

# Exploring Judaism's Denominational Divide

Change and Challenge

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# The French Connection

- French Jewry (about 40,000 in 1790) was made up of two distinct groups.
- In the south, Bordeaux and Avignon, Jews of Spanish/Portuguese origin and in the east, Alsace and Lorraine, Ashkenazi Jews of German and Polish origin.
- The Sephardim were much more assimilated, spoke French and were less observant and involved in local and international trade.
- The Eastern Jews spoke Yiddish, were far more traditional and were still very restricted in terms of occupations and trades.

- The Revolution created an opportunity to push for citizenship and after an extensive struggle Sephardic Jews gained citizenship in 1790 and the Ashkenazi Jews in 1791. However, the latter edict nullified any previous communal privilege they had been granted.
- The Reign of Terror inflicted the same suffering on Jews as it did on others. Synagogues were closed down and communal organizations abolished.
- By the time it was over, the community had changed substantially. The lifting of restrictions enabled Jews to move and resettle and reject communal control.
- Napoleon orders a Council of Notables to meet to review the “status” of Jews in France. No longer “a Nation within a Nation”

- Napoleon's "reforms" were viewed as a step backward. Although he imposed order on the community through the establishment of a system of consistories, controlled by a central consistory headed by 3 *grand rabbins*, the regulations he imposed were disadvantageous in many ways.
- However, these changes did send waves through the rest of Europe and especially Germany and in particular the Kingdom of Westphalia ruled by Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome. (1807)
- Jews of Westphalia were granted full equality and were free to practice their religion without restriction.
- Israel Jacobson was appointed head of the consistory and he in turn selected 3 reform minded rabbis and two educators to serve with him.

1866-1871



# Duties of the Westphalian Rabbis and its implementation

- Moral conduct not observance paramount
- Edifying Sermons in the vernacular
- Conduct Weddings - inside the synagogue under a Huppah and no superstitious or disruptive customs (e.g. no glass breaking and no grains of wheat)
- Introduce dignity and decorum into synagogue services
  - Shortened services by deleting *piyyutim* and prayers considered inappropriate
  - Cantor led which minimized Congregation participation
  - Limited physical rituals (Sukkot and Purim)
  - Individuals called to Torah by newly acquired family names

- Biggest change and most controversial
  - lifting the ban on *kitniyot*
- The Kingdom lasted only a few years and came to an end in September 1813.
- Jacobson moved to Berlin and once again became the motivating force behind liturgical reform in that city.

- By the end of the Eighteenth and in the first decades of the Nineteenth Century in Germany, especially in major cities, secular education becomes pervasive - traditional Jewish education neglected (teachers imported from Poland).
- Romanticism replaces the rationalism of the Enlightenment
- Non-observance becomes the norm and conversions to Christianity increase dramatically. e.g. Mendelssohn's kids
- The community becomes fractured along generational and social lines and separated by levels of religious observance.



- Governmental interference works to break down the autonomy of the Community and its control.
- Walls between Jews and outside community begin to tumble.
- Greater tolerance and acceptance leads to Jews becoming less particularistic and a desire to integrate and modernize Judaism.
- Judah Benzeev writes in *Yesode ha-dat*: “They have destroyed the old structure and built no new one in its stead. The child knows how to despise the old customs but doesn’t know how to live a moral life....”

# Change

- Two basic approaches to dealing with the crisis facing the Jewish community in the early decades of the 1800's.
  - Making attendance and participation more attractive through cosmetic changes to the community structure and especially to the service.
  - Deeper theological approach addressing the fundamental value of Judaism itself.

- For example, in Berlin through the influence of a small group community leaders (generally a few very wealthy individuals) like Israel Jacobson, Ruben Samuel Gumpertz and Jacob Herz Beer, changes were introduced into services.
- Sermons were given in the vernacular and dealt with edifying and contemporary issues.
- Liturgy was shortened and prayers for the restoration of the Temple and the return to Land eliminated.
- Music was introduced with both organ and choir (mixed)
- Still, about half of the community saw no need for reform of any kind.

# WISSENSCHAFT DES JUDENTUMS

## The Science of Judaism

- Its principal objective, as it was then defined in the *Zeitschrift für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* (1822), was the study of Judaism by subjecting it to criticism and modern methods of research. It was emphasized that research must encompass Judaism in its most comprehensive sense: its cultural heritage, the totality of conditions under which it existed and faced its destiny, “the knowledge of Judaism through its literary and historical documentation, and... a statistical knowledge of Judaism in relation to the Jews of our time in all the countries of the world” (ibid. pp. 1, 18).

- Internal as well as external agenda
- Serious research would also serve as a solid basis in the struggle for the survival of the Jewish community and would lead to the complete adaptation of Jewish life within state and society. That life would thus benefit from a new and more spiritual image of Judaism, of which it stood so much in need.
- It would also result in Judaism being generally accepted as a religion culturally and spiritually equal to Christianity.

# Leopold Zunz

## (1794-1886)

- Born in Detmold, Germany.
- Moved to Hamburg and was educated by his father, a Talmud scholar. Then from 1803 at the Samsonsche Freischule at Wolfenbuettel.
- In 1807, the new director, Samuel Meyer Ehrenberg, completely reformed the curriculum introducing history, geography and secular languages (German and French).
- Zunz studied at the University of Berlin from 1815-19 and later obtained a doctorate from the University of Halle in 1821.
- He served as the preacher in the new synagogue in Berlin and as a member of the editorial board of a daily newspaper.
- From 1840 to 1850, he directed a Jewish teachers' seminary (Israelitisches Schullehrerseminar) in Berlin.
- His main interest, however, remained in research to which he dedicated himself full-time after 1850.





- The program which Zunz outlined in his *Etwas über die rabbinische Literatur* was the study of Hebrew literature and its history; it included the study of Judaism in all its manifestations: theology, religious worship of Israel; Jewish law, Hebrew literature including that on the natural sciences and technology and the contribution of the Jews to their development.
- Jewish ethics, education and research into the Judaism of his day (Jewish sociology) were additionally necessary.
- Zunz also encouraged the examination of sources to ascertain the periods and the places of authors, their personalities, and the reliability of the evidence which they handed down. He also pointed out sources which had not yet been exploited (commemorative coins, tombstone inscriptions, etc.), as well as the importance of responsa as a historical source particularly for the history of the economic life of the Jews. He also drew the attention of researchers to community registers and their importance as a historical source. (EJ)



- Zunz engaged in the philosophical debate about the progress of world history and humanity pursued by Herder and Hegel.
- He thought that the historical, cultural and religious achievements of Jews in the Diaspora was contained in all of their written sources, thus putting more recent materials on the same footing as traditional sources.
- Although he did not have any direct disciples, the next generation of Jewish scholars was strongly influenced by his approach. (Frankel, Geiger and in opposition Hirsch and Hildesheimer.)

# Zacharias Frankel

## 1801-1875

- Born in Prague and educated in Budapest.
- 1836 he settled in Dresden as chief rabbi - one of the first to preach in German.
- In 1845 he attended the second conference of Liberal Rabbis but left when they would not take his more conservative approach. They adopted the idea of having both prayers and sermons done in German.
- In 1854 Frankel became the director of the Jüdisch-Theologische Seminar at Breslau.
- He advocated a synthesis between divine revelation plus Halacha and contemporary changes in modern Judaism.
- Positive-historical Judaism - balance between unchangeable divine revelation and the ever-changing, flexible human response to this Divine revelation.
- Loyalty to Halacha should be combined with the voice of whole community of the people of Israel.



- He rejected both Reform and Orthodox Judaism because he thought that the former ignored both of the above and the latter ignored the historical evolution of Judaism and had frozen Judaism into irrelevancy for current Jewish life.
- His position was characterized in the program of the Jewish Theological Seminary which combined traditional study of Rabbinics with Wiessenschaft des Judentums.
- As a scholar Frankel focused on the study of rabbinic literature, presenting it as a human activity, reflecting its historical context, and hence a dynamic and open process of hermeneutics and adaptation of the Torah... he presented the rabbinic discourse and authority as the center of Jewish history and essence, in contrary to the Reform theologians and scholars who emphasized the Bible and theological discourse. At the same time Frankel presented the rabbis as the creators of Jewish legal tradition, in contrary to the traditional and Orthodox understanding of them as the carriers of the Divine oral law, revealed at Sinai. (E.J. 2nd Ed. Vol.7 Pg 201)
- His “positive-historical” approach became the cornerstone of the Conservative Movement in America.

# Abraham Geiger

## 1810-1874

- Born in Frankfurt am Main to an Orthodox family.
- Received a traditional education until he decided to go to University at Heidelberg and then at Bonn.
- His classmates included future rabbis like Samson Raphael Hirsch.
- He was awarded a degree after leaving Bonn and earned a Doctorate from the University of Marburg for his work on the influence of Rabbinic literature on the text of the Koran.
- Because an academic position at a university was closed to Jews, Geiger took a rabbinic position in Wiesbaden and later Breslau, but not without a struggle against the traditionalists led by Rabbi Solomon Tiktin and later his son, Gedaliah Tiktin.
- In 1863 Geiger left Breslau to return to Frankfurt and in 1870 became a rabbi in Berlin where he was appointed to the faculty of the new Reform rabbinical college, the Hochschule.





- Firmly entrenched in Wiessenschaft, Geiger regarded Judaism as an ever evolving process from Biblical times through the Talmudic and medieval periods.
- In his view, Judaism's ethical imperative had become frozen by legalism and concretized by the persecution of the Church.
- In order to make it relevant once again, Judaism needed to be liberalized and democratized in the light of the early Pharisaic tradition. He believed that a fresh coherent ideological framework was needed to justify Reform.
- Realizing that successful change involving the whole community would need to be gradual, he advocated a moderate position between the radicals like Holdheim and the conservatives like Frankel and Graetz.

- In his sermons, Geiger emphasized Judaism's eternal values and hopes,
- He preached "Prophetic Judaism" - the ancient prophets modernized and universalized but at the same time fully Jewish and made relevant for today.
- These moral values still applied as Judaism moved from a national identity to a religious faith.
- Rituals and observances were there to elevate the soul and enhance religious life, and should not be done thoughtlessly merely because of traditional authority.
- Worship services sustained the unity of the community and should therefore reflect its voice. However, his prayerbooks reflect his principles - by excising references to a return to Zion and restoration of the sacrificial cult.
- His German translations sought to elevate and inspire and he kept most of the traditional Hebrew prayers intact, only abridging the service by cutting *piyyutim* and other accretions.



- Toward the end of his life he formulated and articulated his view of revelation in Jewish history.
- The Jewish people have an ethnic “genius” for religion just as the Greeks had it for the arts.
- “Its prophets were able to achieve unprecedented insights into the relationship between the Divine Spirit and its human counterpart...its insights were vouchsafed to Israel by acts of divine enlightenment which could not be explained by reference to natural development alone. God touched Israel and gave it not specific laws and commandments, but sudden understanding...The message was sustained by the ongoing working of God’s spirit in and through Israel. It was that spirit, divine in origin but human in expression, Geiger argued, which assured the continuity of Judaism even as it destined it ultimately to become the religion of humanity.” (Response to Modernity,

M.Meyer. Pg 98-99)

# Samuel Holdheim

1806-1860

- Born in Kempen, in Posen, East Prussia. Very traditional family and had a very traditional education at which he excelled.
- Later in his twenties he attended university in Prague and Berlin.
- He considered himself primarily as a teacher and truth-seeker and had not patience for compromise in theory or practice.
- Between his first pulpit in Frankfurt on the Oder in 1836 and serving as Chief Rabbi in Mecklenburg-Schwerin 1840-1847, he transitioned from Traditional Rabbi to radical Reformer.
- He attended the Rabbinic Conferences in Brunswick (1844), Frankfurt am Main (1845) and Breslau (1846) at which he was viewed as an “extremist reformer”.
- In 1847 he served as rabbi in the newly founded Reform Congregation in Berlin.



- His transition from traditionalist to radical reformer is embodied in the evolution of his views on religious authority.
- As a traditionalist he held by the view that all previous Rabbinic texts were authoritative. He then decided that he could disagree with more recent Rabbis and then questioned the divinity of Talmudic decisions and eventually of the Talmud itself.
- Finally, he concluded that the Bible itself was a “human reflection of divine illumination” and that final authority rested in reason and conscience.
- For Holdheim religion was a matter of beliefs and moral commitments not ritual practice.
- In this he became more and more universalistic in his outlook.
- On his death in 1860, his opponents unsuccessfully tried to prevent him from being buried in the rabbinic section of the cemetery. Abraham Geiger gave his eulogy.

# Samson Raphael Hirsch

## 1808-1888

- Born and educated in Hamburg.
- Traditional education - father and grandfather were his first teachers.
- Studied at the Talmud Torah in the city, headed by R. Isaac Bernays, an enlightened traditionalist, who included secular studies in the school's curriculum.
- Attended the University of Bonn studied classical languages, history and philosophy. Became friends with Abraham Geiger.
- Served as *Landrabbiner* of principality of Oldenburg from 1830-4. From there he went to Emden and then to Nikolsburg where he served as *Landrabbiner* of Moravia until 1851.
- Thereafter he moved to Frankfurt am Main where he served an orthodox congregation and established ancillary organizations like a primary school, a secondary school and a high school for girls. All included Hebrew language studies, Judaic subjects as well as secular studies like German, mathematics and natural sciences.



- His ideal of an educated Jew was that of an enlightened Jew, deeply engaged in the higher levels of general (i.e., non Jewish) culture and civilization, who remains fully loyal to the Torah and faithfully observant of the *halakhah*. Distinctly in contrast to an ultra-traditionalist approach.
- He believed that both the Written Law and Oral Law were both divinely revealed and given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. They are therefore complete in themselves and stand above historical development of any kind.
- He vigorously denounced Wiessenschaft's critical approach to Jewish texts (lest their Divine origin be questioned) and refused to distinguish between *mitzvot* - ceremonial vs moral etc.
- Eventually, he sought to create a separate community - he did not believe in a religiously pluralistic Judaism.

- R. Solomon Tiktin of Breslau (1791-1843)
  - University educated individual ≠ Rabbi
- Moses Schrieber (Chatam Sofer) (1762-1839)  
(Pressburg, Hungary)
  - *Hadash asur min ha-Torah*
- R. Esriel Hildesheimer (1820-1899)
  - Maintain community