
The German-Jewish Experience: Toward a Usable Past

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I am the son and the grandson of refugees from Nazi Germany, but was born in New York and regard myself as an American Jew. In my youth, I attended a synagogue whose leadership was primarily Central European, but whose rabbis were all American-born Jews of East European extraction. I was socialized into the Jewish religion by parents who themselves were raised in two distinctive types of German Judaism—secessionist Orthodoxy and an observant Liberal Judaism—and yet I was taught about Judaism in Jewish day schools whose teachers were primarily the products of East European *yeshivot*. I grew up in an environment where at times only German was spoken, and yet at other times East European survivors of the Holocaust, immigrants from the Shah's Iran, and American-born Jews mingled fairly easily, conversing in English. Perhaps because my own formative years were spent in a culturally diversified environment, I have no sympathy for discussions about a unique and pristine German-Jewish legacy. From my own experience as a member of the second generation, I seriously doubt that many German Jews had much interest, let alone faith, in a unique "German-Jewish spirit." On the contrary: the German Jews I encountered while growing up in the fifties and sixties did not find their heritage a matter of unalloyed pride.

In part this resulted from the shock of having their lives disrupted by their German compatriots—and of knowing that the uprooted were lucky compared with those who did not emigrate. Most German Jews of my acquaintance responded to their encounter with Nazism by regarding their former existence with a measure of skepticism. This, coupled with the practical necessity of adapting to the American environment, dampened their pride in their own history. In some extreme instances, German Jews severed all ties to their former lives once they arrived in America. I recall meeting the parents of three brothers I had befriended who informed me matter-of-factly that the moment they arrived on American shores they resolved never to speak the German

language again. Today, their sons are all Orthodox religious functionaries, whose demeanor and outlook are shaped entirely by the Lithuanian-type yeshivas they attended in New York.

More characteristically, families continued to display some attachment to things German, but encouraged their children to integrate. In my own family, this manifested itself in eclectic practices and modes of thinking: I spoke German with my grandparents, but English with my parents; I was raised on German children's stories such as "*Max und Moritz*," but also was exposed to the icons of American children in the fifties, such as Pinky Lee and the Three Stooges. In the religious sphere, we sang Shabbat zemirot set to both German and American—i.e., East European and Israeli—melodies; and I was duly impressed with the homilies of Hasidic rebbes, as well as Samson Raphael Hirsch. Most important, my social circle consisted of Jewish children from a broad range of cultures. In truth, I felt a strong affinity for children of survivors, perhaps because the experience of their East European parents most approximated my parents' immigrant lives. And when we eventually chose spouses, it was exceedingly rare for children of refugees from Nazi Germany to marry each other. The process of social integration was so complete that, as far as I know, the children of German-Jewish immigrants have not founded an organization analogous to the "Generation After," an international body of children of Holocaust survivors (a classification that, as best as I can tell, does not apply to German Jews who escaped Europe prior to 1940). None of this is meant to suggest that the integration of German-Jewish families into the American Jewish community occurred without strains. Undoubtedly, my own encounter with such tensions prompted my scholarly interest in the historical relationship between East European and German Jews. But the underlying assumption of everyone, whether parents, teachers, or peers, was that we all would mold into the American Jewish community. Given the high level of integration into the American Jewish community that characterizes children of refugees from Germany and their failure to establish any distinctive institutions, one wonders who will be the bearers of the German-Jewish spirit that is of concern to this symposium?

There was also another factor that prompted German Jews and their children to distance themselves from their past: within American Jewish society, it is not a badge of pride to be of German-Jewish de-

scent. In contrast to the proud assumptions undergirding the questions posed by this symposium, the legacy of German Jewry as perceived by American Jews is either negative or irrelevant.

For the preponderant majority of American Jews who give the matter any thought at all, the history of German Jewry serves as a powerful cautionary tale. Some time before the Holocaust, according to this folk-wisdom, there lived in Germany a Jewish population that was more assimilated than any other in the world. The Jews of Germany distorted or hid their Jewishness in a desperate effort to win the acceptance of their gentile neighbors. They stifled all feelings of *ahavat yisrael*, a love of fellow Jews, and instead treated their coreligionists, particularly East European Jews, with contempt and ridicule. And in their bearing, dress, and cultural outlook, they were "more German than the Germans." For a while, German Jews assimilated in an unprecedented manner. And then they were punished brutally. Whether it was divine vengeance or the vagaries of history is not clear, but German Jews were taught a lesson by the Nazis that all Jews must remember: assimilation cannot work; the only protection Jews have is to concern themselves with the fate of their coreligionists. The experience of German Jews teaches us all that escape from Jewishness is impossible.

It does not give me any satisfaction to relate this cautionary tale, for I view the German-Jewish experience in a markedly different manner. As the offspring of religiously observant, Jewishly active and affiliated refugees from Nazi Germany, I hardly regard German Jewry as the assimilated Jewry *par excellence*. And as one who has studied and taught the history of German Jewry in a professional capacity, I know of a far more complex history. But on the basis of dozens of experiences in college classrooms and adult education forums, I believe that the distorted, cartoonlike depiction of German Jewry that I have described is deeply embedded in the American Jewish (as well as Israeli) consciousness.

Why is this the case? Why do German Jews serve in the contemporary American Jewish community as object lessons for how *not* to behave as Jews? To an important extent, the answer has less to do with Germans Jews than with an ingrained Jewish outlook that blames Jewish victims for their own victimization. We ought not underestimate the enduring power of a Jewish religious outlook that under-

stands Jewish suffering as solely the result of Jewish misdeeds. For some ultra-Orthodox Jews, such as a former Ashkenazic chief rabbi of Israel, there is no better way to explain the catastrophe that befell European Jewry than to blame it on sinning Jews—and who were the greatest sinners if not German Jews, who introduced *Haskala* (Jewish Enlightenment) and religious reform? To more religiously liberal Jews, particularly their rabbis and teachers, the experience of German Jewry is tailor-made to serve as a cautionary tale about the consequences of assimilation. And to Zionist educators, the German-Jewish experience provides a perfect illustration of the futility of diaspora existence and the corrosive impact such an existence has upon Jewish solidarity. Whereas other westernized and acculturated Jews were also decimated, French and Italian Jewry for example, the fact that the Nazis originated in Germany places the spotlight on German Jews. They must have done something to set off the Final Solution.

These explanations are important, but they omit the manner in which German Jews contributed to the sully of their reputation. The crucial element here is the long history of intergroup tensions between German Jews and their coreligionists in Eastern Europe. Within Germany this manifested itself in the popularization of stereotypes that portrayed the culture of East European Jews as backward and uncouth. Not surprisingly, such contempt was reciprocated: negative stereotypes of German Jews were widely disseminated in Eastern Europe—especially the images we have encountered in our cautionary tale of German Jews obsessed with assimilation and eager to disassociate themselves from the rest of world Jewry. In the post-Holocaust era, a set of ready-made stereotypes was available for exploitation by those who wished to draw lessons from the European catastrophe. To put matters bluntly, today's negative image of German Jewry represents the revenge of the *Ostjude*.

Beyond the cautionary tale, what more is known by American Jews about the German-Jewish experience? Two small sub-groups within the American Jewish community continue to enshrine some German Jews in their pantheon of heroes. For intellectually oriented, highly literate Jews, there is a continuing fascination with Freud, Kafka, Marx, and Einstein—and with the cultures that produced such geniuses. And for a small religious and scholarly elite, the theological concerns of Buber and Rosenzweig, Baeck and Hermann Cohen, and

the *Wissenschaft* of Zunz and Graetz, Geiger, and Frankel continue to resonate. But even within these circles, it is difficult to measure the enduring impact of German-Jewish cultural heroes. It is ironic that German Jewry, which prided itself on its religious self-definition (as in the formulation, “German citizens of the Jewish faith”), has so little impact upon the religious concerns of most contemporary Jews.

This stands in marked contrast to the influence of another group of Jewish immigrants which also arrived in America during and after World War II—the population of religiously observant Jews from Eastern Europe. It is this immigrant wave that gave new life to Orthodoxy, built a vast network of Jewish day schools, and shaped Jewish popular culture with its spirited *nigunim* and swirling dances. The continuing influence of this group may be measured by the fact that during the past year, perhaps the best-selling Jewish book was a biography of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, a leading member of this immigrant population. And within all of the Jewish movements in America, especially Reform and Reconstructionism, there is today a fascination with neo-Hasidism—another import from Eastern Europe. The impact of German-Jewish culture is negligible by comparison: Lewandowski is unable to compete with *klezmer*, and Franz Rosenzweig cannot outsell Artscroll.

I trust that the foregoing remarks clarify why I regard questions about the “German-Jewish legacy” as unattuned to American Jewish circumstances—both the reality of the lives lived by Jewish immigrants from Germany, as well as the standing of such Jews in the minds of American coreligionists. I do believe, however, that an examination of the German-Jewish experience could enrich American Jewry, and not coincidentally improve the image of German Jews. It is an ongoing source of wonderment to me that American Jews project some of their own worst vices upon German Jewry, rather than seek understanding and perhaps even solace in the history of that Jewry. To cite two glaring examples: I am often informed during adult education lectures that German Jews were prototypical assimilators who intermarried at a staggering pace. It requires much effort for me to convince my auditors that American Jewry’s present rate of intermarriage dwarfs that of virtually any other Jewry. Additionally, when American Jews dismiss German Jewry for its assimilation, they ignore important models of religious adaptation, which produced at their finest an Or-

thodoxy that attempted a genuine reconciliation of Judaism with Western culture, and a liberal Judaism that promoted the observance of rituals and only moderate reforms. In an age when much of organized Judaism in America is careening toward ever more radical or reactionary extremes, there is much to learn from the religious syntheses produced by German Jewry. If nothing else, an examination of the German-Jewish experience might help American Jews place their own struggles with acculturation and westernization into perspective.

It is this shared experience of modernization, rather than a unique legacy, that I find compelling in the saga of German Jewry. More than any other Jewry, the Jews of Germany struggled with issues that are of vital concern to the American Jewish community in which I live: How can Jews sustain a distinctive culture in the face of a powerful and attractive majority culture? How can a Jewish community cope with high rates of intermarriage and defection? How does one forge a modern Judaism within a Western society? And above all, is it possible for a diaspora Jewish community to withstand the allure of assimilation in the modern era? The history of German Jewry warrants the attention of American Jews because for over a century and a half, articulate and thoughtful Jews in Germany grappled with questions that continue to challenge American Jews today.