Starting point for the following considerations is Stefan Reif’s erudite inaugural lecture Why Medieval Hebrew Studies?, originally delivered late 1999 on the occasion of his being appointed the first holder of the chair in Medieval Hebrew Studies in the University of Cambridge. If the title of Reif’s oration suggests a playful questioning of the importance of those studies, their disciplinary content and interdisciplinary potential, the actual text bears a rather more introductory and apologetic stamp. Rather than indulging in methodological speculation, Reif’s aim was to justify the creation of a new Cambridge chair devoted to the study of something as ‘exotic’ and particular as medieval Jewish culture. In his own words, he intended ‘to demonstrate (...) the degree to which many medieval Jewish sources are worthy of serious attention and can be intellectually stimulating, culturally inspiring, and academically challenging’ (p. 49f.).

Needless to say, Reif succeeded very well in demonstrating the academic viability of his medieval sources, with the help of a colourful concatenation of texts which, according to the publisher’s blurb, all testified to ‘stunning theology, super-rational exegesis, and surprisingly scientific attitudes...’ – no Dark Ages here! What is more important, however, is that throughout his learned account Reif does show himself aware of methodological problems pertaining to Jewish historiography in general (e.g., orientalism, the lachrymose approach of Jewish history) and to the medieval corpus in particular. It is his treatment of one such problem, that of historical periodization, which I think deserves some further reflection here.

While meditating upon the professorial title of ‘Medieval Hebrew Studies’ Reif critically examined its various constituents, devoting a
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lengthy section to the original conception of 'the Middle Ages' as the intellectually backward era between the two great cultures of Antiquity on the one hand and the Renaissance on the other. After concluding that this biased notion has been rightly rejected by most twentieth-century historians, he then pointed out that within the context of Hebrew and Jewish studies the concept was even more problematic. 'One could of course decline,' he ventured, 'to use it at all and partition Jewish intellectual history in a distinctly different manner' (p. 16). My heart leapt upon reading this suggestion, for I had been struggling with the dubious juxtaposition of the terms 'Jewish' and 'medieval' on many occasions. Being a relic from the times when Jewish scholars began to reconstruct their history with the help of European paradigms, the notion of 'a medieval period' has always been utterly foreign to the contents of Jewish history. To use it – at least that was my experience – could have serious consequences for the interpretation and evaluation of Jewish texts, genres, and authors, both medieval and (early-)modern.

Having different priorities, however, Reif continued by claiming that abandoning the concept, theoretically attractive though this might seem, would 'lead to all manner of confusion, driving unnecessary wedges between intellectual historians in different disciplines' (p. 16). He decided, if only for the sake of convenience, that one should postulate such a thing as 'the Jewish Middle Ages', quickly defined the period as the era between rabbinic antiquity and the rise of modern liberal thought à la Spinoza (p. 17), and embarked upon its cultural rehabilitation. He did not substantiate his use of the predicate 'modern', nor did he take into account the fact that present-day scholarship recognises numerous 'alternative paths to modernity' throughout the Jewish Diaspora. This newly recognised pluriformity not only rules out 'the beginning of modernity' as 'the end of the Middle Ages'. It also illustrates the fact that Jewish history, spread over the four corners of the world and complicated by continuous uprooting and migration, is governed by dynamics that ignore any clear-cut periodization. Or at the very least, its continuities and discontinuities defy the artificial boundaries that have been superimposed, perhaps only slightly more successfully, upon Western history.