall of Rome, which became, thanks to Gibbon, a permanent source of inspiration and curiosity for the Western mind. Ward-Perkins counts no less than two hundred and ten possible reasons for Rome’s decline and fall, pulled together from books thus far published.

He focuses on the books written since the 1970s, when it appeared that words like “decline”, “decay” and “crisis” were no longer in fashion among historians of Rome. These words were replaced by “transformation”, “transition” and “change”. What was to earlier historians the “end of the Roman Empire” became now “late Antiquity”. The European Commission funded many of these books because the peaceful integration of the new Germany into the European Union called also for a little bit of re-writing of old history. Formerly “barbaric” Germanic invaders of the Empire became now “immigrants” who settled, more or less peacefully, among the old inhabitants. Ward-Perkins rejects this new, politically correct version of events as a falsification, refuted not only by all contemporary witnesses but by a huge amount of new archeological evidence. The truth is that the invasions led to bloody horrors of war and enormous destruction and suffering.

But the invasions alone did not destroy Rome. Ward-Perkins’ explanation of the empire’s fall is complex and not monocausal. Invasions, civil war and social unrest ended centuries of security and led to a drop in tax revenues. Revenues were critical for the funding of the professional army on which the Empire relied for its security. There were other reasons as well, e.g. bad luck and bad judgment. The fall of the Roman Empire was the end of a civilization and of a sophisticated

economy based on a high degree of specialization. Some parts of the Empire sank to an economic level below that of the pre-Roman Iron Age and remained there until the 19th century.

Ward-Perkins confirms some of Gibbon's major conclusions: Rome's decline and fall was a real, dramatic event, its causes were complex and multiple, and many of them were internal. The author concludes with a warning: "Romans before the fall were as certain as we are today that the world would continue for ever substantially unchanged. They were wrong. We would be wise not to repeat their complacency".

12.) Joseph A.Tainter, Peter Turchin, Christopher Chase-Dunn/Thomas D.Hall, Mancur Olson

From the 1970s and 1980s to this day, the rise-and-decline theme has been popular among American social scientists. Jared Diamond, Arthur Herman and Paul Kennedy have already been discussed. This sub-chapter reviews four additional American authors who present different variations of the theme.

Joseph A.Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, 1988, describes more than twenty antique cases of collapse, all from pre-Columbian America, the ancient Near East, archaic Greece and the Western Roman Empire. He reviews two thousand or more years of explanation and gives the best note to those who see the reason of collapse in economic factors, and the worst to those who see it in what he calls "mystical" factors. These include "value judgments", ethical factors such as immoral behavior of rulers, and all theories that compare civilizations to organisms that grow and die. Tainter accepts none of the existing theories. He attributes the collapse of civilization to the "declining productivity of increasing complexity". Civilization means complexity, which is not a natural state. As civilizational complexity increases, the "marginal returns" on new "investments" in complexity keep declining until collapse becomes inevitable. Collapse is a return to greater simplicity, poverty, decentralization, smaller units, etc., which is a more natural state of things. There have been many collapses in history. They are the norm, not the exception, and our civilization should not feel too secure about its future either. Tainter admits that his theory leaves virtually no room for human will, statesmanship and intervention. He rejects all external explanations of collapse. Wars, invasions, etc., are "random accidents" that cannot explain the regularity of collapse.

Having buried the organic and ethical theories of rise and decline, he replaces them with a mechanical one. Civilization is now more similar to a piece of equipment, and while its end is still inevitable, decline follows mechanical and econometric laws instead of organic ones. The more new functions added to equipment, the more sophisticated it becomes, and the greater the danger is of

breakdowns that require costly repairs. In the end, the most economical solution is to scrap the equipment – “collapse” it – and acquire a cheaper and simpler model.

Peter Turchin, *Historical Dynamics – Why States Rise and Fall*, 2003, goes a step further. He notes that historic processes are “dynamic”: populations, empires, states and religions keep growing and declining. Therefore, “we need a mathematical theory in history”. The dynamics of history should be converted into hypotheses, and these translated into mathematical models and model predictions that can be checked against empirical patterns. Turchin applies his method, among others, to the territorial expansion of agrarian states, and the question of why they expand and contract. He is inspired by Ibn Khaldun’s concept of “group solidarity” considered to be the basis of civilization. He takes Ibn Khaldun’s idea as a useful starting point and sets out to demonstrate that frontiers are the best “incubators” of group solidarity. They increase group solidarity independently of the ethnic origin of the inhabitants inside the borders. Whether this and other demonstrations of the book can be proven mathematically, only mathematicians can tell. But few historians will take seriously the postulate that mathematics is indispensable to define and test the laws of rise and decline. But this is the conviction of Turchin who calls for a mathematical modeling approach - “cliodynamics” - to investigating history.

Christopher Chase-Dunn and Thomas D.Hall, *Rise and Demise – Comparing World-Systems*, 1997, replace the notion of individual civilizations by that of “World-Systems”. A World-System is an interconnected economic space or grouping that is transnational and multicultural. World-Systems allow for divisions of labor and for the production of goods and raw materials. Chase-Dunn and Hall consider Fernand Braudel as the main forerunner of World-System analysis. Today’s globalized economy is a World-System, but there were many others before. The authors pay most attention to the “unification of Afroeurasia” from 500 BCE to 1400 CE. They assert that all three continents were, during two thousand years, parts of the same World-System. This has strongly influenced if not determined the shape and fate of individual civilizations within “Afroeurasia”. It helps to explain their rise and decline, and many other parallels.

A more modest approach to rise and decline has been proposed by Mancur Olson, *The Rise and Decline of Nations – Economic Growth, Stagflation and Social Rigidities*, 1982. Olson wrote during the years when Western politicians were preoccupied with the twin problems of economic stagnation and inflation, and the need to restore economic growth. He equates “the rise and decline of nations” with variations in their economic growth rates. A more appropriate though less sensational title of his book would have been “Why Growth Rates Differ”, but there were already other books with this or similar titles. Olson shows that the longer a society enjoys political stability and peace, the more likely it is to develop

powerful special-interest lobbies that make it less efficient economically. He attributes the higher growth rates of Japan and Germany, compared to those of many other Western countries, to the two nations' defeat in World War II. Their past break-down explains why they have less social rigidity and fewer special interest groups that dominate and stifle their government's macro-economic policies. Olson's insight was praised by leading economists.

Of course, more than ten years later, when Japanese and German growth rates dropped to lower levels than those of the United States and the United Kingdom, other social scientists began to discover both in Japan and Germany, social rigidities and economic lobbies that Olson may have overlooked. The earlier economic success stories of Japan and Germany could probably be attributed to several, and not only one reason.

What all four authors have in common is their exclusive reliance on quantifiable, material, mostly economic drivers to explain rise and decline of civilizations. Two other Americans, Jared Diamond and Paul Kennedy, share this conviction. In the last resort, they are still crypto-Marxists. What they also have in common is a firm conviction that decline and collapse are always self-generated. External reasons are not decisive. Three of them, Tainter, Turchin and Chase-Dunn/Hall, have something else in common, the conviction that rise and decline follow some discernable, mathematic-scientific law that humans can do little to change. The three share this conviction with Oswald Spengler although they all reject his work.

At this point, we can now try to better understand why none of the American theoreticians of civilization ever mentions the Jews or Jewish civilization. The Jews don't fit. No mathematical model, no economic sub-structure, can explain why the Jews went through thriving and decline more than once and why they are still here. There must be other drivers that cannot be quantified. Only Samuel Huntington in the *Clash of Civilizations* recognises the omission of Jewish civilization from his list as a problem, but justifies it, unconvincingly, with the comment that "in terms of numbers of people Judaism clearly is not a major civilization".

Historians of civilizations have perhaps reached the end of a road, and the pendulum may swing in another direction, away from exclusively economic or otherwise quantifiable drivers. Maybe the longevity of the Jews would be a good incentive to look at a broader range of theories.

C.) Drivers of Rise, Thriving and Decline, Applications to Jewish History, and Policy Considerations.

Introduction

The following list of drivers of rise, thriving and decline of civilizations presents in each case, two separate summaries, one for general and one for Jewish history, followed, when appropriate, by policy ideas. These are deliberately called “policy considerations” because they require further discussion. They are “thought-starters” rather than specific policy recommendations.

The drivers have been extracted from the theories of the authors summarized in the first part of this paper. However, because the drivers belong to different logical categories, the list might at first sight appear somewhat incoherent. To make the differences between drivers more transparent, four sub-headings were introduced:

- Lessons of History: 1,2,3
- Strengthening Drivers of Thriving: 4,5,6,7,8
- Coping with Challenges and Threats: 9,10,11,12
- Contentious Factors: 13,14

LESSONS OF HISTORY

1.) Decline has Multiple Reasons

General History

Single events may explain the birth of a civilization (see 3.), but they generally cannot explain the decline and downfall of a civilization, at least not of a multi-faceted, widespread one. No single, mono-causal reason can explain the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, or of any other large empires. American policy scientists try to find a common denominator for the decline or collapse of civilizations, but they too propose factors that can be seen as causal agents in a more complex chain of events. Except in extreme cases of genocide (see 2.), there is always a combination of reasons.

Jewish History

If one looks for historic, not metaphysical reasons for the long-term survival of the Jews, it is clear that they were saved more than once by their global spread and their fragmentation into different branches. No single danger or cause of decline could touch all of them simultaneously. If Spain and Portugal had in the 16th and 17th centuries dominated most of the world like they dominated parts of Europe and America, it is doubtful that Judaism and the Jewish people would have survived the inevitable persecutions and forced conversions across the world. In

the 18th century, their fate would have resembled that of the American Indians, more than 90 percent of whom are thought to have perished within three or four generations. Obviously, the same could be said of the fate of the Jewish people in the 20th century: if the Nazis had conquered the world, there would be no Jewish people today. Jewish history knows some Diasporas that withered and disappeared even in the absence of persecutions, while others were rising and flourishing elsewhere. The fragmentation of Judaism and the competition between different branches may also have played a role in long-term survival: history kept choosing the “fittest” branch, the Pharisees over the Sadducees, the Rabbinic Jews over the Karaites, etc.

Policy Considerations

Unless one assumes that the world is about to enter an era of eternal peace, history teaches us that a monolithic Judaism concentrated in one place will have a smaller chance of long-term survival than a multifaceted Judaism present in different parts of the world. The policy recommendations to be drawn from Jewish history are obvious: getting all Jews into the same shape and country, even if it is Israel as recently advocated by an Israeli poet, is not the best survival strategy.

2.) The Reasons of Decline are Internal – with Exceptions

General History

Internal reasons seem to predominate the causes of decline and fall. Toynbee’s “civilizations do not die by an assassin’s hand, but by suicide”, is the most colorful illustration of this consensus. This is true for many civilizations, but not for all. It is puzzling that historians are paying so little attention to the many nations and civilizations that were exterminated by stronger enemies without leaving a record or much of a trace. Did they die in vain? The Roman Empire wiped out scores of civilizations: the Etruscans, Carthage, the Gauls. These are just the best remembered. The Jews were luckier than all of these – or more resourceful.

Jewish History

Rabbinic thought also ascribes to the belief that the causes of decline and fall are internal, but for reasons very different from those of Western historians. The Talmud attributes the destruction of both the First and Second Temple to Jewish faults; idolatry and fraternal hate respectively. If the blame could not be placed on the Jews themselves, it would be difficult to explain why God had not protected them. The historian Flavius Josephus redoubled the rabbinic interpretation of the catastrophe of 70 CE by accusing Jewish fanaticism and internal strife. He had good personal reasons to do so as he had to justify why he had deserted his own camp to join that of the Romans. But it was not Jewish strife that burned Jerusalem

and the Temple, it was Titus and the Tenth Legion. Jewish history does not corroborate the apparent consensus that civilizations die only for internal reasons. The truth is more complex.

Policy Considerations

Jewish policy considerations must give at least as much attention to external as to internal causes of decline and fall. The past experience of Jewish history remains valid, as the renewal and spread of genocidal, anti-Semitic hate in the Moslem world shows. This is why the thriving of the Jewish people may for a long time require military strength. Hannah Ahrendt explained the virulence of Nazi anti-Semitism by the discrepancy between the enormous cultural and economic influence of the Jews and their inability to back it up with real political and military power. In other words, to have seemingly exorbitant “soft power” but no “hard power” to defend it is a provocation that can expose the “power-holder” to great danger. Israel’s military power today may have subtle indirect impacts on much more than the country’s strategic position in the Middle East.

3.) The Working of Challenge-and-Response

General History

One of the theories proposed to explain the emergence and growth of civilizations, the “challenge-and-response” theory explains that civilizations rise as a response to an external, natural-geographic or human stimulus. This theory is easier to substantiate historically than others, such as the organic philosophies, which see civilizations emerge spontaneously, following some immanent law. A slackening of external challenges can lead to stagnation and decline.

Jewish History

Jewish history knows at least three periods of major transformation that are responses to severe, external challenges. The first historically validated transformation occurs as a result of the destruction of the First Temple of Jerusalem, the Babylonian captivity and the return from Babel, and the teaching of the main prophets, mainly during the 6th and 5th centuries BCE. The second major transformation follows the destruction of the Second Temple by Rome and the renewed dispersion of the Jewish people, a period of enormous change that lasts from 70 CE to approximately 400-500 CE. The third major transformation begins late in the 18th century with the Enlightenment. It reached its two, so far, most dramatic peaks with the annihilation of most of Europe’s Jews and the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, and it is still continuing.

All three transformations show a remarkable Jewish capability to adapt to new conditions and survive catastrophes that would have been fatal to other civilizations.

Policy Considerations

One of the main aims of a Jewish people policy is to strengthen the Jewish people's capacity to respond to new challenges. This is easier said than done. There is no single, specific policy to achieve this goal, but a combination of policies might help achieve it.

STRENGTHENING DRIVERS OF THRIVING

4.) Creative Leadership and Elites

General History

Civilizational rise and growth has sociological drivers. These are creative leaders and tiny, creative minorities or elites who are followed by the majorities. Civilizations decline and fall when leaders or leadership groups who were pioneers in the past lose their creative inspiration. The decline and fall of Rome, of China's main imperial dynasties and of many other civilizations can be explained by the failures of later rulers who did not have the qualities of their predecessors. The reasons of failure are complex. It was observed that it is uncommon for two or three successive, major challenges to elicit creative responses from one and the same leader or leading minority. Also, ruling dynasties often remain creative only for three or four generations after which they begin to decay. This could even apply to political "dynasties" in republican regimes or democratic parties.

Jewish History

A comprehensive history of Jewish leadership across the ages, how leaders emerged and how elites changed, remains to be written. Much Biblical history is about leadership, all too often about its failures. Jewish tradition attributes national decline and fall to bad leadership, just as traditional Western and Chinese historians do. The Jewish people had great and unworthy leaders, like every people, but the linkage between bad leadership and decline of civilizations postulated by historians may have particular relevance for the Jews. Their external conditions were and are more tenuous than those of bigger and more powerful nations and their survival less assured. They could much less afford bad or weak leaders. All through history, Jews paid a high price for the shortcomings and mistakes of their leaders and elites. This is true for Biblical times, for the disastrous Jewish revolts against Rome in 70 and 135 CE, and some 20th century historians believe it is also true for the time of the *Shoah*. One might raise the

question whether Israel's short history does not show some examples of a loss of creativity in the ruling elites.

It cannot be denied, however, that the Jewish people also produced outstanding leaders particularly in periods of crisis and catastrophe. Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai and the school of Yavneh are credited with transforming and saving Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple, and some of Israel's founding fathers are likely to remain in history as outstanding leaders. It is these and other leaders who formulated and implemented Judaism's creative responses to severe challenges.

Policy Considerations

The quality of Jewish leadership – political, religious and cultural – is a key condition for the future thriving of the Jewish people. The current leadership situation in Israel and parts of the Diaspora could be cause for concern. It should be a Jewish policy aim to improve this situation, by modifying selection and career mechanisms, fostering cooperation between leaders, promoting young leaders and encouraging potential leaders to withdraw for some time from their milieu and public activity and return later in a new shape and into a new situation.

5.) Numbers and Critical Mass

General History

Numbers count. But large numbers do not by themselves guarantee, and small numbers do not threaten, the success of a civilization. Many other factors come into play.

The population of the Roman and the Maya empire was shrinking as these civilizations declined, but it is not certain whether population reductions came before, and thus were one of the causes of decline, or whether, as most believe, they were the result of other deteriorating factors. China's population oscillated for the last two thousand years in correlation with internal troubles and dynastic changes, but cause and effect are again not completely clear. If there is a critical population mass for the thriving or decline of a civilization, the figure is likely to vary greatly according to external circumstances and the ambitions of the people concerned. It could be quite small as the case of the Parsees in India shows. The Parsees are certainly a living civilization, distinguished by a common history, religion and language. They are seen as a politically, economically and culturally very successful community. Yet they number only between 300,000 and 400 000 people, or less than 0.03 percent of India's population, which is smaller by an order of magnitude than the percentage of Jews in the world population (0.2 percent).

Jewish History

The virtual stagnation of Jewish population numbers is a source of concern for Jewish policy makers because it is seen as a symptom of crisis and weakness. This raises a number of questions. Is there a minimum critical mass for the Jewish people as a whole, or for individual Jewish communities, to allow Jews to defend their interests? Is there a trade-off between quantity and quality, and how can quality replace quantity?

Jewish history may teach us a few things about numbers. There were past periods of relative political, economic and cultural thriving, for example the history of European Jewry in the 17th century, although the number of Jews in the economically most important cities was very small. But according to historians, these Jewish communities built one of the world's best networks of mutual cooperation, communication and international commerce, which made up for their small numbers. Jewish history in the 20th century shows in various ways that greater numbers do not automatically confer greater power or better protection. In the decade prior to World War II, Jews represented 0.6 percent of the world's population, but rarely in history have Jews been so helpless in the face of mortal dangers. Today Jews represent only 0.2 percent of the world's population but are incommensurably more powerful. Another example conveying the same message is the effect of the number of Jews living in Russia. When they suffered under the Czar at the beginning of the 20th century, Jews numbered five million, but they were completely powerless and barely able to protect their lives. Today, they number less than 300,000 in Russia but they have more influence and power than their grand-grand-parents could ever have dreamed of.

Policy Considerations

All of this is not to suggest that small numbers are better than large ones. The opposite is true. Jewish demographic policies, which will not be addressed here, are therefore of the greatest importance for the future.

But history does suggest that in the meantime, there are ways to cope with the problem of small numbers. If Jews would communicate and cooperate as they did in the past, they could partly make up for their widespread and small numbers. The revolution in information technologies of the last thirty years has multiplied the possibilities of communication. In fact, cyberspace has the potential to partly alleviate the lack of critical mass. Cyberspace could help Jews to connect with, and become part of the wider, Jewish world because it creates the possibility of instant communication and quick, joint action among large numbers of dispersed people. Cyberspace would also allow Jews to efficiently argue their case and attack their enemies in front of a large world audience irrespective of their own small numbers.

, Jews have not, however, fully exploited these opportunities. Interaction and cohesion between Jews across the world have certainly not improved at the same rate as the technology. Worse, Jews seem to be hopelessly inferior to their enemies in using cyberspace to defend their cause, while the latter are very skilled in its use to defame the Jewish people. Clicking “Jews” on Google yields appalling results¹, testifying to Jewish indifference or disorganization.

This has led to appeals to Jews to make better use of cyberspace to connect and defend themselves. These appeals have two components. As to the first, improving cooperation between Jews, one must ask whether this proposal does not put the cart before the horse. Many, and certainly all younger and professionally active Jews, are very well networked – but not with each other. Their problem is not insufficient familiarity with modern technology, but deficient “affiliative behavior” with regard to other Jews, to use a term from the neuro-sciences. If Jews had the necessary solidarity, interest and will, they would know how to use cyberspace. As to the second component, defense against anti-Semitism, a permanent institute with professional staff and a comprehensive cyberspace information and anti-defamation agenda seems to be increasingly necessary. Jewish organizations should give cyberspace policy a higher place on their agendas.

6.) “Magic Consensus” or “The Particular Secret of Every Civilization”

General History

Civilizations depend on more than clearly identifiable factors and objective interests. Historians are groping for words to describe these “other” factors, which shows that they are part of an emotional and not rational realm. Among the terms proposed are “group feeling”, “magic consensus”, “spiritual essence” and “things one cannot explain: the particular secret of every civilization”.

Beyond historiography, such ideas were popular among Europe’s romantic poets and philosophers. They have also influenced some of the right-wing political ideas of the 19th and 20th centuries. How this “group feeling” comes into existence is not

¹ A check made on 15.5.2006 on Google showed nearly seventy-one million entries under the key word “Jews”. Of the twenty that fill the first two internet pages, ten are neutral and informative, though sometimes irrelevant (“Jews in Cuba”), but ten are hostile or hijack “Jews” for other purposes. Three are Neturei Karta or similar ultra-orthodox sites attacking Zionism as anti-Jewish, two are pro-Palestinian sites attacking Zionism, one is “Jews for Jesus”, one is “Jews for Allah”. One is for gay-lesbian Jews, one is Jews for life and against abortion (an Evangelical, not Jewish religious site) and one is “Jews for the preservation of firearm ownership”! Not so long ago, Google’s first entry under “Jews” was the web-site of an anti-Semitic, American, neo-Nazi group. It has since disappeared from the first place because one of the two co-founders of Google asked his engineers to “fix” this problem.

clear; how it can be destroyed is easier to understand. “Group feeling” is the positive opposite of internal dissent, the “splits in the soul”, which will be mentioned as a cause of decline and breakdown of civilizations (C 9).

Jewish History

Because the Jewish people, was not rooted in a land for two thousand years, except through memory and imagination, this emotional “group feeling” was particularly important to maintain Jewish civilization. Spengler coined the term “magic consensus” to describe the essence or unifying factor of the Jewish people, but he predicted its destruction and with it, that of the Jewish people as well. Freud concurred with the general idea but saw no danger of an impending destruction. He wrote that he was Jewish “in its very essence”, although he had abandoned Jewish religion and nationhood. He added that he could not now express “that essence” in clear words.

Policy Considerations

Since the Enlightenment, the “magic consensus” of the Jews has been in danger or under attack. But contrary to what Spengler predicted, this invisible marker of Jewish civilization and identification has been weakened, but has not completely disappeared. It was amazing e.g. that it survived in so many Jews in the Soviet Union in spite of the suppression of all Jewish religious, educational and other activities during seventy years. Today, this magic consensus is changing, but it is not clear whether it is getting stronger or weaker, and whether it will be transmitted to the next generation. It should be a Jewish policy priority to discuss what can be done to strengthen the old or develop a new “magic consensus”, via educational and other cultural policies.

7.) Economic Foundations of Long Lasting Civilizations

General History

In the 20th century, it became increasingly clear that there are important economic and not only political or cultural foundations of long lasting civilizations, and that the rise and decline of great powers was also linked to the rise and decline of their economic resources and productivity. This new trend of historiography responds to a recognition that economic structures have been ignored for too long as a basis of the general history of civilizations.

Jewish History

Quantitative, socio-economic perspectives can be applied to Jewish history, but it is difficult to identify enduring, socio-economic structures that would underpin the longevity of the Jewish people. Jewish history evolved in many different countries and centuries, and under very different economic conditions. Many Jews lived in great poverty until the 20th century, and many others found that discrimination had closed many professions to them. However, there are also examples of Jewish professional achievements that are remarkable. There are similarities between them although they are separated by centuries and oceans. Jews have more than once created and maintained important international networks of commerce and exchange. Their knowledge of foreign languages, customs and markets, and their international Jewish connections gave them a competitive advantage. They used this advantage in entrepreneurial and innovative ways. From the late 19th century on, this innovative entrepreneurship, a drive to do things differently by making economic use of new knowledge, was again visible in the contribution of Western Jews to the industrial and technological development of their host countries, particularly in Germany until 1933 and in the United States. Maybe this knowledge-based entrepreneurship was, and could increasingly become again, a genuine socio-economic basis of Jewish civilization.

Policy Considerations

The thriving of the Jewish people will require as a necessary, though not sufficient basis, a strong economic foundation built on professional achievements and stable wealth. Whatever the global economic trends will be, only a sufficient level of professional competence in the increasingly knowledge-based economy will in the long term guarantee economic success for most, and stable, lasting wealth for some. The management of existing wealth and short-term financial manipulations are not likely to create stable, new wealth for more than a very few.

Educational policies in Israel and the Diaspora should help to influence the career choices of the young so that they can successfully integrate into the knowledge-based economy. This is particularly urgent for the economically backward sectors of the Jewish people, e.g. the Haredi population in Israel.

8.) Science and Technology, Drivers of the Future

General History

Science and technology are increasingly the drivers of the future and the main long-term source of intellectual, economic and military power. They are the core of a wider knowledge revolution that also includes all social sciences. The great geo-political alignments that lie ahead will be strongly influenced if not determined by the scientific and technological standing of the main civilizations and their command of knowledge in the broadest sense: the United States, Europe,

Russia, China, India and the Moslem world. The current concern with energy resources that do confer a historically temporary power to its owners will not change the long-term power trends, even if oil should dominate the world for one generation longer and lead to havoc if revenues are misused for the production of weapons of mass destruction and terrorism.

Most historians and policy scientists, who study rise and decline of empires and civilization, are unfamiliar with science and technology and give too little attention to these factors.

Jewish History

The 20th century has seen the development of a singular, intense relationship between Jews and the world of science and technology. Jews contributed to the advancement of science and technology more than any other small minority or religious group in the world, as can be seen by the fact that they received between 1901 and 2004 almost 30 percent of all Nobel Prize awards in science and economics. The contribution of Jews to science and technology was particularly noticeable in the two scientific world leaders and great powers of the time, Germany between 1880 and 1933, and the United States from the 1940s until today. Also, Israel's survival against overwhelming odds owes a lot to Israeli excellence and ingenuity in critical fields of science and technology. At the same time, achievements in science and technology have given many Jews professional status and political and cultural influence.

Policy Considerations

Jewish policy makers and the public do not pay enough attention to the importance of science and technology for their own future and the future of the Jewish people. Also, the currently high international position of Jews in science and technology should not be taken for granted. A proportion of the most talented young Jews are not attracted by scientific or other scholarship, but by careers that promise financial gain at a faster pace. An effort should be made to enhance Jewish understanding for the importance of science and technology, attract the young to science and engineering, particularly in the United States, and improve scientific education. In addition, new forms of cooperation and exchange between Israel and the Diaspora in scientific and technological research and teaching should be explored.

COPING WITH CHALLENGES AND THREATS

9.) Internal Dissent

General History

According to the controversial opinions of nearly all authors, civilizations usually perish for internal, not external reasons (see 2.). These internal reasons include dissent, conflicting customs, a collapse of once shared value systems and contradictory ways of behavior and feeling that can undermine the cohesion of a civilization. The loss of cohesion can lead to secessions from the guiding principles and ruling elites of a civilization. Internal dissent does not have to take violent forms. Civilizations can disintegrate without much bloodshed. One of the causes blamed for the decline and fall of the Roman Empire was “multiculturalism”, to use this modern term, that is the introduction of contradictory and competing beliefs and manners from the entire world. Similar explanations were given by cultural pessimists in the 19th and 20th century who complained about the assumed decline of their own civilization and blamed it on foreign influence. However, mankind’s great periods of cultural thriving were not all periods of internal cohesion, peace and unity – quite the contrary. The Italian Renaissance was a period of great cultural thriving, but also considerable internal tension, unrest and conflict. In fact, internal dissent can produce cultural creativity and not only decline.

Jewish History

Theories that link thriving to internal cohesion and decline to internal dissent may be applied to mythical periods of Jewish history, but not to the historically well-known periods. Conflict seems to be integral to Jewish civilization. The dynamics of Jewish history is driven by dissent, argument and strife. Jewish arguments focus on values, conflicting interpretations of truth, tradition and ritual and what it means to be Jewish. For the respective protagonists, such questions are critical to the very survival of Judaism and are often conducted with deadly seriousness and even some violence. They appear to later generations as irrelevant – often because one side has won and the other has disappeared – or as incomprehensible.

A typical, recent example is the early 19th century split between *Chassidim* and *Mitnagdim* in Eastern Europe. They fought an extraordinarily vicious battle that led to murders and attempted murders between Jews because one party was convinced that the other was jeopardizing the very survival of Judaism. After little more than five generations, all that is left of this bitter fight that once mobilized large numbers of Jews, is bantering and jokes for many and some variations in prayer books and other religious texts.

There are various types of conflicts. Limited conflict and competition can stimulate creativity and thriving, bloody conflict and civil war can destroy a civilization as Thucydides has shown.

It would help if Jews were aware that the current disagreements and conflicts in Israel and the Diaspora are not necessarily signs of an exceptional crisis and even less of an impending “civil war”, but a continuation of the rocky history of the Jewish people where dissent was the norm, not the exception. Maybe better historic awareness would make some of the ongoing arguments less emotional.

10.) Hidden Decay and Remote External Dangers

General History

A civilization can decline but take no note of it. An empire can be in danger from outside forces but ignore them because they are geographically too remote. The Roman Empire had both problems. “The Romans were ignorant of the extent of their danger, and the number of their enemies” (Gibbon). This ignorance was, by itself, a cause for Rome’s decline. Moslem civilizations, e.g. the Ottoman Empire, had great difficulties understanding internal decline or military defeat. Napoleon’s effortless conquest of Egypt came as a shock to a Moslem world that did not expect and could not comprehend the event. The Aztec, Maya and Inca empires were vast, rich and densely populated, but fell victim to a minuscule band of Spaniards in the shortest time span because the Indians never quite understood what was happening to them. The historic examples are legion.

Jewish History

Some of these problems can be found in Jewish history as well. Currently, Jews seem well aware of the dangers of internal decline, but anticipating the causes of possible future threats is more difficult. For a people as widespread as the Jews, linked to so many global issues, and provoking so many contradictory opinions and feelings across the world, many known and unknown events may become important.

The question is not only about long-term threats. The Jewish people and its leaders have more than once been blamed for ignoring imminent threats. For example, some historians have concluded that Spanish Jews and their leaders before the expulsion of 1492, and many European Jews and some of their leaders before and even after 1939, did not grasp that a catastrophe was imminent and could have done more to escape. It is difficult to judge in retrospect whether such reproaches are fair and realistic in view of the dire circumstances of the time.

Policy Considerations

Jews will need to cope better with such challenges in the future. Recognizing internal decline even when times are good, anticipating remote sources of danger and responding quickly to imminent threats, calls for foresight and statesmanship

of a tall order. Jews, with a few great exceptions, never had a forward-looking geopolitical concept of the world and their place in it. The currently greatly improved geopolitical situation of the Jewish people, but also the new dangers threatening it, make the shaping of such long-term geopolitical visions imperative.

11.) Decline of the West or the End of Civilization

General History

Many historians of civilization warn that our civilization will come to an end too, and some are already detecting a decline of the Occident. Their predictions are rooted in the study of the fall of once flourishing civilizations of the past, ideological opposition to current world powers or general cultural pessimism. Should one dismiss all these authors as crypto-religious, doomsday-preachers? After the horrors of the 20th century, more people are probably ready to take such predictions seriously than at any time since the Enlightenment.

Jewish History

From ancient times to the 20th century, Jews have watched or experienced the end of empires and civilizations. In some cases, they were among the main beneficiaries, as in 539 BCE when the Persian King Cyrus demolished the Babylonian-Chaldean Empire and its powerful civilization, or in 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed. In other cases, they probably suffered together with the rest of the population.

A serious decline or collapse of Western civilization would dramatically affect the Jews because the overwhelming majority of them are an integral part of this civilization. The prospect may seem far-fetched, and in any event, Jewish policy could do very little to directly affect the mega-trends of Western civilization. A critical part of this question is the future of the United States, the only super-power and the dominant civilization of the world. The future of the Jewish people is inextricably linked to that of the United States and will remain so for many decades to come. More than forty percent of all Jews live in America, and for another more than forty percent, those of Israel, the strategic alliance with a powerful America can be an issue of life or death. In other words, the thriving and decline of America is not only a global issue, but also a specific and critical Jewish issue as well.

Policy Considerations

No specific policies can prepare for a global crisis of civilization or a decline of the West, which in any event might consist of long and drawn-out processes. But some policies, which should already be pursued for other reasons, could be strengthened.

Thoughts about the future of Western civilization or the United States should accelerate Jewish policy initiatives to seek more links with non-Western civilizations, particularly the new emerging great powers of Asia, China and India. These civilizations are less prejudiced and more open to Judaism and the Jewish people than the Christian and Moslem worlds were in the past or still are today. Many Chinese and Hindus are interested in Jewish history and culture, but often not well informed. Jews should pursue a broad-based cultural policy in both countries, and reinforce or improve whatever presence they already have in the collective conscience and imagination there. Economic and technological links alone are not sufficient. Jews have been too slow to respond to the broader, long-term opportunities that are opening up in Asia.

12.) Natural and Health Disasters

General History

The Bible, Plato and others transmitted pre-historic memories of civilizations that were destroyed by natural catastrophes. In the late 20th century, the collapse of civilization through geological, environmental or health catastrophes has become a subject of public and scientific debate. There is widespread alarm about climate change and its effects on global warming, rising sea levels, food production, etc. – the whole material support basis of civilization. Today, most scientists agree that we are reaching a “point of no return” and that global warming may soon spiral out of control. Environmental anxiety, the awareness that catastrophic earthquakes, tsunamis and volcano eruptions will occur in the future as they did in the past, and the fear of new pandemics (global epidemics) are all making growing demands on government policies.

Jewish History

The Jewish people suffered several major disasters during its long history, but none of them had a natural-geological or environmental origin. This is why it may be difficult to mobilize Jewish policies for disaster prevention or ecological causes. Also, the capacity of the Jewish people to influence global environmental trends and global policies are extremely limited.

However, the environment will become increasingly important for the Jews as well, first because they are citizens of the world and second because almost half of them live in a small and environmentally fragile country. One of the predicted major weather changes is that wet regions will get wetter, dry regions drier. Future

weather maps show that the water-starvation of the Near and Middle East is likely to get worse. This could affect Israel and its neighbors in major ways. According to other calculations, rising sea levels will be felt in many parts of the Mediterranean, which could also cause problems to Israel and Arab states. Earthquakes are relatively frequent in the Near East, and catastrophic ones have occurred in the past and will occur again. Israel is not well prepared for this possibility because several hundred thousand buildings are not earthquake-safe. Underwater earthquakes followed by tsunamis are rare in the Mediterranean but have occurred in Antiquity, with catastrophic consequences for the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Policy Considerations

The risks of pandemics are probably more amenable to preemptive policies than earthquakes. Microbiologists are convinced that pandemics will happen again. Jews need to be well prepared because, in addition to the risks they share with everybody, they could become a specific target of biological terrorism or warfare. A particular consideration is that pandemics will have their greatest impacts in large urban areas where the majority of the world's Jews are concentrated.

The environment and nature are raising a whole range of new issues relevant to the Jewish people that are calling for some foresight and crisis preparation.

CONTENTIOUS FACTORS

13) Religion and its Controversial Impacts

General History

The role of religion in the rise, thriving and decline of civilizations has been enormous and is continuing. While historians and philosophers will agree on this general observation, their opinions vary widely when specific impacts are discussed. Few issues of history are so inextricably linked with personal value judgments. Are the impacts of religion beneficial or destructive? Do they affect rise or decline, or both in equal measure? Are religions more or less similar in their impacts, or are there great differences? And what is the future of religion in our world?

Among the reviewed authors, every possible answer – as well as its contrary – can be found. For one (Ibn Khaldun), the only true religion, his own, is the essence of civilization. Therefore, religious and political power should be concentrated in the same hand. For another (Gibbon), the most important religion, Christianity, played a major role in the fall of the Roman Empire because it was seeking worldly power. This is why Gibbon shows particular sympathy for the incorruptible

Emperor Julianus who tried in vain to stop the spread of the Christian religion. A third author (Toynbee) blames both the Catholic Church and the Protestants for resorting to force, thus betraying the message of the founder and jeopardizing the moral heritage of Western civilization. Many predict that the world is on the way to a new religious age, but disagree completely on the deeper meaning of this development. For one (Spengler), the emergence of a new religiosity and the related decline of science and scientific thought, is a symptom of the irreversible decay of the Occident. Others, on the contrary (Toynbee, Sorokin), put all their hopes for a more humane future into a comeback of religion, preferably Christianity. Many of the American authors have no problem with religion. They ignore it because they base their analysis mainly or only on the material (economic, geographic, demographic, environmental) bases of civilization.

For a deeper study of the impacts of religion, a different group of scholars – historians of religion and anthropologists – would have to be consulted. Their analysis would be richer and more comprehensive, but probably as divided as the opinions just reviewed.

Jewish History

Religion dominates the history of the Jewish people. When a growing proportion of Jews abandoned religious practices, new definitions of Judaism were offered: peoplehood, civilization, the Jewish nation. But when Jewish leaders of all shades worry today about out-marriage and assimilation, they still worry about marrying out of the Jewish religion, not Jewish “civilization”. Religion remains a key issue in all arguments about the future of the Jewish people and Israel.

It would be presumptuous to make policy proposals on this subject. Pressures are growing on religious and civil authorities both in Israel and the Diaspora to make conversion to Judaism less difficult. The further evolution of the conversion debate is not predictable. Also, there was an extraordinary proposal of a non-Jewish historian of civilizations (Toynbee) that the Jews should become a missionary religion and actively seek converts. This idea attracted some Jewish attention in the late 1970s, but seems now to have disappeared from Jewish agendas although it can be found in the Prophets, the Talmud and even in medieval religious scriptures. A discussion on whether this would make sense as part of a global Jewish strategy, and what its effects on Jewish thriving and decline could be, will bring widely diverging and perhaps surprising opinions to light.

14) War and its Diverse Consequences

General History

Wars created empires and strengthened civilizations, but wars also destroyed them. The impact of war on the rise, thriving and decline of civilizations is as diverse

and controversial as the impact of religion. The evaluation of wars and their impact on history changed over the centuries because war changed. Earlier historians, including Thucydides, considered war to be a normal event in the life of nations. Sun Tsu, the Chinese war strategist of the 4th or 3rd century BCE, writes: “military action is important to the nation”. Biblical history conveys more or less the same message. The idea of war as a normal event became callous in the 20th century. The mass killings of the two World Wars and the destruction of so many countries and lives are seen as violent ruptures of civilization, and since the invention of nuclear weapons as a threat to the future of world civilization.

A particular consideration is that victory and defeat in war can have contradictory, long-term effects on civilization. The intoxication of victory has more than once prevented necessary institutional changes in a victorious nation, whereas defeat in war has pushed some nations to accept difficult but necessary changes, particularly when defeat could be attributed to outdated traditions and institutions.

Jewish History

The Jewish people engaged in war in its homeland in ancient times, and did so again since the creation of Israel in 1948. However, during the two thousand years of exile, Jews were more often victims of war than active participants, although large numbers of them fought and died in the wars of their host countries. Jewish martial virtues served the powers of the world with distinction and more often than is usually admitted – this is a greatly underreported chapter of Jewish history. No summary assessment of the impact of war on Jewish civilization is possible, and policy proposals would be out of place here. What one can say is that some of the consequences of war observed in other nations can be found in Israel as well. There was clearly an intoxication of victory in 1967 that may have prevented change, and a greater willingness to change after the Yom Kippur war of 1973.