

History as the Rise Of a Modern Jewish Identity

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Abstract: History has always held an important place in the forming, inflection and reflection of Jewish identity. The emancipation movement and subsequent Jewish enlightenment in nineteenth century Germany brought about a major crisis in Jewish identity regarding issues around integration to modern German society. From this emerged both an intellectual and a religious movement that sought different ways to negotiate Judaism within a Christian hegemony. But these movements were in conflict with one another, each vying to support the correct means of social participation and integration without assimilation. History, more precisely historiography, became the central element of delineating one form of modern Jewish identity upon which this conflict was waged. In this article, I will outline the important role historiography took in the rise of the scientific study of Judaism or *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in modern Germany, the emergence of the Jewish Reform movement and its impact on Jewish socio-religious identity, and conclude by delineating the second-generation of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and its negation of the Reform movement. This essay underscores the connections between historiography and identity.

*I would like to thank Dr. Ira Robinson for his guidance and mentorship in writing this article, Dr. Rebecca Margolis for her comments and editing, and David Walsh for his insight and patience in reviewing this material.

Reform Judaism developed out of the nineteenth century emancipation movement in Germany that allowed Jews, and

other ethnic minorities, to participate openly in civil society as citizens. Within this inclusivist social thrust, the German Jewish community were offered new opportunities to engage modes of cultural production—i.e. academia, art, governance, economics and business. This, along with new secular-modernist definitions of citizenship and an identification with the nation-state, developed a need to reinterpret Judaism from its conceptions of the past to fit modern views. However, Jewish emancipation came with the price of assimilation to Christian society. Jewish scholars and liberal reformers aimed to negotiate Jewish identity within this modern social context without succumbing to assimilation. By mid-century, this caused an irreparable rift between liberal Jewish reformers and conservative Jewish scholars. History and historiography became the rhetorical tool in this polemic between social engagement and ethnic differentiation. I wish to discuss the relevancy and impact of nineteenth century Jewish historiography on the Jewish Reform and counter-reform movements, and the forging of a modern Jewish identity.

This thesis will be argued in three major sections. The first section will engage the definition, historical context and experience of Jewish emancipation and the Jewish Enlightenment within a German context. In so doing, we will understand the emergence of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* or the scientific study of Judaism. The second section will investigate the burgeoning Reform movement by underscoring its relationship to *Wissenschaft* and modernity, its founders, and its core values and concerns. In order to gain the clearest view of these developments, I will explore the work and worldview of Abraham Geiger, considered the progenitor of the modern Jewish Reform movement. This will lead to the third and final section that questions the impact the Reform movement had on Jewish historiography, or the writing of Jewish history, at the height of the nineteenth century. This discussion is most concerned with the place of historiography in the counter-movement against Jewish Reform. I will discuss the second generation of *Wissenschaft* scholars focusing on the historian Heinrich Graetz. I will outline his conception of history and delineate how he used

historiography to counter Geiger's Reform movement and make epistemological innovations. This, ultimately, will explain how this very influential religious movement impacted the writing of Jewish history and, moreover, the forging of a modern Jewish identity.

Jewish Enlightenment and Emancipation

Jewish emancipation and the subsequent enlightenment came out of a general paradigm shift that affected most Western European nations in the nineteenth century. These nations were dealing with issues surrounding the emergence of the nation-state and the rise of secular, post-Enlightenment ideologies. Meyer (2001) describes this phenomenon as a “world that developed gradually and differentially in the West over the last three centuries, characterized especially by unifying theories and technological advance, cultural innovation, and reliance upon human reason” (18). This development disrupted traditional understandings of society as a whole—from modes of governance to the rights of the individual as a social agent. In Germany, the effect was a humanist thrust towards the integration of its ethnic minorities, such as Gypsies and Huguenots (Panayi, 2000), in a broad nationalistic project of social integration. For German Jews, this was the opening of the ghetto and an unprecedented opportunity to escape the brutality of a history of social marginalization. However, this humanist project was only a partial integration of Jews into the greater Christian society.

In Germany, emancipation was understood to be a greater social inclusion of ethnic minorities, so long as they acted the part of modern Christian Germans. The majority Christian population wanted a partial emancipation of ethnic and religious minorities based on “occupation, education and capital, thus sustaining the mercantilist-absolutist policy of making horizontal (urban-rural) and vertical (socio-economic) differences into political-legal ones” (Sorkin, 1990: 20). This classist prerogative nevertheless created a secularist, somewhat anti-Judaic undercurrent dressed as liberalism that asserted “only the

dissolution of Judaism would make emancipation feasible. Moreover, the naysayers sometimes turned the language of emancipation on its head, asserting that the Jews must first ‘emancipate’ themselves from Judaism” (20). Though there was a wide variance of opinion amongst German Christians with regards to the Jews themselves (i.e. from “Friends” to anti-Semites), this conception of modern identity as a matter of assimilation to the German Christian hegemony remained a dominant feature of the German worldview.

Nevertheless, emancipated Jews could not forsake the opportunity of greater social and civic engagement vis-à-vis these assimilation policies. Their efforts gave rise to the maskilim. The maskilim were a group of scholarly, liberal Jewish reformers who sought new ways in which Jews could distance themselves from the languages and worldview of the ancient rabbinate and move towards modern scientific approaches of interpreting the world in what they understood to be a more rational way. Sorkin (1990) notes,

The bulk of such intellectuals, as well as of the urban middle-classes, understood assimilation to mean the transformation of a corporate community subject to numerous disabilities into a religious community whose members enjoyed equal rights with non-Jews. Such a community would be distinguished by its Judaism alone, which was now to be divested of its corporate trappings in order to fit its members’ new situation (21).

Emancipation became less the view that Judaism was to be dissolved, but rather understood as a renewal process where Judaism had to adapt or modernize in order to exist in the modern period.

The maskilim negotiated and interpreted non-Jewish, Western epistemology as part of their efforts of intellectual and social engagement. This was no small task. Schwarcz outlines three elements that describe the difficulties German Jews faced when engaging this liberal, intellectual paradigm. The first refers to the fact that the maskilim took a conscious step into Christian

society, while keeping its own history and distinct identity. But a major concern of the maskilim was the misalignment between Jewish identity and the broader Enlightenment project related to “the partnership between Christianity and Western philosophical consciousness” (1971: 7). Effectively, the second element relates to the Christian undercurrents of Kantian philosophy. Schwarcz notes how Kantian philosophy and the modern Enlightenment project are but an extension of the Reformed Christian movement, especially with regards to major Kantian notions such as freedom, ethics, and law as guiding principles similar to Reformed Christian interpretations of religious justifications acting as guiding principles (i.e. *sola fides* as ultimate freedom). As such, religious Jews could not subscribe to the inherent freedoms implied through Kantian philosophy, the basic premise of the Enlightenment. The third and most important element is the fact that German Christian culture, at “its most mature philosophical manifestations” (8), ultimately relegated Judaism to the annals of an arcane and outmoded pre-history that could not fit within a modern cultural and philosophical framework. Schwarcz aptly states: “[A] historiosophical conception which traced general culture from the association of Hellenism and Christianity had no difficulty in squeezing out of it the spiritual reality of Judaism” (8). Ultimately, emancipated Jews faced a tremendous struggle for the recognition needed to match the nationalistic ambitions of the Enlightenment project.

Against this massive hegemon, early scholarly reformers sought a way to convince the rest of the modern world that they, as Jews, were capable and worthy of cultural and scholarly inclusion. This could only be done via a scientific study of Judaism or *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Schorsch notes that *Wissenschaft* ideology consisted of two fundamental components that inadvertently caused an irreparable rift in the Jewish community. The first has to do with a normative value of Jewish historicity or the deliberate periodization of Jewish history. In relation to the historical/philosophical concern with time and how it drew consternation, debate and existential problems between the pre- and post-Emancipation definitions of what is Jewish, “all [Wissenschaft scholars] were part of an intellectual

revolution which no longer approached reality as a category of changeless being. The modern mind perceived existence as a function of becoming” (1994: 179). The second component was concerned with critical engagement, and the freeing of the once restricted access to knowledge and cultural reality within Judaism. This concerned the eviction of dogmatic assertions that gave Wissenschaft scholars the freedom to critically engage the ‘claims and conclusions’ of a longstanding rabbinical hegemony. With the emergence of the Wissenschaft movement, Judaism took a turn towards completely asserting a historical primacy in relation to Jewish identity. “History is no longer a handmaiden of dubious repute to be tolerated occasionally and with embarrassment. She confidently pushes her way to the very centre and brazenly demands her due. For the first time it is not history that must prove its utility to Judaism, but Judaism that must prove its validity to history, by revealing and justifying itself historically” (Yerushalmi, 1982: 84). History thus became the icon of modern Jewish scholarship.

Schorsh (1994) also points to a third component of Wissenschaft ideology that is described as being a “quantum jump in the conception of Jewish sources available for a study of the past” (180). Though this is mainly a methodological innovation, Schorsch explains that it underscored major attitudinal differences between the Ashkenazic yeshiva (i.e. religious schools) and the works of the maskilim who were now engaged in a critical understanding of history using multiple sources beyond the internal documents of the Jewish community. As a result, the scientific or, more precisely, the systematic study of the Jewish past became a political ploy to convince traditional European Jews to engage the modern discourse. Meyer (2001) notes, “The study of history, as some of the more radical German maskilim saw it, would liberate their fellow Jews, especially the benighted ones in Poland, from the shackles of a tradition that they had never before examined critically. They would come to realize that their plight was of their making” (48). Though at the heart of Wissenschaft lay a polemic between traditional Ashkenazic rabbinism and modern German Jewish scholarly scientism in relation to the differences in the conception of

Judaism, there were difficulties, however, in transcribing modern ideals into traditional Judaism especially with regards to its religious and liturgical forms that seemed antiquated and somewhat outdated. Meyer underscores that “Judaism might be modern in its fundamental values, but in its externals it was foreign to the culture of modernity” (212). This social and intellectual environment under such conditions in Germany was ripe for religious reform.

Convergence of the Reform and Wissenschaft Movements

The Reform movement in nineteenth century Germany had an intimate relationship with the rise of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, which was itself a reaction to the shifting identities of modern Jews. Modern Jewish identity has three distinguishing features: the rise of historical consciousness, the secularization of Jewish identity as promoted by the maskilim, and a re-evaluation of traditional authority structures. One of the major impediments to full emancipation was the reluctance of the German state to give full civil access to German Jews. According to Schorsch, this was an assault on the halakhic primacy of Judaism as an impediment to full integration—in other words, a constant projection of ‘Otherness’ on Jewish people. One manner in which emancipated Jews took to initiating this social rapprochement was by downplaying the spiritual and religious importance of the Talmud, by claiming it to be an exegetical tool for the early rabbinate that has since lost its meaning due to its historical specificity. Such a perspective has as its aim “to restore equal authority in religious matters to the leaders of every generation, without debunking the Talmud or espousing a return to some form of pristine Mosaism” (Schorsch, 1990: 83). This type of critical understanding unquestioningly deflated the power of traditional rabbinism and ushered Judaism into the modern world.

Questions over rabbinical authority, therefore, came to play an essential role in provoking contention between liberal and traditional Jews ultimately affecting the role of halakhah and

the vernacularization of liturgy into German. This thrust towards modernization was a cue to redefine traditional rabbinical roles—i.e. from being a judiciary authority to a liturgical, pastoral and pedagogical community leader, as well as a shift in priority and redefinition of educational backgrounds for rabbis. The rabbinate became the symbolic battleground in circumventing new means of shaping modern Jewish identity. Schorsch (1994) describes how the pre-modern rabbinate, due to the emerging modern Jewish Emancipation, had lost political and cultural dominance over a judiciary role that encompassed defining halakhah and morality as well as divorce and inheritance claims. This shift was led by a generation of scholarly rabbis who matriculated within secular institutions, whose roles were de-emphasized around civil concerns and shifted in terms of a vernacularization of liturgy and community pedagogy. Therefore, within the context of modern nation-states with new forms of governance and new levels of civic engagement, modern Reform rabbis took a prescribed role resembling Christian pastors rather than traditional Jewish rabbis. Abraham Geiger, one such rabbi, became the leading proponent of the Reform movement in Judaism.

Abraham Geiger (1810-1874) changed the contours and definitions of Judaism, not from within an academic institution, but from behind a pulpit as a modern, liberal rabbi. Under different circumstance Geiger himself might have been an historian, even as a rabbi his main prerogative was to “make history.” In contrast to the maskilim and their secularization campaign, Geiger was theologizing modern Judaism. According to Geiger, the task of the Jewish theologian was outlined as a historical endeavour: like the maskilim, Jewish history must be held to the rigors of a modern scientific approach, but this must be done strictly from a Jewish perspective that cannot be divorced from its religious character. This was very different from the early nineteenth century syncretistic adaptations of Western philosophy into a Jewish framework. Geiger was influenced by Johann Gottfried Herder’s historical philosophy. Herder was a “pre-romantic thinker...not interested in history in the sense of political developments...but in order to discover the

evolution of the human spirit” (Meyer, 1971: 27). Geiger too sought to “characterize an era of the Jewish past as a particular manifestation of the Jewish spirit and to advance from bibliography to intellectual history” (27). This intellectualist, universalistic approach to understanding the Jewish spirit became the centre of Geiger’s worldview affecting both his scholarship and the subsequent religious reforms of Judaism.

Geiger founded a scholarly journal of Jewish theology with a nine year circulation that “irregularly coincided with a period of theological turbulence in Geiger’s own thinking in which he often bordered on despair over worth, viability, and future of Judaism” (Schorsch, 1994: 186). Geiger’s main concern reflected this somewhat despairing worldview, “namely, the validity of the exegetical base which supports the sprawling superstructure of rabbinic Judaism” (187). Geiger illuminated a crucial flaw of early rabbis who read their ideas into the biblical scriptures in a misrepresented Talmudic hermeneutic of subjectivity, subsequently taken dogmatically as divine revelation. He instead opted to emphasize historical periodization in which “he consistently aimed at penetrating to the essential character of a period and to the progress of the Jewish spirit from age to age” (Meyer, 1971: 30). Geiger wrote *Urschrift* in 1857 (Geiger & Wiener, 1962) that argued, “the arbitrary biblical exegesis of the Pharisees and their descendants was precisely the innovative instrument which enabled them to challenge the tradition-bound of the priestly Sadducean aristocracy with a democratic religious program” (Schorsch, 1994: 187). Using historiography and literary criticism, Geiger was able to invest into the modern Reform movement a tremendous historical precedent. He now viewed the Reform movement’s contemporary values, concerns for religious and ideological restructuring, and historical change was something the early rabbinate also upheld. This slight change in outlook redirected the Reform worldview from that of the mostly secularist maskilim to one which could engage in the ancient Talmudic and Midrashic (i.e. exegetical) discourses, and adjust and reinterpret halakhah to fit a modern religious paradigm.

Prior to the paradigm shift occurring in Geiger’s

Urschrift, many moderate and conservative proponents of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement used historical methods to engage in a dialectical negation of reformed views in order “to accentuate the virtues, vitality, and achievements of traditional Judaism, to moderate the pace of change, and to stem the tide of defections. The same medium could be made to yield different messages” (Schorsch, 1994: 187). Though there had been a debate within the *Wissenschaft* movement oscillating between liberal/reform and moderate/conservative sides, by mid-century *Wissenschaft* was clearly outside of the spheres of the Jewish Reform movement and within a scholarly context. By then the movement was being driven by moderate/conservative academics, such as Zunz, Sachs, Luzzatto and Rapoport, and especially Hirshfeld and Bär Fassel. Their strategy to counter the Reform movement inducted into modern Jewish thought the reconceptualization of traditional Jewish religio-cultural elements, such as the Jewish legal system, into the “legal and conceptual categories of the Western world” (189). Though this discussion of the value of traditional formulations of halakhah (or the primacy of traditional halakhah over a restructuring of halakhah in face of the great changes of modernity) may appear by contemporary standards to belong in the domain of religion, the work of these scholars was undertaken in a scientific idiom; they sought to find a median between traditional Judaism and the modern world using critical scientific methods. Geiger had a great respect for *Wissenschaft*, understanding it to be complimentary to his work in the Reform movement. Yet, many of his contemporaries believed he was an antagonist, subverting both religious life and *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.

Jewish historiography and the second-generation *Wissenschaft* scholars

Of the many scholars of the mid-century *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement, Heinrich Graetz (1817-1891) was a dominant factor of nineteenth century Jewish historiography. Graetz’s academic career and scholarship was formed in

antipathy towards the Reform movement. He contributed to this counter-discourse exclusively using *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in order to devalue the claims of Reform to historical relevancy. Schorsch (1994) remarks, “The key to understanding Graetz’s philosophy of Jewish history lies in the nexus between this early anti-Reform bias and the scholarly positions he subsequently adopted. Ideology governed his reading of Jewish history no less than it governed Geiger’s” (280). As a young man, Graetz grew weary of the “narrow Talmudism” of traditional Judaism and moved away from his first mentor Samson Raphael Hirsch (i.e. an early proponent of the Conservative Judaism movement) to the more Positivist and historically minded Zacharias Frankel (Meyer, 1974). Taking a moderate approach, Graetz expounded a counter-argument to Geiger’s overall treatment of the development of the Mishnah’s objectivity and the hermeneutical failure of the Talmud. As such, Graetz opposed Geiger’s exegetical arguments by stating that these arguments were only a cover for the contemporary “anti-halakhic program” of the Reform movement. This gained Graetz the recognition that he wanted and served as a catalyst in his professional life.

Graetz is considered the first historian of the *Wissenschaft* scholars “to integrate the external and internal history of ancient and medieval Jewry into a single work of scholarship” (Schorsch, 1994: 192). At that time, many of the contemporary *Wissenschaft* scholars preferred to study the internal histories of the Jews, holding to the notion that the external history was one of relentless persecution. All of these scholars exclusively used Jewish sources. Similar to the major innovation of *Wissenschaft* ideology in using multiple sources, Graetz’s major breakthrough was also methodological: placing the profane history of the Jewish people and the sacred history of Judaism within the same narrative. Schorsch states, “Neither could be understood without systematic reference to the other. [...] In sum, the combination of structural innovation, basic research, and pulsating narrative made of Graetz’s didactic scholarship the most effective vehicle for reinvigorating the waning identity of a disintegrating community with the power of historical memory” (193).

Much like his counterparts in the *Wissenschaft* movement, Graetz took to creating a historical treatment of Jewish history that would refute the careful views of the Reform movement using their own methods against them. Graetz did so by staying grounded in German philosophical idealism with an additional understanding that a totality of Jewish history was the only way in which to understand modern Judaism. This was his first critique of the Reform movement as only covering the history that they needed and glossing over the rest. Schorsch (1994) notes, “if an idea had forged its way into reality and stamped its imprint upon an age, then it must represent a genuine dimension of Judaism’s essence. In light of the totality of Jewish history and in contrast to Reform ideologues, Graetz proposed a multifaceted essence of Judaism whose different dimensions shaped different periods of Jewish history” (283). This ideal around the totality of Jewish history would become the methodological trademark that characterized his work.

In his nine-volume treatment of Jewish history in its entirety (Graetz, Löwy and Bloch, 1891), Graetz portrayed rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud as heroes or characters to whom modern Jews could relate. Though this was based in a thorough reading of the sources and careful consideration of the data, Graetz’s historiographies notably fell in line with the conventions of modern German historiography, which were also engaged in a process of finding modern national unifications through the commonality of history. “*Wissenschaft* became a vehicle for the recovery of self-respect and a force for the preservation of the Jewish people. [...] The historian had the sacred task to fire his people with a love for the drama and glory of its past in order to strengthen its sense of unity and its resolve to survive” (Schorsch, 1994: 288). In his historiographies, Graetz had two guiding characteristics. The first was a relentless belief in the historical continuity of the Jewish community. He rebuked the Christian denial of Jewish history past the Second Temple, seeking instead a justification to Jewish social representation through a continued history. The second characteristic revolves around Graetz’s emotional engagement to the subject of Jewish history. “When the Jews endured defeat and persecution, he

shared the agony of their fate. [...] Not surprisingly, Graetz also harbored an ill-concealed hatred for the enemies of his people” (289). Not only was he engaged in overtly subjective narrative, his historiographies were replete with the characterization of these imported values. Graetz was a product of his time as a nationalist historian, striving to make the Jewish people contending participants in the German nation-building project. Ultimately, Graetz as a Jewish historian was engaging Jewish history searching for the common Jewish spirit.

Historiography Informing Jewish Identity

Graetz’s nationalistic fervour, however, would eventually send him into a place he did not expect. He would assert two important features of the Reform platform. After having been silent on the issue of the “universal Jewish mission”, which refers to the soteriological value of Judaism in the diaspora, Graetz in 1853 finally spoke of his view that incidentally fell under the Reform understanding: “the redemption of mankind hinged upon the dissemination by the Jews of their unique theological and ethical systems. [...] A consciousness of their mission and a confidence in their ultimate success served to sustain the Jews through centuries of frustrations” (Schorsch, 1994: 291). Ultimately, Graetz agreed with Geiger that “Judaism’s right to survive could only be established at the expense of Christianity” (291). The second feature was an emphasis on the role of persecution for the history of Jews. Graetz highlighted the emotionally charged and lachrymose history of Jewish persecution underlining the importance of Jewish suffering and martyrdom as the justification for Jewish faith and its institutions. Both Graetz and Geiger venerated the diasporic qualities of Jewish identity, which reflected their German Jewish experience. And finally, both sought to find the common spirit of Judaism that traversed the eras of its long history.

Though Geiger and Graetz engaged the subject of Judaism in the modern world differently as a result of their

conflicting ideologies, they both reached the same conclusion that spoke of the Jewish spirit alive in the perpetuation and survival of Judaism throughout the ages as distinctly Jewish. Their competing views stood atop a shared worldview—that Judaism is relevant and important as evidenced by its uncompromising and rich history. For Geiger and Graetz and their contemporaries, that history affirmed and asserted the flexibility of Judaism to take its place in the social and cultural complexes of nineteenth century modernity. Against the cultural currents of a modern Germany that said otherwise, these historians understood the importance of a Jewish history as interrogating and informing a modern Jewish identity. Historiography, then, became not just the writing of history, but also a means of formulating and establishing different Jewish identities and the differences between these Jewish identities.

Reform Judaism, along with the *Wissenschaft* movement, came to play a critical role for modern Jewish historiography. Graetz's historiographies served as a catalyst for a nationalistic understanding of Judaism as well as a watershed moment for the contemporary historical study of Judaism. The different polemics between Enlightenment ideals and ethnic exclusion, socio-religious adaptation and cultural continuity culminated in the emergence, animosity and similarities between the Jewish Reform and *Wissenschaft* movements, which influenced the shifting of Jewish identity in a modern Germany. Therefore, under these terms, we can appreciate how the study of history was the impetus that gave rise to a modern Jewish identity.

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