Judaism and Jewish identity have never been homogeneous, a statement all the more true today. Internal differentiations, divergent symbols of identification and differences in the meanings ascribed to them, as well as enduring dialogues and debates, have unfolded within the changing perimeters of the Jewish world in various spatial, geopolitical, and socio-cultural contexts. The present recovers and reshapes old and new historical conditions: religion coexists with secularization processes; peoplehood develops hand in hand with national existence; ethnicity and civic commonalities reaffirm one another, and collective belongingness interacts with assimilation trends, while new forms of cohesiveness find their way into the private and public realms of a diversified Jewish existence.

Contents and structures, interactions and borders, all define collective Jewish life and identities. Primordial and symbolic referents derive from a wide cultural spectrum that must never be seen as unitary, indivisible, or organic, but always as an assemblage of disparate ideas, elements, patterns, and behaviors (Berlin, 1991). Jewish life and identity(ies), then, are built, internalized, created, and transformed within a context of diversity. Rather than homogeneous totalities expressing essentialist a-historical contents, identities stretch and reshape themselves beyond their original definitions. Their complexity and their historical character relate to social and communal realms wherein structural and cultural dimensions interact (Ben-Rafael, 2002; Bokser Liwerant, 2008b).

Jewish identities and Jewish life presently split along two major dimensions: the transnational dimension, referring to clusters of approaches bearing on the contents of Judaism, and the spatial dimension, drawing spaces within the Jewish world conditioned by place and territory. In today’s globalized world, both singularities and shared features reflect how national, regional, and global dimensions interact, and also the various modalities in which they intermingle with the new
and specific transnational circumstances of the Jewish people. Though these dimensions are analytically distinct, Jewish life in the United States, Israel, Europe, and Latin America shows that they result in both divergences and convergences.

The interaction of collective identities, changing external conditions, inner dilemmas, and diverse settings has resulted in a pluralization of approaches to Jewishness within the wide ethno-cultural-religious-national frameworks. A gamut of Jewish identities has emerged, dynamically inhabiting an increasingly differentiated space, though still resting on shared basic elements that allow us, even today, to refer to all of them as Jewish identities (Ben-Rafael and Peres, 2005). Elaborating on Wittgenstein’s concept of ‘family resemblance’, we may assume a shared Jewish condition despite identity differences: “Even if they do not furnish similar answers to the basic questions of identity, they must at least address the same questions” (Schatzki, 1996: 100). Provided they do so, they cannot be considered entirely alien to one another. Thus, following Appadurai’s (1996) concept of flows or streams, the main flows of Jewish identity may be discerned according to their answers to distinct aspects of the identity structure. In the same vein, Sergio DellaPergola (1999b) emphasizes that differences in the identification patterns that develop and prevail in the Jewish world are more a matter of intensity and composition than the product of an intrinsically different typology.

In today’s changing world, however, Jews may not only formulate different answers to the same questions but may also ask different questions. The place and the role of Judaism’s different dimensions as well as their various meanings may shape discontinuities and disunity. Symbols, regardless of the differences in their referents, do indeed provide a solid substratum for unity and integration, but they can also have the opposite result (Liebman and Cohen, 1990). Identities must thus be seen as fluent junctures wherein the past, the present, and the future coalesce. They are built around contents and identification referents that imply both an individual sense of belongingness and collective-relational behaviors.

Transnationalism: A Historical Dimension

The transnational dimension essentially refers to shared historical clusters of approaches concerning the contents of Judaism, both in their past and present configuration and dynamics. The concept of transna-