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Publication date

2018

Document Version

Other version

Published in

Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Zwiep, I. (2018). Discursive reflections on Jewish identity and culture. In J. Leerssen (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe* (Vol. 2, pp. 1149-1150). Amsterdam University Press. <http://romanticnationalism.net/viewer.p/21/56/object/122-250540>

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Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

Discursive reflections on Jewish identity and culture

Author: Zwiep, Irene

The beginnings of Jewish historicist dialectics

In 1818 Leopold [Zunz](#) (1794–1886), a student of Classics in Berlin, published his debut *Etwas zur rabbinischen Litteratur*. Behind the unassuming title lay a revolutionary message. Claiming that the academic study of Judaism no longer was the privilege of Christian theology, Zunz laid out the agenda for an ambitious new branch of study: *jüdische Philologie*. Its task was to uncover a Jewish past that would supply the Jewish entry into gentile society with an attractive (for both parties) national basis.

Central to this first attempt at modern Jewish self-articulation was the (re)construction of Jewish culture past and present, defined by Zunz as the combination of diachronic *Literatur* and synchronic *Bürgerleben*. While the source of Judaism's transcendent essence was located in the revealed *Gottesidee*, the material for its historical analysis could be found in libraries and archives all over the world. Though lacking in aspirations towards statehood, Zunz's scrutiny of the Jewish *Volksgeist* was a thoroughly political exercise. Its aim was to prove the Jews worthy of emancipation, of "Recht und Freiheit statt Rechte und Freiheiten". And so, alongside the notion of Jewish culture, the myth of "the Jewish contribution" to universal culture and society was born.

In the Jewish appropriations of Hegel's scheme of history, diasporic Judaism constituted a curious, semi-oriental counterforce. In the ensuing narratives, a putative medieval Arabic-Jewish symbiosis supplied the precedent for Jewish emancipation, with the Muslim empire serving as the keeper of the Greek (universal) heritage and as the prefiguration of the modern tolerant *Grossstaat*. A lasting Jewish fascination for the "Sephardi mystique" is attested by publications as diverse as Phöbus [Philippson's](#) (1807–1870) novel *Die Marranen* (published in instalments, 1837), Michael [Sachs's](#) (1808-1864) *Religiöse Poesie der Juden in Spanien* (1845) and [Heine's](#) *Romanzero* (1851), and in an impressive chain of Jewish experts on Arabic and Islam culture – most famously Ignaz [Goldziher](#) (1850–1921) in Hungary.

As in other national philologies, language served as the Jewish scholars' principal handmaiden; yet, rather than celebrating it as the national DNA, they used it as a neutral interface with the societies they sought to enter. Zunz's *Namen der Juden* (1837) and Moritz [Steinschneider's](#) (1816–1907) *Die hebräische Übersetzungen und die Juden als Dolmetscher* (1893) advocated Jewish multilingualism. In Western Europe, backward Yiddish was censured and ancient Hebrew (partly) abandoned in favour of modern metropolitan languages. In Eastern Europe, however, Jewish novelists collaborated in creating a Jewish secular literature in Hebrew, which found its culmination in the revival of spoken Hebrew in Palestine, codified by [Eliezer Ben-Yehuda](#) (Lužki nr Mosar 1858 – Jerusalem 1922) in his monumental "Lexicon of the totality of Hebrew" (from 1911 onwards). Ben-Yehuda established a language-codifying "Hebrew Language Committee" in Palestine in 1890 (it was replaced by an Israeli government agency, the Academy of the Hebrew Language, in 1953) and famously raised his son monolingually in Hebrew, thus creating the first native speaker of the language in modern times.

For Zunz, who belonged to a generation that had been catapulted into modernity, the *Aufhebung* of Jewish cultural history had been a transitory strategy on the road to assimilation. Ironically, his take on historicism, soon labelled *jüdische Wissenschaft* or *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, proved lasting. Over the years, it nourished a series of reflections on the nature and status of Jewish culture, in which every parameter (religion, nation, state, assimilation, reform, language, even philology's textual bias, which was supplemented by ethnology towards the end of the century) would be critiqued, depending on time, place and circumstance. What follows here is an impression of the main stations in this ongoing Jewish conversation between 1818-1897, with particular focus on the German-speaking realm, where it constituted an eclectic counterpoint to the gentile majoritarian discourse.

Religion

From the beginning, Jewish historicism was mobilized to modernize Jewish religion. Zunz's *Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden* (1832) was both a foray into Jewish national literature and an attempt to transform the traditional rabbi into a modern German *Prediger*. That this *mission civilisatrice* could have grave theological implications becomes clear from Abraham Geiger's (1810–1874) *Urschrift und Übersetzungen der Bibel* (1857), which introduced Biblical criticism into Jewish textual study, and Samuel Holdheim's (1806–1860) 1843 attack on Jewish particularism entitled *Die Autonomie der Rabbinen*.

The critiques of tradition soon triggered responses from more conservative rabbis like Zacharias Frankel in Breslau (1801–1875), Samuel David Luzzatto in Padua (1800–1865) and Samson Raphael Hirsch in Frankfurt (1808–1888), who each sought to reconcile historicist deconstruction with the holistic pre-modern Jewish experience. While Hirsch stressed the compatibility of permanence and progressivism (in *Die Religion im Bunde mit dem Fortschritt*, 1854), Moses Chatam Sofer (1762–1839) of Pressburg claimed – in a famous pun on an ancient rabbinic axiom – that “all innovation was forbidden by Torah”. Orthodoxy, that was how the Reform leaders dismissed these attempts at Jewish restoration, and it was Hirsch who embraced their verdict as a positive soubriquet. In the meantime, the ageing Zunz had drifted towards a middle stance. From the 1840s, he wrote historical vindications of Jewish practices (such as circumcision), which had been dismissed by the radical reform. His *Die synagogale Poesie des Mittelalters* (1855) was as much a learned inventory as a pamphlet against current liturgical oblivion.

It should be added here that this extreme polarization was predominantly a German phenomenon. Elsewhere in Europe, tradition and progress were balanced with greater ease. That German-Jewish scholars were fascinated by this “traditionalist” historicism can be deduced from their veneration of the Galician rabbi-scholar Solomon Rapaport (1786–1867) and his compatriot Nachman Krochmal (1785–1840), whose “Guide for the perplexed of our time” was published posthumously (in Hebrew, 1851) by Zunz himself.

Nation

In treating nation and religion as virtual synonyms, the early reconstructions of Jewish “national” culture betray a strong individual, assimilationist bias. In the historical surveys of the Spinozist Isaac Markus Jost (1793–1860), especially in his *Allgemeine Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes* (1829), assimilation even acquired messianic proportions. By choosing neutral titles such as *Zur Geschichte und Literatur* (1845), Zunz too continued to express his preference of universal belonging over particular culture.

The first to credit the Jewish condition with a – modest – political dimension was historian and “Nationaljude” Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891). He did so in a controversial essay called *Die Konstruktion der jüdischen Geschichte* that was included, albeit reluctantly, in Zacharias Frankel's *Zeitschrift für die religiösen Interessen des Judentums* (1846). Having embraced the idea of a Jewish *Stamm*, Graetz presented Jewish history as the sum of its religious and political factors. Yet although he identified an unbroken strand of political consciousness (and reality) in Jewish history, he did not strive towards political agency.

It was the Marxist philosopher Moses Hess (1812–1875) who, inspired by the Italian *Risorgimento*, introduced the concepts of state and territory into Jewish cultural discourse. In a volume called *Rom und Jerusalem* (1862), he argued that Jewishness was a matter, not of personal choice but of a common descent that demanded collective affirmation. Jewish culture, by implication, was a shared commodity that could not be traded by the individual Jew. While Hess pondered over an immediate territorial solution, he simultaneously longed for the ultimate *Geschichtssabbath*, the “Sabbath of history” that would merge mankind into one happy, nationless brotherhood. In the meantime, the various national ideologies, including the Jewish cultural narrative, would offer their audiences easy, customized access to the complex values of humanistic universalism.

Towards the end of the century, opinions on the Jewish national disposition proliferated. On the one hand, we see how Graetz's and Hess's reorientations culminated in long-distance nationalisms, epitomized by Theodor Herzl's (1860–1904) territorial *Judenstaat* and Ahad Ha'am's (1856–1927) spiritual answer (“The problem of state and the Jewish problem”, 1897, in Hebrew). At the other end of the scale we find Jews insisting on the need for ethnocultural pluralism (e.g. Moritz Lazarus, 1824–1903, in the essays collected in *Treu und Frei*, 1887), or by postulating the essential hybridity of Western culture (thus Steinschneider in the aforementioned *Hebräische Übersetzungen*).

An extreme assimilationist position was taken up by the later government minister Walther Rathenau (1867–1922), whose “Höre Israel” (published in the socialist weekly *Die Zukunft*, 1897) advised Jews to fully dissolve into the non-Jewish public sphere. In a similar vein, the *Verein zur Förderung der Bodenkultur unter den Juden Deutschlands*, also founded in 1897, hoped to redefine European Jewish culture in terms of gentile productivity. Thus we find that, by the end of the century, a Hegelian *Aufhebung* had indeed been achieved: the ghost of Jewish culture past had been successfully vanquished and stored in the Jewish collective memory. Over the following decades, it was the ghost of Jewish culture present that would prove the greater menace.

Notes:

Some developments in Yiddish language interest are addressed in the article on [Language interest in the former Poland-Lithuania](#).

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