Jews in Sweden represent an ethnic and cultural minority which has preserved and developed a special ‘Jewish’ relationship to life. This article will provide a perspective on what “a Jewish way of relating to life” builds upon and signifies. From this the question of how the specific Jewish traditional frame of mind and its understanding of the concepts of religion and identity, and particularly the predicament of living as a minority in Diaspora, have rendered the Jewish group capable today of being at the same time a distinct national minority in Sweden and firmly integrated in the modern society.

Religion and Peoplehood

Being Jewish means belonging to a particular ethnic category—a people with a particular history, particular cultural traditions, customs and language. Judaism is a religion, however in a decisive respect unlike the other so called Abrahamic religions in our part of the world: Christianity and Islam are not linked to a special people. Christianity does not require that a Christian is Swedish, a Christian can just as well be Danish, English, German, American or Palestinian. Nor does Islam require that a Muslim be Arab, some Arabs are Christian while most Muslims are not Arabs.\footnote{But e.g. Pakistanis, Indonesians, Turks or Malays (from Malaysia). Within Islam there is however the concept of the \textit{Umma}, which includes all the Muslims in the world.} Whoever has Judaism as religion, whether or not practicing it, is always a Jew in the sense of being part of the Jewish people. Thus it is possible and quite common today to be a Jewish
atheist\textsuperscript{2} or ‘secular’ Jew,\textsuperscript{3} but it is almost a \textit{contradictio in adjecto} to speak of a ‘secular Christian’ or a ‘Muslim atheist’.

The majority of today’s Jews in the world live in Diaspora,\textsuperscript{4} i.e., as a people among other peoples.\textsuperscript{3} They represent an ethnic, religious and cultural minority in a country where the majority and leadership do not share their origins, history, religion and/or cultural customs. This is true not least in Sweden where the Jewish group since the law of April 1, 2000 is one of five officially recognized national minorities.\textsuperscript{6} Living in Diaspora means that elements of one’s perspective, idiosyncrasies and peculiar sensibilities in relation to society in some way distinguish themselves from the rest of the population. A Diaspora Jew can be, e.g., American, Hungarian or Swedish. But never merely that, he or she is also always and simultaneously ‘Jew’—however that may be interpreted.

Unlike, e.g., Christianity and Islam, Judaism is not a proselytizing religion—it is sometimes described as a “tribal religion”. An individual not born Jewish can after rabbinical examination convert to Judaism. Conversion to Judaism is much more than simply selecting a religious faith, for the individual conversion to Judaism—rabbis are generally restrictive and initially discouraging—is in principle and concretely a

\textsuperscript{2} That is how the scientist and author George Klein describes himself in the book \textit{Ateisten och den heliga staden} (The Atheist and the Holy City, 1987). The French philosopher André Comte-Sponville has captured an attitude rather typical for many Jews: “I am a faithful atheist because I do not believe in any God; faithful because I acknowledge my adherence to a certain tradition, and to some values that we have inherited from our forefathers.” (Comte-Sponville, 1999)

\textsuperscript{3} A little more than every third member of a Jewish congregation in Sweden responds that he/she is not religiously observant or that he/she is “just Jewish”. If one adds an almost equal number of Jews in Sweden who have chosen not to be members of a Jewish congregation it would be safe to conclude that the proportion of ‘secular Jews’ constitutes substantially more than half of all Jews in Sweden. Cf. Dencik and Marosi, 2007.

\textsuperscript{4} The word Diaspora means “a scattering [of seeds]” (Greek, from \textit{speiro}, to sow and the prep. \textit{dia}, over). In its original meaning, while talking of peoples, it referred to migration and that a people, like the Jewish, is living “dispersed among other peoples”. The Hebrew word \textit{galut} means the same thing, that you live in exile (i.e. “outside your home country”), but the Hebrew word has clearly more negative connotations than the Greek \textit{diaspora}.

\textsuperscript{5} To put it more clearly: to speak about a Christian or Muslim Diaspora is hardly meaningful, while the Jewish Diaspora is a well known historical and sociological fact.

\textsuperscript{6} The four other officially recognized minorities are Roma, Sami (also an indigenous people), Swedish Finns and Toromedalers (a people living in northern Sweden bordering to Finland where they use the language mienkäli).