

Germans, Jews and the Enlightenment: Lessons for today?

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If this project proves of value to others in the future, I will be delighted. If they find errors, I hope they will let me know.

*John Dunston, Head, Leighton Park School, and Farmington Fellow, Hilary 2009
Harris Manchester College, Oxford*

Introduction

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

This verse in Psalm 137 has for long summed up one of the great dilemmas of Jewish existence.

Throughout their long history, the Jews have found themselves repeatedly having to pick up the thread of their lives after expulsion from one home after another. Each time, and in every age, they have returned to this question, which has become a symbol, not just of their music and worship, but indeed of their daily living and very survival.

The late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries saw an unprecedented increase in the numbers of refugees seeking to escape persecution and worse by fleeing to other parts of the world. This, in turn, created more widespread challenges among the already domiciled populations as well: the challenges of how to welcome the newcomers and then to live alongside them. The Jewish historical experience, therefore, has valuable resonance for this new era in our human relationships. The more specific and unique German-Jewish experience of the Enlightenment and its aftermath has, I believe, particular relevance for us all.

This Farmington Fellowship has given me the opportunity to explore that experience further, and to draw on strands running through both my personal and my professional life. It is my hope that the story of German-Jewry will be seen as the inspiring narrative it is, despite the catastrophe with which it ended (or, perhaps, was interrupted), and that from it, wider lessons may be learned: about the relationship between what we commonly call church and state, and more particularly, with future relevance for young people in schools, how that experience may be drawn upon to help generate a tolerant, constructive and mutually beneficial approach to “the other”. How we deal with “the other” is likely to be a determining factor in the very future of our world.

The Jews are a people who, for thousands of years, have been “the other”. Yet the world continues to be shaped by their prophetic calls for human freedom, their unique mission, their unflinching commitment to the one-ness of God and to the moral code deriving from that. The Jews have a particular responsibility not only to survive (which itself is already one of the most baffling achievements of human history), but to keep alive that vision for the sake of the world.

Jewish Roots

I was born a Jew, and despite a not unusual drifting into condescending scepticism at university, I remain a Jew. I belong to the progressive Reform tradition, which began in eighteenth-century Germany, and represent the first generation of my family to be born in this country for some time. My parents fled to England from Austria as refugees after Hitler’s *Anschluss* in 1938. Research into the family’s history has so far stretched back some nineteen generations, to a rabbi Eleasar who lived around 1450 in the German town of Neuss on the banks of the Rhine, writing poetry and lamentations on the destruction of the Temple. (It is not impossible that about five generations earlier, his ancestors had been among the Jewish community of England when they were all expelled in 1290 by Edward I.) The intervening five and a half centuries saw the family move around in central Europe for reasons that are sadly all too familiar, settling by turns in areas that we have come to know as Bohemia, Moravia, Transylvania, the Holy Roman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary, and even some of the little states and principalities that, less than 140 years ago, were for the first time to become Germany.

That catalogue of national and imperial labels is a reminder of the transience of political reality, and the fragility of national identity. When the citizens of Poland, for example, discovered in 1795 that they no longer had a country, but had become instead subjects of one of the three empires that had divided up their homeland - Russian, Prussian and Habsburg Austrian – they were

still the same people, they still spoke Polish, and felt Polish, and were Polish. It's just that the term had lost its political currency, until the state of Poland was restored 123 years later.

I grew up in a home that felt European. I heard German spoken by my parents, and by their friends. I learned experientially what it meant for them to have made their life in a new country, and how they tackled the eternal dilemma of the refugee, namely, balancing the need to integrate and feel part of the new, host community, with the desire not to lose the bearings provided by their own upbringing, values and culture.

During a post-university gap year teaching in Germany, I was once visiting the Museum of Hamburg History. In the entrance hall – this was 1973 – was a book of remembrance, listing the names of all those Jewish residents of the city who had been deported and murdered in the Holocaust. As I stood there, a family came into the museum. One of the young children went to the glass case housing the book, called over his parents, and asked what it was. His father glanced inside, then quickly ushered his son away with the comment: “That’s nothing important, we don’t need to worry about that. Oh, just look at these statues....” And away they went.

I came to understand how impossible it had been for that father in the Hamburg museum, at that time, to discuss the Holocaust with his son. Bridges, I felt, needed to be built.

Working in a Quaker school

A career in teaching - and teaching German in particular - was at least in part a means to that end. Becoming Head in two Quaker schools, Sibford in 1990 and Leighton Park in 1996, brought me finally into an environment where bridge-building, peacemaking, and understanding “the other” were at the heart of education. The Quaker imperative of responding to “that of God” in everyone creates an environment of tolerance, honesty and integrity that



Leighton Park School

makes for a distinctive type of school community, one in which, from the outset, it is accepted that God may be sought in ways other than our own, ways whose insights might even have something valuable to teach us. And the worship of God, based on silent listening and waiting, is a spiritual experience that draws together those of many different faiths, and offers a non-material place of peace and a refuge to those who deny a faith and to those who feel they cannot yet know if they have a faith or not.

I once had a set of prospective parents visiting the school. Towards the end of our meeting, they clearly had one unspoken question which they were diffident, even embarrassed, about asking. In the end, they did. “Look,” said the mother, “It’s like this. I’m Protestant....” “And I’m a Catholic,” interrupted the father. “Is that going to be a problem here?” Where else should their son go, I replied, but to a Quaker school with a Jewish Headmaster?



Bobby Wills and Harris Manchester College

Above the main gate at the entrance to Harris Manchester College is an inspiring inscription: *TO TRUTH, TO LIBERTY, TO RELIGION* with the date *1891*.

Those three great concepts are the cornerstone of our humanity. They seem to me to be interdependent, and to reflect not only a pioneering example of the branding strap-lines that have become so common in institutions today, but also the essence of my theme. The Enlightenment championed the truth and reason; it was as a result of the Enlightenment that Jews were first free to leave the ghettos in Germany; and it was the religious tolerance proclaimed by the philosophers and writers of the Enlightenment that enabled two hundred years of remarkable German-Jewish history to unfold, with timeless lessons for the whole of humanity.

And the date of 1891? Well, it does have a nice connection, since Leighton Park School and Manchester College, in its Oxford incarnation, were founded at almost exactly the same time, Leighton Park being the senior partner - by just one year.

Bobby Wills' awful experiences during the Second World War made him resolve "to do something to help people understand and value each other". That vision struck a chord, as did his powerful statement that the war had arisen out of "godless tyranny", his inspiration for setting up the Farmington Institute in 1990. His determination to help young people, through the medium of religious education, to overcome the relentless materialism of our age, and to understand each other better in a multi-faith society, is certainly shared by Quaker schools with their focus on peace, and by Jews who have experienced in our age the full ferocity of that godless tyranny.

By the rivers of Babylon

When the Jews began to settle in Babylon after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE, they had a major decision to make. Would they establish a new home for themselves in this new land, learn the language, and immerse themselves in its society? Or would they regard their time as a temporary sojourn, of indeterminate length, and build a fence around their lives and activities in order to retain the familiar customs and language of their homeland? Which language and culture would reflect their main identity: Chaldean, or Hebrew? In the end, of course, both options were adopted by different groups.

The dilemma, however, is instructive, It has resonance among other groups who have found themselves in a parallel predicament, and with whose diasporas we are familiar today (Chinese, Indian, Armenian, for example). The Jewish experience is instructive on two counts in particular: the length of time during which they have repeatedly witnessed to this dilemma – around

2,500 years – and their unique sense of mission which derives from the exhortation of Jeremiah to:

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (29:7)

This meant that the Jews in a strange land had a duty to live in and for that land, to serve it and to contribute to the well-being of those who had now become their neighbours. They needed, also, to have something to say, much as the Quakers did in more recent history: *If there had not been a critical mass of Quakers in Pennsylvania living out a non-violent, dialogical lifestyle, the uniqueness of that colony in contrast to the others, with regard to religious liberty, democracy, respect for the Indians, and early challenging of slavery, could not have happened. (Yoder, 1997)*

The Jews had to cope with complete dislocation when the Temple was destroyed, but used the opportunity to create one of the greatest innovations in religious history: the synagogue, an institution where what had previously been considered the essentials of communication with God – priests, altar, Temple hierarchy, sacrifice – were found not to be indispensable, but rooted in another era that was now gone. They created a new way of living a Jewish life in a strange land, a way of retaining their dignity and their witness, as the land came to feel first less strange and, in time, their own. In Babylon they established a great centre of learning, whose academies and institutions were to have a profound influence on the subsequent development of Jewish thought and its contribution to the world. The same can be said of the Jews of Germany.

Singing the Lord's song in a strange land – and in Germany

The German-Jewish experience had its triumphs and frustrations, and ended in catastrophe.



The Judengasse in Frankfurt am Main, seventeenth century

Jews have been living in Germany for two thousand years, having come with the Roman armies after the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 of the Common Era. Communities flourished along the Rhine, in centres of Jewish life and scholarship such as Worms, Mainz and Speyer, despite regular interruptions to peace that came in the form of pogroms, especially during the Crusades. Jews had their own communities, forcibly closed off from the Gentile society around them, and subject to innumerable restrictions relating to dress and trade, excessive taxation, and curfew times when they might or might not be allowed to leave the ghetto. This is how Ludwig Börne (born Löb Baruch), a Jewish journalist and author, described the ghetto in Frankfurt am Main (the “Judengasse”) at the end of the eighteenth century:

Ahead of us a long alley with no end in sight, beside us just enough space to reassure us that we could turn back whenever we felt like it. Above us is no more sky than the sun needs to spread out its disc; there is no sky to be seen, nothing but sun. Everywhere a foul smell rises, and the cloth that keeps us from infection serves also to catch a compassionate tear or to hide a malicious smile from the gaze of the lurking Jews. As we wade laboriously through the mud, our slow pace provides us with leisure needed for contemplation. We step timidly and cautiously, so as not to trample on any children. The latter are swimming round in the mud, innumerable as a swarm of insects which the sun's power has bred from dung. (Robertson, 1999)

Not pleasant. Marginalised and institutionally demonised, the Jews epitomised in classic guise the notion of “the other”.

Yet all this began to change in 1743, the date when we can consider the modern German-Jewish experience to have begun. It was then that the young Moses Mendelssohn, 14 years of age, walked from his home town of Dessau to escape the traditional trade of becoming a pedlar, and arrived at the Rosenthal Gate in Berlin, the gate reserved for the entry of Jews and cattle. He had come to study with Rabbi David Fraenkel, the Chief Rabbi of Berlin, and was to become a pioneer in his advocacy of the Enlightenment both for Jews and for the general population. Until then, it had simply not been conceivable that a Jew might be seen as a civilised member of society, with whom one might engage on all levels.

There had been calls before Mendelssohn for civic equality, though notably these had come from Christian philosophers and writers. Christian Wilhelm Dohm (1751 – 1820) was a civil servant in the Prussian government and councillor in the department of foreign affairs. In his treatise of 1779 “On the Civic Improvement of the Jews”, he had argued that an improvement in the Jews’ civil status would lead to an improvement in their moral condition too:



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Christian Wilhelm Dohm

If Jews are treated humanely and like other sections of society, one cannot doubt that their religious devotion will decline to the extent that they become tied more strongly to the state through their civic devotion. (Dohm, 1999)

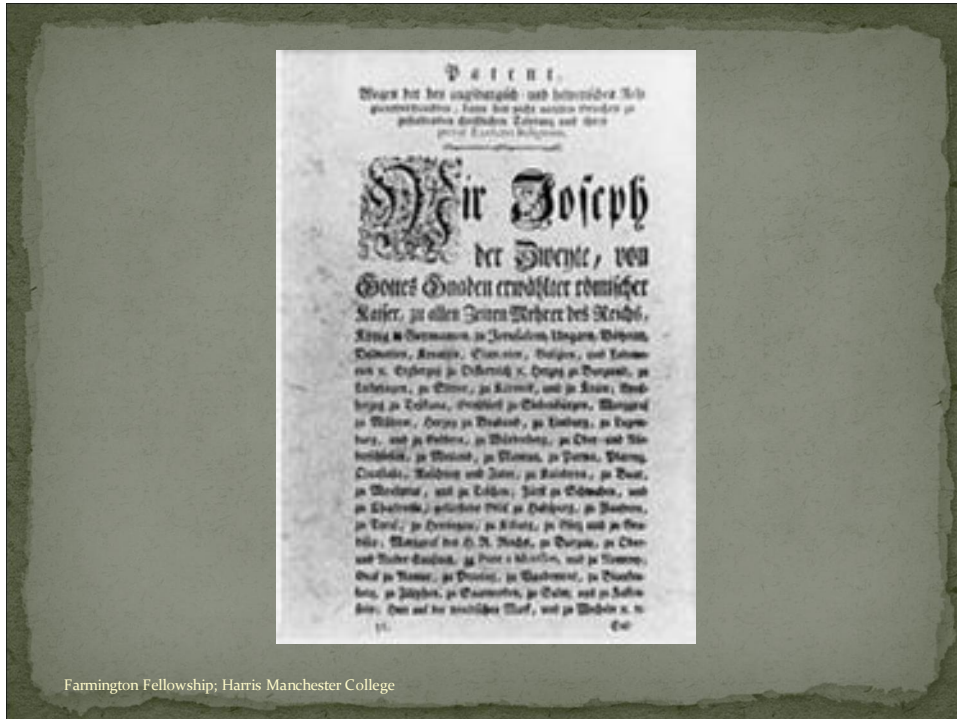
More than anything else a life of normal civil happiness in a well-ordered state, enjoying the long withheld freedom, would tend to do away with clannish religious opinions. The Jew is even more man than Jew, and how would it be possible for him not to love a state where he could freely acquire property and freely enjoy it, where his taxes would be not heavier than those of the other citizens, where he could reach positions of honour and enjoy general esteem? Why should he hate people who are no longer distinguished from him by offensive prerogatives, who share with him equal rights and duties? The novelty of this happiness, and unfortunately the probability that this will not in the near future happen in all states, would make it even more precious to the Jew, and gratitude alone would make him the post patriotic citizen. (Dohm, 1957)

Dohm goes on to indicate why so little understanding and mutual sympathy existed until then between the Jewish and Gentile populations in Germany. Exclusion had fostered prejudice. Yet, without any real contact or attempt to overcome the social and legal barriers, almost no possibility existed until the Enlightenment for such prejudice to be overcome. Dohm was certain that negative views of Christian society among the Jews were hardly a surprising response to the humiliating condition in which they were forced to live. He and others articulating what, in effect, were revolutionary views found their ideas far from universally welcomed, for these men were prophets in the wilderness, well ahead of their time.

Everything the Jews are blamed for is caused by the political conditions under which they now live, and any other group of men, under such conditions, would be guilty of identical errors....If, therefore, those prejudices today prevent the Jew from being a good citizen, a social human being, if he feels antipathy and hatred against the Christian, if he feels himself in his dealings with him not so much bound by his normal code, then all this is our own doing. His religion does not commend him to commit these dishonesties, but the prejudices which we have instilled and which are still nourished by us in him are stronger than his religion. We ourselves are guilty of the crimes we accuse him of; and the moral turpitude in which that unfortunate nation is sunk – thanks to a mistaken policy – cannot be a reason that would justify a continuation of that policy. (Dohm, 1957)

At around the same time, in 1782, the Holy Roman Emperor and King of Germany, Joseph II (1741 – 1790) issued his famous Patent of Toleration. Among other aims, this was intended to end the social isolation and economic exclusion of the Jews, and thus to make them more useful to the state – a fine example of enlightened self-interest from an enlightened absolute ruler.

From the ascension to Our reign We have directed Our most pre-eminent attention to the end that all Our subjects without distinction of nationality and



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Joseph II, Toleranzpatent, 1782

religion, once they have been admitted and tolerated in Our States, shall participate in common in public welfare, the increase of which is Our care, shall enjoy legal freedom and not find any obstacles in any honest ways of gaining their livelihood and of increasing general industriousness.....

And here are some of the practical steps Josef proposed towards the realisation of that aim:

As it is Our goal to make the Jewish nation useful and serviceable to the State, mainly through better education and enlightenment of its youth as well as by directing them to the sciences, the arts and the crafts, We hereby grant and order:

For example:

Graciously, that the tolerated Jews may send their children to the Christian primary and secondary schools so that they have at least the opportunity to learn reading, writing and counting.... No less to We hereby completely

abolish the head toll hitherto levied on foreign Jews and permit them to enter Our residence from time to time in order to carry on their business....and [We remove] All hitherto customary distinctive marks and distinctions, such as the wearing of beards, the prohibition against leaving their homes before twelve o'clock on Sundays and holidays, the frequenting of places of public amusement and the like. (Mahler, 1941)

The Edict advised them to scrupulously observe all the civil laws of the country since the Jewish nation was now *almost* placed, as it stated, on an equal level with adherents of other religious associations. The Edict applied initially only to Lower Austria. Later Edicts made the Jews adopt German-sounding family names and required them to undertake military service. Since the Edicts confirmed the status of “tolerated Jew”, the wealthier Jews, to whom that was more likely to apply, welcomed the news; poorer Jews, however, saw in them, rather, a threat to their more traditional way of life.

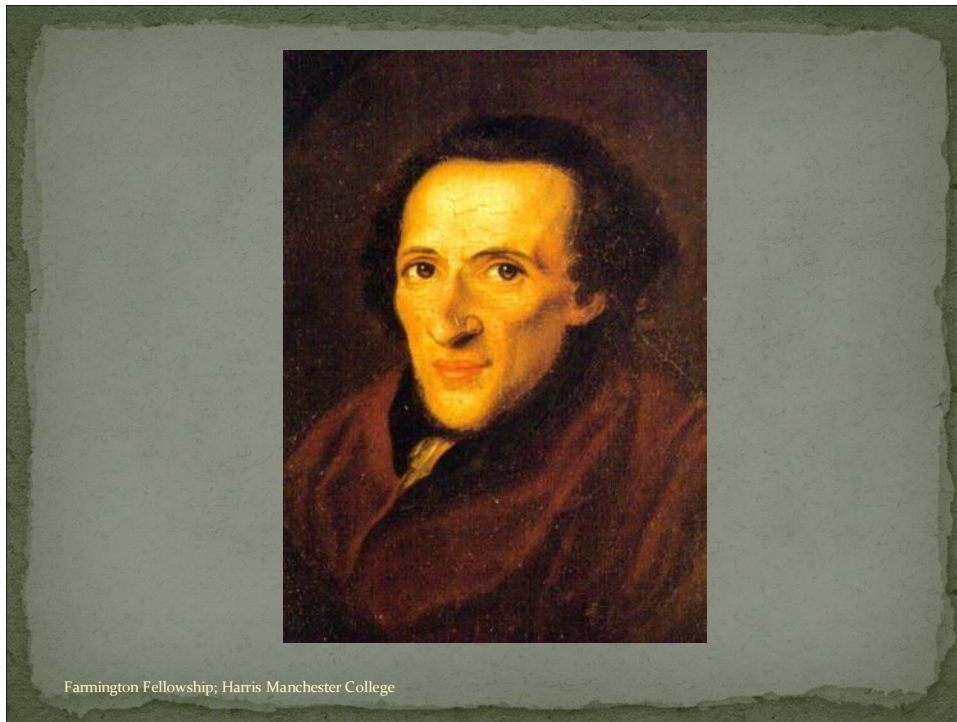
We can already see here the beginnings of the “quid pro quo”, the deal of emancipation: in return for admission to certain aspects of civil society, the Jews would have to renounce some of the traditions that made them separate. Reactions among the Jewish population were therefore mixed to this guarded welcome into modern society.

Key figures

Moses Mendelssohn

Let us return to Moses Mendelssohn (1729 – 1786), who was in fact a friend of Christian Wilhelm Dohm, and also of Immanuel Kant and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. He became the major Jewish figure of the Enlightenment, his most important work “Jerusalem, or Concerning Religious Power and Judaism” being published in 1782. In the first of the two parts, Mendelssohn argues that neither religion nor the state should be authorised to coerce the consciences

of men, and in the second, he explains how Judaism honours this principle. "Jerusalem" is a plea for liberty of conscience, for unrestricted toleration and pluralism, and for civic equality irrespective of creed. In it, Mendelssohn shows how compatible traditional Judaism is with the ideas of the Enlightenment. It is, though, rooted in Jewish tradition, proclaiming an unshakeable loyalty to Jewish values. Its plea was meant to secure a Jewish share in the modern world.



Moses Mendelssohn

God has not stamped on every man a peculiar countenance for nothing: why, then, should we, in the most solemn concerns of life, render ourselves unknown to one another, by disguise?

Regents of the earth! If an insignificant fellow-inhabitant of it may be allowed to lift up his voice unto you, For your happiness' sake, and for ours, religious union is not toleration; it is diametrically opposite to it Lend not your powerful authority to the converting into a law any immutable truth....

Be strict as to the life and conduct of men; make that amenable to a tribunal of wise laws; and leave thinking and speaking to us, just as it was given to us.... as an unalterable right, by our universal father. (Mendelssohn, 1838)

Mendelssohn is clear that acceptance into civic society should be a consequence of adhering to an accepted code of social, rather than religious conduct, and that a society which can be truly admirable is one in which its citizens or subjects have freedom of conscience in matters of religion.

Reward and punish no doctrine; hold out no allurements or bribe for the adoption of theological opinions. Let every one who does not disturb public happiness, who is obedient to the civil government, who acts righteously towards you, and towards his fellow-countrymen, be allowed to speak as he thinks fit, to pray to God after his own fashion, or after that of his forefathers, and to seek eternal salvation where he thinks he may find it. (Ibid.)

Mendelssohn saw that the very existence of many different religions was of fundamental importance and that the discovery of religious truth was within the capacity of every human being. For him, it was entirely logical that human reason should be the means by which people could arrive at universal truths about the nature of God, and that the search for religious truth itself offered one way to discover the reality of God and the immortality of the soul. Yet Mendelssohn also recognised a particularistic role and mission for Judaism, claiming that Jews could not desert their vocation by allowing the distinctive characteristics of Judaism to be submerged even within enlightened Christianity. The covenant with Israel he saw as a divine act calculated to benefit the whole of humanity: since the Jewish religion taught nothing irrational, nothing that conflicted with reason, it had the capacity to show what human reason could achieve both in and for the world.

But despite this universal mission, Jews had a duty, to seek out cultural connections, indeed to forge real cultural bonds with the societies in which they were living, and to become engaged in civic life while remaining faithful to their religious heritage.

Adopt the mores and constitution of the country in which you find yourself, but be steadfast in upholding the religion of your fathers, too. Bear both burdens as well as you can. True, on the one hand, people make it difficult for you to bear the burden of civil life because of the religion to which you remain faithful; and, on the other hand, the climate of our time makes the observance of your religious laws in some respects more burdensome than it need be. Persevere nevertheless; stand fast in the place which Providence has assigned everything which may happen, as you were told to do by your Lawgiver long ago. (Mendelssohn, 1969)

Mendelssohn, therefore, was clear that Judaism was well placed to enter the modern state and contribute to it. He recognised that in consequence, Jews would have to give up a part of their corporate status and independence, though this did not mean that Judaism would have to change in order to fit in to the state. It was the state itself that would have to change (as the Enlightenment was urging anyway), for example by abandoning its endorsement of one particular religion. Religions would move, therefore, from the public to the private sphere, but Judaism's moral force would remain as determining as ever.

As a reflection of this conviction, Mendelssohn set about translating the five Books of Moses into German, partly in order to assist his fellow-Jews in learning the language of the country in which they lived, though it was originally undertaken for the benefit of his own children. This translation of the Bible, printed, we should note, in Hebrew letters, marked the dual achievements of both teaching German to a whole generation of Jews, and bringing them back at the same time to the religious centre of Judaism – the Torah, rather than the Talmudic commentaries. It also began to provide that essential bridge between Jewish and German culture, and forms one end of the spectrum of the German-Jewish synthesis, the other provided, with some symmetry for our purposes, by the later translation of the Bible into German undertaken by Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber in the 1920s.

Lavater and Kant

The Christian establishment, as the Enlightenment took hold, could not and did not ignore the impact of Mendelssohn's writings or indeed of the man himself, who was universally seen as giving the lie to the traditional stereotype of the Jew. He commanded respect and affection, mixing easily with the great thinkers of his day. He received many visitors from within the German states and from abroad, some of whom became close friends, while others, still maintaining respect for Mendelssohn the man, challenged the ideas he was proclaiming. Among those was a young Christian deacon from Zurich, Johann Caspar Lavater (1741 – 1801).



Johann Caspar Lavater

Lavater and Mendelssohn met in 1763 and discussed, naturally enough, religious matters. Lavater himself, something of what today would be called an evangelical or a revivalist, believed that those more philosophically-minded Jews in Berlin tended towards a unitarian view of Christianity, insofar as they emphasised the human view of Jesus rather than his divinity. He publicly

challenged Mendelssohn to demonstrate the superiority of Judaism over Christianity. For a reply which was also to be published, Mendelssohn faced a dilemma. There had been other Christians, well-meaning, who had wondered what it was that made him remain a Jew, but this was the first such public challenge. To reply confrontationally would create a disputation quite out of place in the increasingly tolerant Prussia of the time, where the Jewish position was, still, far from secure. Yet he could not ignore the challenge either, since that would have suggested that he simply had no sustainable answer to it.

Mendelssohn chose a characteristically conciliatory path for his response, avoiding a direct reply because he could not see the need to demonstrate the truth of Judaism, which he would reflect in his conduct rather than by argument. He also held that it was not necessary for him to have to refute Christianity in order to remain a Jew, and that the miracles invoked by Lavater could not in themselves form a proof, since all religions could allude to miracles of their own. Rather he explained with commendable diplomacy:

I am a member of an oppressed people who must appeal to the benevolence of the government for protection and shelter Should [the Jews] therefore attack their protectors on an issue to which men of virtue are particularly sensitive: Or would it now be more fitting if they abstained from religious disputes with the dominant creed? (Mendelssohn, 1969)

The Lavater incident generated much heat elsewhere, and several anti-Jewish pamphlets, and Lavater later apologised for what could have been seen as an implied attack on the Enlightenment itself. Mendelssohn, by contrast, was elected a member of the Prussian Academy – but could not take it up because King Frederick II (“The Great”, 1740 – 1786) refused to sign the necessary decree on account of his Judaism. The road to equal civic status may have begun with toleration, but it was clearly going to be a long one.

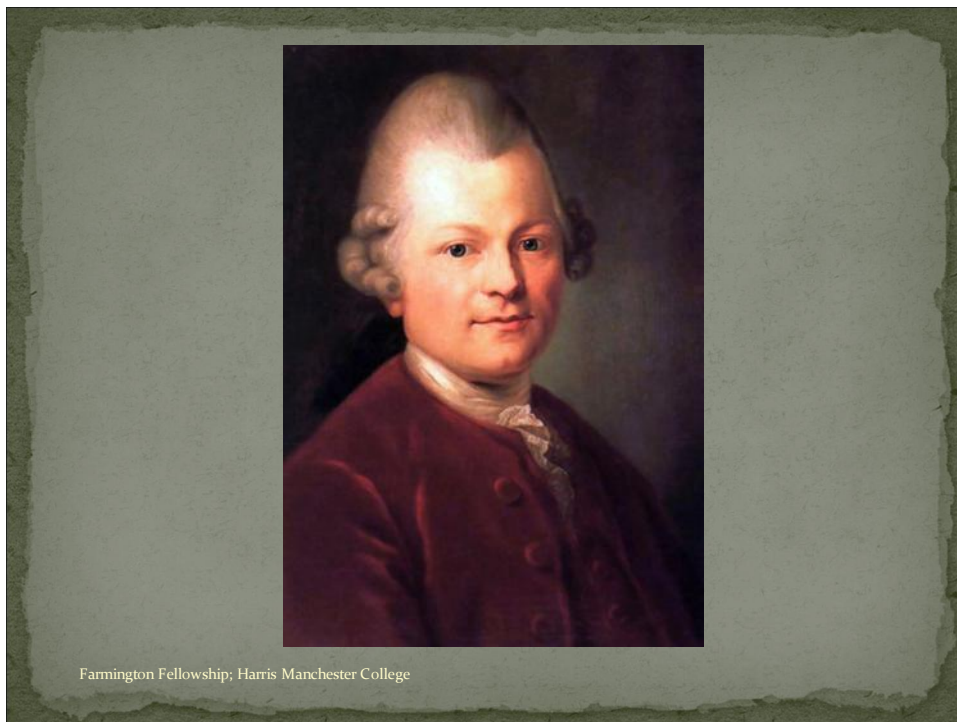
Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) systematically expounded the principles of the Enlightenment. Although not well disposed towards Judaism, he could see

that allowing Jews freedom of worship was entirely consistent with liberty of conscience. He wrote of Mendelssohn in a letter to one of his own pupils, Markus Herz, in August 1777:

Today Herr Mendelssohn, your and my honourable friend – as I take pride in calling him – departed from here. Having a man of such gentle disposition, and good spirits and intelligence for a constant and intimate companion in Koenigsberg would be the kind of spiritual nourishment which is completely lacking here, and which, as I grow older, I increasingly miss. (Kant, 1918)

Clearly perceiving the link between Jewish particularism and its historical significance, Kant wrote to Mendelssohn himself that he saw “Jerusalem” as *the harbinger of a great, though slowly emerging, reform, which will benefit not only your nation, but others as well.*

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and *Nathan der Weise*

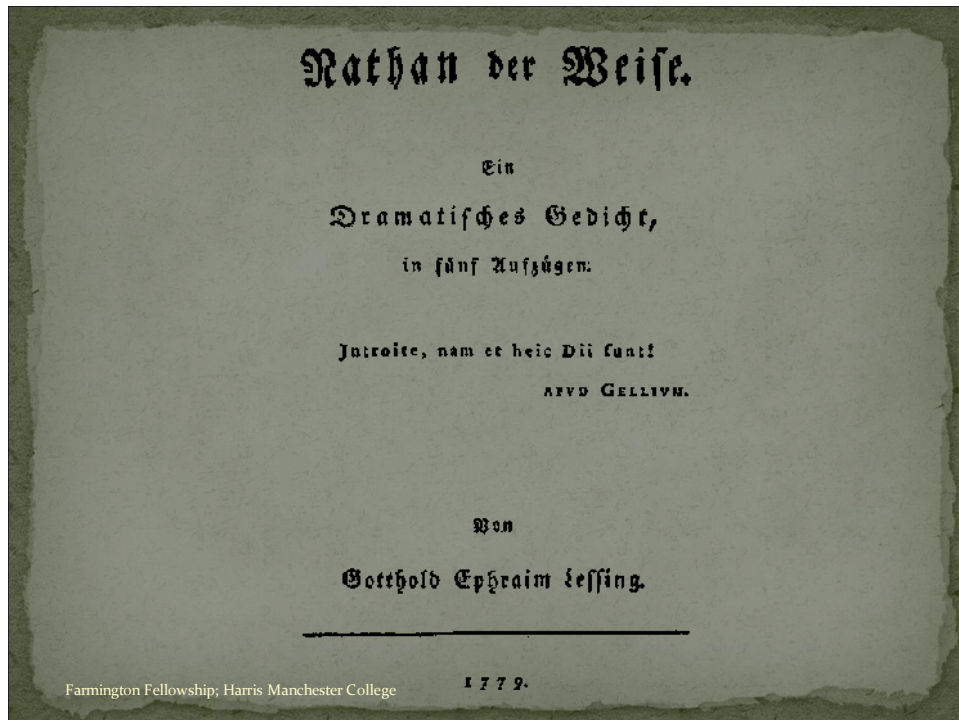


Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

Lessing, born, like Mendelssohn, in 1729, was already a well-known critic and dramatist when the two men met. After Kant, Lessing is one of the best-known representatives of the Enlightenment, a brilliant scholar, a formidable debater, and a tireless campaigner against prejudice. He had written his play, *The Jews*, in 1749 before he met Mendelssohn, describing it as the *outcome of serious reflection on the shameful oppression endured by a nation which, I should have thought, a Christian cannot contemplate without a kind of reverence*. It had been written in the climate of Frederick the Great's *Charter Decreed for the Jews of Prussia*, issued in 1750, which promised the Jews closer economic, cultural and political ties with the state, according them the status of subjects, but also revealed considerable contempt and distaste for them, as well as a desire to limit the competition they might afford to the Christian business community. A year later, Frederick proclaimed the toleration of many sects in his kingdom.

What was startling and original about Lessing's *The Jews* was the sympathetic portrayal of the Jewish main character, known as the Traveller (whose Jewish identity is not known for most of the play). He rescues the Baron from highway robbers who are initially assumed to be "damned Jews", but who turn out to be employees of the Baron himself. The Baron offers the Traveller his daughter's hand in marriage, but the Traveller has to refuse, explaining *I am a Jew*. He also turns down an alternative financial reward offered. By the end, the Baron is embarrassed by his earlier slights against Jews in general: *Oh, how commendable the Jews would be if they were all like you!* to which the Traveller replies: *And how worthy of love the Christians, if they all possessed your qualities.* (Lessing, 1853). He also states that he asks nothing more than that in future the Baron should reach less harsh and generalising judgements about his people.

Thirty years later, another play by Lessing became known as a parable of tolerance and reason in the search for religious truth. *Nathan der Weise*, first published in 1779, brings together a Jew, a Christian and a Moslem whom we see clearly as representatives of their religions. The centre point of the plot is



Nathan der Weise, 1779

the story, told by the Jew Nathan to the Moslem Saladin, of the opal ring which had the power

*To make the owner loved of God and man
If he but wore it in this faith and confidence.*

The ring, also conferring leadership of the house and the family, was passed down from generation to generation, until it reached eventually a father who loved all his sons equally and could not decide which one should inherit the ring. Secretly he has two exact replicas made. Each son receives one ring with his father's blessing. After the father's death, of course, each claims to have the true ring and to have inherited the father's mantle.

*But all in vain, the veritable ring
Was not distinguishable –
Almost as indistinguishable as, to us,
Is now – the true religion.*

Nathan goes on to explain to Saladin that unless each of the three brothers, by his love for the others and by his behaviour, could make himself indeed *loved of God and man*, then it was entirely possible that the original ring had in fact been lost, and that the father had had three replicas made. *Splendid!* cries Saladin. And we then hear Nathan's final explanation: each son was to believe he had inherited the true ring, and should therefore treat the others with affection rather than prejudice:

Let each one strive

To gain the prize of proving by results

The virtue of his ring, and aid its powers

With gentleness and heartiest friendliness,

With benevolence and true devotedness to God. (Lessing, 1894)

Nathan becomes the spokesman for the true ideals of the Enlightenment: tolerance, brotherhood, love of humanity, and, in religious terms, the understanding that all faiths come ultimately from one God. This, at a stroke, undermined the concept of the superiority of one religion over another, and with it the notion that any religion had the right to force itself on the adherents of another – the finest expression in dramatic form of the vision set out in Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*.

Some Jewish responses to modernity

The question that was paramount in responses to modernity and the Enlightenment, whether religious, political or social, was that of the *quid pro quo*. How far was it possible for Jews to be liberated from their medieval chains and become modern citizens like any others? To what extent would the Jews have to discard their traditions and even their identity? At what point would *emancipation* become first *integration* and finally absorption and *assimilation*? There were many who felt that civic equality would lead to the abandonment of all outward signs of belonging (distinctive clothing, beards)

and to their conversion to Christianity. It was certainly true that the emancipated Jew was a private Jew, reflecting the prescient words of Count Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre (1752 – 1792), a revolutionary and deputy in the French National Assembly, when he spoke at the Debate held there on 23rd December 1789 on the Eligibility of Jews for Citizenship:

The Jews should be denied everything as a nation, but granted everything as individuals. They must be citizens. It is intolerable that the Jews should become a separate political formation or class in the country. (Halphen, 1851)

What indeed was to be the price for emancipation? In the upheavals of the first half of the nineteenth century, the Jews scarcely had time to catch their breath between the extreme swings of the pendulum. Whilst in Germany, the gradualist approach towards civic equality seemed to be bearing fruit, in France the Revolution granted it to them at a stroke. As long as the aims of the Revolution were confined to France, they received enthusiastic support elsewhere; but once Napoleon spread them throughout Europe, they seemed, unsurprisingly, less welcome (an early example of “Not In My Back Yard”?) and generated a predictably violent reaction. A series of far-reaching reforms culminated in a decree of 1812 granting the German Jews full equality of civil rights and opened up hitherto inaccessible possibilities of residence, academic and municipal careers and military service. The Congress of Vienna in 1815, however, put paid to many of the reforms, and indeed Bremen and Lübeck actually expelled all their Jewish residents in the fervour of the romantic urge to restore an almost medieval understanding of Christian society. Anti-Jewish riots took place in several parts of Germany in 1819, even converts to Christianity were despised as baptized Jews, and it seemed for a while as though emancipation had left the Jews in limbo, without either the old certainties of the pre-Enlightenment ghetto, or the acceptance they had craved within Gentile society. Communal disintegration threatened.

Yet, perhaps drawing on the strength derived from renewals of the past, Judaism proved ready for the challenges of reinvention and rebirth. Despite the antagonism surrounding them, the Jews discovered a new relationship

with Judaism that enabled them to reflect the simple truth that they would be valuable citizens of their host country, not just in spite of the fact that they were Jews, but because of it. An intense new form of Judaism and Jewish consciousness developed that was to lead to the pre-eminent and unprecedented development of German-Jewish spiritual, cultural, economic and artistic life over the next hundred years.

Neo-Orthodoxy and the Reform Movement

One response was the Reform Movement, a radical vision for the future designed to combine theological simplicity with the scientific spirit of the age. Its chief advocate was Rabbi Abraham Geiger (1810 – 1874), who studied at the universities of Heidelberg and Bonn before serving as Rabbi first in Wiesbaden and then in Breslau (now the town of Wroclaw in Poland). He felt that the Enlightenment had lacked any spiritual basis. By contrast, his vision of Judaism was of

a faith founded on the trust in One who guides the universe and on the task imposed upon us to practise justice and mercy, a faith that becomes manifest in acts that fulfil this demand and that is clothed in uplifting ritual forms designed to awaken such sentiments. (Wiener, 1962)

Geiger took as one of his paradigms for change the tradition of animal sacrifice, an integral part of Temple Judaism. Once the Temple no longer existed, neither did the need for sacrifices, yet its disappearance did not mean the disappearance of Judaism, any more than did the expulsion of the nation from the land itself. Judaism was to become one religion among many, with a much greater emphasis on universal truths and values – justice and mercy foremost among them – and much less both on Messianic fulfilment and on external practice, including the dietary requirements.



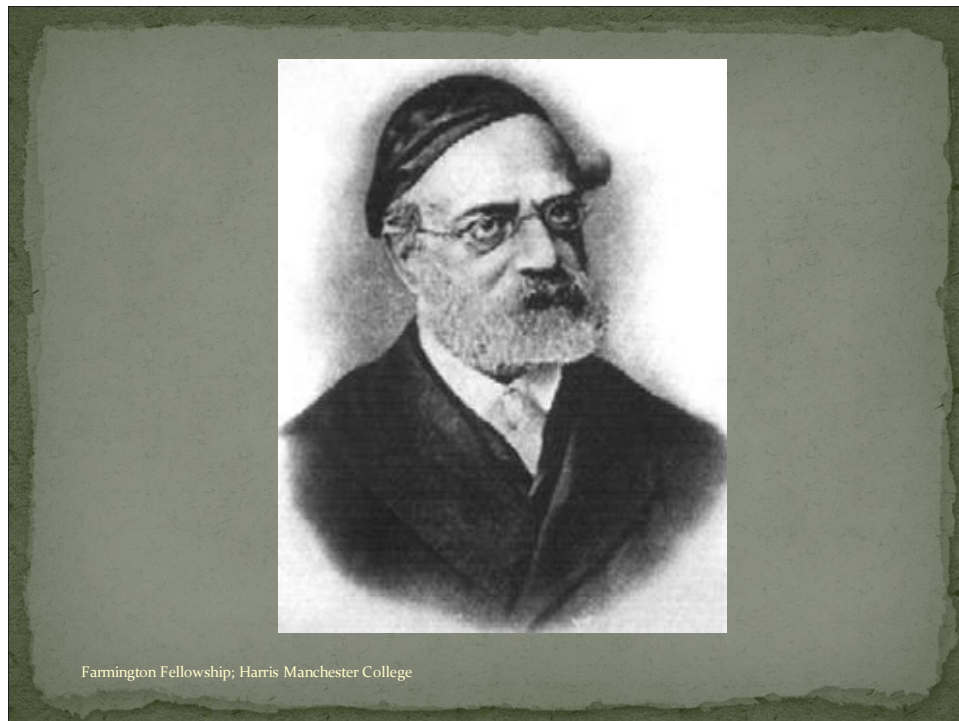
Farmington Fellowship; Harris Manchester College

Abraham Geiger

Geiger claimed that medieval customs appropriate for an earlier age were now to be discarded in the light of historical knowledge and understanding, and that this would not divorce Judaism from its roots. As a result, a new form of worship emerged, generally shorter than the traditional, with music and organ, no Messianic allusions, and prayers and a sermon in the vernacular. It was a bold step, but undoubtedly acted as a powerful synthesis for those who wished to feel German citizens of their own country while continuing to express their Jewish faith.

Geiger and the Reform Movement were regarded with deep suspicion by the neo-orthodox, whose figurehead was Geiger's former fellow-student Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808 - 1888). In 1830, Hirsch wrote his *Nineteen Letters on Judaism*, designed to encourage young Jewish men and women to continue to observe the traditions, and to discover what the Torah has to say about the meaning and purpose of life. The nationhood of biblical Israel was part of that answer, but so was the subsequent exile which enabled Israel to carry the divine truth to all the peoples of the world by remaining faithful to it. Despite centuries of persecution and oppression, Israel has continued, as God's

suffering servant, to proclaim the message of universal love and individual freedom, and to maintain a spiritual life. Hirsch saw the Torah as the permanent, unchanging model for Jewish life, whatever changes occurred in the modern world, claiming that it was therefore entirely possible for a Jew to be a fully fledged citizen of the modern state, while maintaining his Jewish way of life.



Samson Raphael Hirsch

Not surprisingly, and despite the Neo-Orthodox claim that it was possible for loyalty to Torah and traditional Judaism to be integrated into modern Jewish life (which Hirsch described as “Torah with a practical way”), those Jews who were seeking greater acculturation found themselves unhappy at this route to the future. The question began to be asked more frequently as to what it meant to be a Jew, and indeed to what extent that could be reconciled with ever greater involvement in German civic society. Both responses tried to reconcile the secular present with the religious past. Both *wanted the advantages of a pluralist and tolerant society, while preserving the values and secularising pressures inherent in that pluralism.* (Robertson, 2001)

The advance of Liberalism, and German unification

Let us turn now from religion to politics, to the pendulum of social and political progress towards the elusive goal of emancipation that characterised the second and final thirds of the nineteenth century. One of the principal spokesmen of the cause was the Liberal lawyer Gabriel Riesser (1806 – 1863). He saw a coincidence of purpose between the drive towards Jewish emancipation and the thrust towards an emancipated German state. He could hardly have put it more emphatically: *We want to belong to the German fatherland; we shall belong to it everywhere.....[Jews] want to distinguish themselves from their fellow-citizens in no respect except through their own inherited or freely-chosen form of worship.* (Riesser, 1867-68)

Jews had been involved in the liberal, radical, even revolutionary movements of the 1830s, yet it was in 1848 with the Frankfurt Parliament – the first such pan-German institution – that at last the dream seemed about to be fulfilled. The Basic Rights of the German People were proclaimed, abolishing all religious discrimination. *We have and desire no other fatherland than Germany!* was the sort of sentiment typically heard, even from rabbis. The pendulum swung back again in the 1850s; it was the moment when the concept of the “Jewish question” became real; and the reforms risked being lost for good. In the following decade, Jews were once again involved in the progressive movement, this time towards German national unification. In 1861, religion was once again ruled out as a criterion for limiting civic rights, through a law passed by the North German Confederation which, after unification two years later, was applied to the whole of Germany.

1871, that year of unification, was the moment when civic equality was achieved.



Map of Germany, 1871

Taking stock: a hundred years on

Within around a hundred years, therefore, the Jews had progressed from being hardly of significance within the German consciousness to the point where they were making major contributions to the very development of the German national state. The Enlightenment had led to both a major change in the self-image of the Jews, and also to a new attitude towards them by the surrounding Gentile population. Once the Jews felt an impelling loyalty to their new country as citizens, many no longer experienced that age-old longing for the return to Zion which had been such a unifying factor among the Jewish people.

Yet just as they appeared to be gaining greater rights at least on paper, hostility towards them grew as well, giving rise to further questions as to why that should be, and why despite the growing antisemitism the Jews went on striving for emancipation and full German citizenship. Their acculturation continued, the Jews hardly thinking that their enthusiastic overtures towards attaining Germanhood could ever be rejected, but social integration nonetheless remained limited for many. For some, this limitation, together with the decline in traditional Jewish education, the non-observance of the Sabbath, the neglect of the dietary laws, the adapting of dress and language to resemble those of their Christian neighbours, left a void, a sort of no-man's land. Yet, as the nineteenth century pressed on, so did the drive towards becoming accepted fully as Germans. Some families changed their names – both first names and family names – so that they should seem more German. They felt a far greater affinity with their fellow-Germans, as they saw them, than with the mass of their fellow-Jews elsewhere in the world. And when in that fateful year 1871 German unity was achieved, they still retained a feeling of inner insecurity. Walter Rathenau, the Jewish writer, industrialist and statesman who rose to the position of Foreign Minister in the Weimar Republic (and was assassinated in 1922), described it as an *uneasy feeling of restriction and abandonment*. There was always the whiff of the second class citizen.

Nonetheless, they persisted. Still seen as outsiders, yet deeply involved in German life in the early twentieth century, the Jews suffered growing discrimination, being seen still as aliens and intruders. Modernity had impacted on all areas of life, and the Jews had thrown themselves into many of them, including politics, the press, commerce and banking, publishing, and the theatre, as independent progressive spirits, whose modern ideas were, however, seen by many in a negative light, or who themselves were perceived by Kaiser Wilhelm II (1888 – 1918) as *striving to dominate culture, trying to destroy German culture with gutter art*. Such pronouncements didn't help, but on the contrary gave support to those antisemites who refused to accept that the Jews had stopped defining themselves as Jews, and just wanted to be Germans like everyone else.

After the First World War, nothing was the same again. Jews had fought on both sides with equally unbridled enthusiasm. On the German side, however, they were traumatised by the Jewish census carried out in 1916 to “prove” that the Jews were hardly represented at the front, having allegedly secured safe desk jobs at home. In fact, out of 100,000 German Jewish combatants, 12,000 were killed – almost exactly the same proportion as among the non-Jewish population – yet the slur had already been planted in the public mind. They died for the honour of their fatherland and their Kaiser. The ironies accumulated: Before the war, the Jews had been one of several ethnic groups in the old Austrian-Hungarian empire thirsting for national territorial independence, with the one difference that they had no territory to call independent. After the war, the violence continued against Jews in Germany, where they were grotesquely held responsible for the “stab in the back” that led to defeat.

The inter-war period was a time of relative optimism, though, for western European Jews and German Jews in particular. They resumed their pre-war pattern of integration, were highly acculturated, had abandoned Yiddish, reformed their religious practices, and were left with little autonomous Jewish culture, unlike the Jews in Eastern Europe, where the opposite obtained. Between 1919 and 1933, in the Weimar republic, the Jews were fully emancipated, all legal restrictions were lifted, Jews contributed on a major scale to society, and despite making up only 1% of the population, they filled a significantly higher proportion of posts in academe, medicine, the law, banking and commercial trade. Yet they were making that contribution as individuals, not as Jews. For the most part they were seen as part of mainstream, rather than Jewish culture. It was the culmination of the trend of emancipation that had begun with the Enlightenment.

Everything had seemed fine at the end of the 1920s, but this assumption of permanent security changed after the Depression of 1929 and, of course, following the seizure of power by the Nazis in 1933, though even during the five years leading up to the Kristallnacht pogroms in 1938, and despite the

gradual though relentless process of exclusion from every aspect of society, including ultimately life itself, the Jews kept up an astonishing internal Jewish life, pouring their energy into education and culture even within the ghetto.

Another translation of the Bible: Franz Rosenzweig

Franz Rosenzweig (1886 – 1929) studied not only Hebrew, but subsequently medicine, philosophy, theology, art, literature, classical languages and law at five German universities. He volunteered for the German army, was hospitalised in 1918 and while there wrote his seminal work *The Star of Redemption*. In this work, Rosenzweig not only considers three relationships between man and God – revelation, creation and redemption – as elements of God’s plan, but turns his attention to the relationship between Judaism and Christianity insofar as it contributes to God’s kingdom.



Franz Rosenzweig

Rosenzweig was a direct successor to the thinkers of the Enlightenment to the extent that he saw the modern period as offering the possibility for both faiths to gain a much greater understanding of each other. They had, he claimed, a unique relationship with each other, sharing in God, revelation, prayer and redemption, neither having access to the whole truth: Judaism is represented by the symbol of a star, brightly burning at its centre, and sending out rays, while Christianity is symbolized by the rays emanating from the core and out into the world. The core burns, even if the radiation is blocked; but the rays are the means whereby the light is transmitted, and are dependent on the core for this, as Christianity must remain dependent on Judaism for its continuing nourishment. Judaism he sees as representing the basic relationship between God, mankind and the world, while Christianity has by contrast the capacity to include all the nations in the revelation of God. Judaism cannot accomplish this alone.

The translation of the Bible that Rosenzweig undertook with Martin Buber he saw as part of the tradition that included his sixteenth-century German predecessor, Martin Luther, and others, as one of the links in the chain of what he called a *dialogue of mankind*, feeling that it would offer insight and a new beginning in an age that was becoming increasingly secular. In some sense, therefore, Rosenzweig was continuing the tradition also of Moses Mendelssohn, though from a different inspiration and with a different purpose, reflecting the enormous chasm that had been bridged through emancipation during the preceding two centuries. Rosenzweig died in 1929, exactly two hundred years after the birth of Mendelssohn. His translation and work were to signify a new beginning for German Jewry; within just a few years, however, that particular light had been virtually extinguished.

The German – Jewish legacy

At the start of this paper, I referred to the catastrophe with which the German – Jewish experience ended, or was perhaps interrupted. Yet as we look back

on those two hundred years that began with Mendelssohn's arrival in Berlin and the unfolding of the Enlightenment, what are the lessons that might be learned? Lessons for other peoples in a strange land? Questions about the still illogical survival of the Jews? Models of how a nation state and a religion might draw mutual benefit from mutual understanding?



Pogrom in the Frankfurt ghetto, 1819

What is certain is that despite the ineffable cataclysm of the Holocaust (which itself is not a Jewish issue, but an issue for mankind), despite the irreplaceable loss of those who died, of the world that died with them, and of all those who as a consequence were never born, the history of Jewish culture in Germany must not necessarily be seen as having come to a final end. Something survived even the flames of Auschwitz. But what?

Jewish German history continues, it is unfinished, not just in the sense that Jews have returned to their German homeland, or even chosen to live there as Jews, but also in the legacy of the Enlightenment and what it made possible: concepts of tolerance and dialogue, relinquishing of religious and political power, the outbreak of modernity, the continuing importance of

Judaism and its message. In Germany today, the past is present. There is formal, official recognition of that past both in the minds of all three generations now living there, and in the visible signs and buildings that testify to it. In Berlin alone, the Jewish Museum designed by Daniel Libeskind, and the vast Memorial to the Holocaust, into which one wanders as into a maze, with the outside world gradually disappearing from view as the ground sinks imperceptibly beneath one's feet, are two of the significant steps that have been taken not only to preserve the memory of what was, but to ensure the survival and future of the ideas it represented.



The Jewish Museum, Berlin

In the story of the German-Jewish experience we have an illustration of the dialogue between the quest for universal freedom (the German Enlightenment) and respect for its particular example (the Jewish experience). In "Jerusalem", Moses Mendelssohn *views the particular freedom he demands on behalf of the Jews, and the universal freedom to which all peoples are entitled, as one and the same.* (Goldschmidt, 2007) It is an experience not just of significance for the Jews. It was Mendelssohn whose efforts made it possible for the Jews to enter the modern world, but also for

the modern world to be introduced to the universal truth that a living Judaism would continue to exist.

Even the absurdity of antisemitism, particularly as it developed in Germany, is a legacy of man's inherent need to transpose his own failings on to the other, who is then punished for them. The Holocaust provides the evidence of where that leads. Although the Jews had been scapegoated both as archaic relics of an outdated past, and as dangerously radical agents of modernity, the German-Jewish story nonetheless reveals a deep, profound and redemptive message that is its legacy: the right of all peoples to both a particular and a universal freedom; the message of liberation; and hope and the promise of progress towards genuine understanding.

German Jewry's unique achievement in modern times stems directly from its specific blend of Judaism and European civilisation. New forms of Jewish life sprang up as a direct result of this meeting of cultures, just as had been the case in previous periods of great Jewish assimilation, for example in Spain. The Jewish Enlightenment; Jewish modern philosophy ranging from Mendelssohn to Rosenzweig; religious liberalism and the Reform Movement; new types of rabbis and leaders; modern Neo-Orthodoxy; Jewish nationalism and Zionism: all these flowed directly from the encounter between a Judaism emerging from the ghetto and the modern non-Jewish world. All have had a dual impact on both worlds.

That it is possible to participate in the project of modernity with unstinting engagement and complete devotion, while remaining grounded in the biblical truth, German Jewry is the proof. The Jewish community of Germany kept faith with its people's four-thousand-year-long world and redemptive history by meeting the challenge of its contemporary world: harkening to the call of modernity, they heeded Judaism's call as well....Their accomplishments, like Europe's, can be understood as a past that remains incomplete....as a past whose meaning can only work itself as a legacy, the future task left for a united humanity to understand and fulfil. (Goldschmidt, 2007)

It took several generations to begin to understand previous catastrophes such as the destruction of the Temples or the Expulsion from Spain, and we are still blinking uncomprehendingly at the enormity of the Holocaust. Yet two centuries earlier, the arrival of the modern world had been heralded by the Enlightenment. For all the angst over how to respond to it - how to stop being “the other” while still retaining one’s identifying characteristics; how to achieve emancipation and integration without assimilation; and how to continue to live out Judaism’s unique mission among the nations of the world - despite all the setbacks and disillusionment, the legacy of German Jewry has helped to shape the modern world. It might yet continue to do so.

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Appendix

Key Words

Judaism – Germany – Enlightenment – Religious reform – Antisemitism –
Tolerance - Church and state - The “other”