
The German-Jewish Legacy in America: A Process of Continuity and Completion

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My connection to the German-Jewish experience in America would seem to be somewhat tenuous in two ways. First, I was not raised in a German-Jewish environment such as Washington Heights or smaller enclaves located elsewhere. Secondly, some thirteen years ago—at the age of thirty-one—I emigrated to Israel and confronted the ingathering not so much as a German Jew, but primarily as an American of somewhat removed German extraction. As a child in Lynn, Massachusetts, I was not particularly conscious of a German-Jewish identification. English was the exclusive language of my childhood, and German was only a vague echo spoken by my parents on rare occasions with the few other German speakers—mostly Austrian—that lived in Lynn. My self-identification in this predominantly Christian environment was as a Jew, and more specific subidentifications would have been superfluous. This was the case until I came into closer contact with a broader and more exclusive Jewish world. As a teenager, I became active in the Zionist youth movement Young Judea. It was there, at the age of fourteen, that I first confronted certain generalities about the assimilationism that presumably had characterized the German-Jewish experience. I opposed those generalizations then and have done so since in both my writing and teaching. The deep immersion in Jewish values and life-style that I encountered in my movement activities influenced the major life choices that I made subsequently. But in another sense, the historical inaccuracy of that stereotyped view of German Jewry has also remained with me, and in ways I will describe below has greatly informed my message in teaching Jewish history in Israel. Such descriptions, it seems to me, make life rather easy for their authors. German Jewry is described as if it were all urban—which it distinctly was not; as late as 1925, the seven largest communities accounted for only 50 percent of German Jewry; as if it were all Prussian, which it was not; as if it were all Reform, which it certainly was

not; and of course, as if they were all naive fools sleeping through the better part of their history, including the better part of the 1930s.

My move to Israel has made me more aware of the American aspect of my identity and that there was in fact a problem in distinguishing between German and American influences. For example, the religious environment of my home was compatible with the religious ambiance of the Conservative synagogue that we belonged to. Decorum, order, propriety became deeply embedded values in my religious outlook. My impression is that other than a few leaders who found elite roles within Israeli society, German Jews integrated far better into American society than did their cousins who emigrated to Israel, raising literally a question of *Rezeptionsgeschichte*. Apparently, American society reinforced certain characteristics deriving from German influences, which Israeli society did not. Thus, it seems to me that my Germanic heritage helped make me a good American—but simultaneously perhaps a marginal Israeli. This requires some explanation. The nature of Jewish life in America represents a continuation, perhaps, even a completion, of the historical processes that began in Germany. While German Jewry sought an emancipation, which eluded them until the end, American Jewry achieved the closest proximity to equality that we have attained to date in our history in diaspora. German Jewry also produced a diversity in Jewish life, especially religious life, that resulted from its confrontation with modernity and its pursuit of emancipation, and American Jewry expanded upon and enriched that diversity. Because of the closeness of those cultural traditions, I now find it difficult to distinguish between their influences on my outlook, but taken together their collective cultural legacy has a significant contribution to make to contemporary Jewish developments.

Recent trends in Israeli religious life indicate an active attempt to eradicate the rich diversity that has emerged, leaving essentially the rather limited choice between old-style Orthodoxy on the one hand and secularism on the other. Even modern Orthodoxy is in danger of sinking into oblivion in Israel. Ironically, Zionism once represented precisely the kind of individuality it now seems to discourage. When Zionism first emerged in Germany toward the end of the nineteenth century and the opening years of the twentieth, it attracted Jews who sought to rebel against what they saw as the program of conformity of the established Jewish community. Thus, Zionism offered a platform which contrasted with the program that characterized the Reform

movement. The Zionists emphasized Jewish messianism, Hebrew language, and Jewish peoplehood—values which had come under attack in the meetings and writings of classical German Reform. Obviously, there are complex reasons for these developments. My purpose here is not to explain them, but to contrast the emerging status quo with the German-American legacy. Israeli society has never learned to appreciate that Judaism and the Jewish people are capable of surviving in a free society. Just to cite one example, one of the world's leading scholars of Holocaust research wrote in the introduction to his textbook in that field that the new Jewish community that emerged in the nineteenth century was no longer compulsory, but *merely* a voluntary community. The fact that virtually all of German Jewry had retained their membership voluntarily did not leave an impression that such communal ties were strong and healthy. Nor has the creative impulse found in American Jewish religious life changed the Israeli conviction that American Judaism is doomed because of its environment of freedom and voluntarism. While the Israeli critique may provide some healthy sobriety, the failure to appreciate the opportunities of freedom and diversity is really a loss for Israeli society itself. Zionist thinking concerning Israeli-diaspora relations has been rather reduced to postulating the inevitability of an explosion of anti-Semitism in America. Again the free-associating connection between the German and American experiences supports such an assumption. But Zionist ideology would be far more positive if it could—to borrow an expression from Salo Baron—transcend beyond the *lachrymose conception of Jewish history*. And Israeli religious life would certainly be richer if it could allow for the spectrum of options that emerged within the German-American milieu. A number of years ago, shortly after I came to Israel on aliyah, I was on my way to synagogue on *erev Shavuot* when I found a family waiting at a bus stop, totally unaware that a holiday was about to begin and that the buses weren't running. I think the incident reveals some of the shortcomings of a system that fails to appreciate voluntarism and is oblivious to the educational limits of religious coercion. It is certainly possible to prohibit buses from running on holy days, but quite another thing to prevent people from waiting at bus stops.

Any participant in this symposium will tend to project his personal background onto the general subject matter. If our responses are varied, I would be vindicated in my position that what marked the Ger-

man-Jewish historical experience was not conformity, but individuality, and that what characterized Jewish communal bonds was voluntarism and not coercion. It is not merely ironic that these traits emerged, even flourished, within the two such different Jewish historical experiences of Germany and America. While American opportunities encouraged the cause of Jewish religious liberalism, the German resistance to Jewish integration split the Jewish community over questions of tactics and accommodation. Religious coercion had no permanent place on the American scene, but in Germany the path to religious multiplicity required a restructuring of traditional communal concepts and essentially emerged as a result of the very difficulties German Jewry was encountering in its confrontations with modernity. I would like to conclude with a striking anecdote related by the German Zionist leader Kurt Blumenfeld to illustrate a number of these points. When his history class in school was studying the wars between Rome and Carthage, his teacher turned to Blumenfeld and asked him with which side he identified. Blumenfeld responded that he sided with Hannibal. The teacher was somewhat taken aback at this affront to the original Roman Empire and asked if Blumenfeld was always on the side of the underdog. After some reflection, Blumenfeld answered that Hannibal was Jewish. Blumenfeld was giving expression in this anecdote to his conviction that Jews must be prepared to respond in the negative to the tremendous pressures of accommodation that were being placed upon them by the successor to the Holy Roman Empire, the Second Reich. Making almost the same point, Richard Lichtheim declared that affirming one's Jewishness had become at that time a matter of personal dignity. There was much in common between the German-Jewish legacy and the atmosphere that the refugees of fifty years ago found on American soil, as America offered them the opportunities they had sought and fought for so hard, but had failed to find on the other side. The long struggle finally reaped its rewards, as the new immigrants were all the more cognizant of what they had been denied and what America now offered them.