

AGENTS OF CULTURAL CHANGE: JEWISH AND OTHER RESPONSES TO MODERNITY, 1750-1900

Conference held at the German Historical Institute Washington (GHI), October 8-10, 2018. Organized in collaboration with Tel Aviv University as part of the collaborative research project "Innovation through Tradition? Jewish Educational Media and Cultural Transformation in the Face of Modernity," funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). Conveners: Simone Lässig (GHI), Zohar Shavit (Tel Aviv University), and Kerstin von der Krone (GHI). Participants: Christian Bailey (Purchase College, SUNY), Christiane Bauer (GHI), Michael Brenner (LMU Munich/ American University), Bernard D. Cooperman (University of Maryland), Alexander Dubrau (University of Tübingen), Mary-Helen Dupree (Georgetown University), Shmuel Feiner (Bar Ilan University), Andreas Fuchs (Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research/ Göttingen University), Geraldine Gudefin (Brandeis University), Peter Jelavich (Johns Hopkins University), David Käbisch (Goethe University Frankfurt am Main), Tal Kogman (Tel Aviv University), Natalie Naimark-Goldberg (Bar Ilan University), Nisrine Rahal (University of Toronto), Claudia Roesch (GHI), Marsha L. Rozenblit (University of Maryland), Dirk Sadowski (Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research), Asher Salah (Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design/ Hebrew University in Jerusalem), Dorothea Salzer (University of Potsdam), Anne C. Schenderlein (GHI), Jonathan Sheehan (University of California, Berkeley), Barry Stiefel (College of Charleston), Stefano Villani (University of Maryland), Jeff Zalar (University of Cincinnati), Alexandra Zirkle (Boston University), Irene Zwiep (University of Amsterdam).

This conference sought to examine the role of religion and knowledge as well as education and emotion in times of social and cultural transformation and to trace the influence of and the interaction between different agents of cultural change. It did so not exclusively, but predominantly, from the vantage point of Jewish history.

The first panel discussed the challenges to authority arising within and beyond the Jewish community in the eighteenth century, prompted by the emergence of secular thought and the reciprocal influences of religion and secularism. Shmuel Feiner challenged recent interpretations of the Haskalah movement, the Jewish Enlightenment, in the context of a "religious turn." According to Feiner, the Haskalah was the driving force behind a Jewish project of secularization, and therefore an interpretation through the lens

of a “religious turn” underestimates the multiple conflicts *maskilim* were confronted with: between traditional elites and a new generation of Jewish intellectuals, and between Jewish religious and secular knowledge.

Dirk Sadowski demonstrated how *maskilim* challenged traditional authority through print culture. He argued that books published during the first half of the eighteenth century differ significantly from the established corpus of printed knowledge in Ashkenazi Judaism. Printers like Israel bar Avraham in Jessnitz created a new corpus of knowledge through philosophical and pedagogical books that served didactic purposes and a new pedagogical agenda, scrutinizing traditional Jewish education and its focus on Talmud study.

While the first two speakers concentrated on the Haskalah as a distinctly Jewish movement embedded in Enlightenment thought, the third speaker, Jonathan Sheehan, spoke about one of the most quintessential projects of the European Enlightenment, Diderot and D’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*. By analyzing its entry on God, Sheehan showed how the efforts to integrate theological concepts into a “reasoned dictionary” with ambitions for systematic order and philosophical coherence made core Christian ideas vulnerable to “unexpected triangulations, relationships, and histories.” The *Encyclopédie*’s article on God disaggregated the Christian God by situating him within new hierarchies of knowledge.

Drawing on the broader impact of the European and the Jewish Enlightenment, the second panel focused on the politics of knowing and knowledge formation since the late eighteenth century. Bernard D. Cooperman discussed the Italian reception of Nafthali Herz Wessely’s *Divrei Shalom ve-Emet* (Words of Peace and Truth), published between 1782 and 1785. In this foundational text of maskilic educational reform Wessely famously advocated for revising the curriculum of traditional Jewish education by re-defining the core body of Jewish knowledge while at the same time integrating non-Jewish, secular knowledge. Cooperman highlighted that Italian responses to Wessely’s ideas were significantly more positive than among the Eastern European rabbinic elite. However, the Italian context also proved to be far more complicated, with Ashkenazi and Sephardic traditions mutually shaping one another and the presence of an economic elite that since the early modern period laid the foundation for a greater openness towards non-Jewish knowledge, local languages and literary traditions.

Kerstin von der Krone discussed the interplay of Jewish education, knowledge, and print culture in nineteenth-century Central Europe. While nineteenth-century Jewish educators and religious leaders eventually built upon the maskilic educational project they also had to respond to changing conditions of Jewish education in the context of Emancipation. New approaches to and practices of Jewish education gave rise to a new kind of literature meant to serve the dissemination of knowledge about Judaism and Jewish religious practices, about Jewish history and culture in school and at home. Von der Krone explored the reach and usage of these texts by analyzing school reports and inventory lists, curricula, and recommendations for teachers and situated Jewish educational writings within the history of nineteenth-century Jewish book culture.

Jeff Zalar discussed faith, reason, and practices of cultural negotiation in nineteenth-century Catholic Germany, pointing out that scholars often seem almost perplexed that Catholics navigated the modern world and negotiated the impact of secular knowledge in a similar fashion as other religious groups did. However, by doing so, Zalar argued, Catholics always seemed to be in an “in between-state,” state defined by the “bipolar epistemic foundations of faith and reason” through which knowledge gained authority in Catholicism.

The third panel dealt with objects of translation. Zohar Shavit explored how maskilic translations and adaptations of non-Jewish texts for children and adolescents functioned as agents of social and cultural change and thus as modes of “cultural translation.” These translations introduced new cultural and social ideas and norms into Judaism while drawing on the rich Jewish literary tradition to legitimize their reform project. According to Shavit, the maskilic translational project answered the need of a community in transition, but more importantly it showed the appreciation maskilim had for the enlightened culture and the new ideas of *Bildung* and *Bürgerlichkeit* that emerged from it.

Barry Stiefel offered another example of cultural translation, although a far more exceptional one: bilingual Hebrew-German inscriptions on a half-timbered barn in the small village of Rauschenberg in rural Hesse. The inscription told the story of the Katz family who owned the barn, located on the edge of the village in the late eighteenth century. Given that Jews rarely owned residential property in eighteenth-century rural Hesse, the inscription is not only a remarkable object, but according to Stiefel, indicates a fundamental change in rural Jewish life.

Alexander Dubrau discussed late nineteenth-century translations of rabbinic literature, situating them within a long history of translation as well as within nineteenth-century Jewish education and scholarship. A first category of translations served academically-oriented circles, and according to Dubrau stood for a secular endeavor that embraced the methods of modern philology and historical critical thought. A second category of translations were “apologetic” in nature aiming to refute prejudices about Judaism and the rabbinic tradition, especially the Talmud. These translations mostly aimed to reach a broader Jewish and non-Jewish readership while a third category — translations originated from Orthodox circles — mainly addressed a Jewish readership, although not necessarily an Orthodox one.

The fourth panel highlighted the increasing role of higher education in the training of religious leaders and educators. Irene Zwiep shed light on rabbinic education in the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the efforts of Joseph Dünner, a graduate of the Breslau Jewish Theological seminary, the first modern rabbinical seminary in Germany. Dünner developed an ambitious curriculum for the Dutch rabbinical seminary that included Greek and Latin classics. However, Dünner’s plan was at odds with the expectations and needs of the Dutch-Jewish community, leading to a much reduced amount of classical knowledge rabbinical candidates would encounter during their training.

David Käbisich examined the training of Protestant religious teachers based on a case study of the Catechetical Institute at the University of Jena. He put particular emphasis on a growing body of texts meant to teach Christian religion as well as instruct the respective teachers that was characterized by a significant degree of differentiation and pluralization. According to Käbisich, this new religious educational media should be understood as responses to and products of modernity rather than efforts of resistance.

The fifth panel shifted the focus from professional training and higher education to the education of children. Tal Kogman discussed the teaching of Hebrew by analyzing eighteenth and nineteenth-century textbooks for Jewish children published in Central Europe. She showed the impact of the Haskalah and subsequent movements like *Hochmat Yisrael* (Wisdom of Israel) in Galicia and their efforts to preserve the Hebrew language while the usage of German became increasingly popular. Kogman highlighted that Jewish pedagogues

not only developed new teaching materials that spoke to the children's abilities but that they fundamentally broke with the teaching methods that had shaped the *Heder*, the traditional framework of Jewish elementary education. To a significant degree Jewish teachers drew on pedagogical methods for language instruction that were applied in contemporary philanthropist and humanistic schooling.

Dorothea Salzer explored the role of Jewish "Children's Bibles" as means to teach children about emotions. Drawing on the first Jewish Children's Bible, Peter Beer's *Sefer Toledot Israel* published in 1796, Salzer highlighted its rational approach towards the social, cultural and emotional education of children. Beer and other authors highlighted the ethical values and societal norms present in the Hebrew bible and enlisted the biblical text — rather than the rabbinic tradition — to build a new Jewish identity in the face of modernity, based on teaching a "bourgeois habitus" that emphasized reason and respectability.

The sixth panel took a closer look at the role of emotions as well as the politics of gender. Asher Salah spoke about the "desire not to be perceived as culturally different" and the category of "shame" in the context of Italian Jewish history around 1800 while challenging the German-centric history of Haskalah, emancipation and religious reform. Salah drew on two Italian intellectuals, Elia Morpurgo and Aron Fernandez, and their respective reform projects. Both embraced civic amelioration, emancipation and acculturation as necessary steps while characterizing the cultural and social conditions of the Jews in terms of a "dialectic of shame and guilt," drawing to a significant degree on negative stereotypes about Jews prevalent in contemporary debates.

Alexandra Zirkle explored how new concepts of romantic love and marriage influenced interpretations of the Song of Songs, drawing on Heinrich Graetz's translation and commentary. Graetz, a leading German-Jewish historian and scholar, presented the Song of Songs as an ideal of true and chaste love that stood in contrast to Hellenistic perceptions of love, which he equated with German-Christian romanticism.

Nisrine Rahal also examined the "ideal of love" but focused on its appropriation for political or revolutionary ideas in Germany in the 1840s. Rahal concluded that activists "utilized" the concept of love to challenge the power of church and state especially in the context

of the education of children. Activists questioned the attitudes and actions of Protestant and Catholic authorities with respect to the violence children endured in public education while highlighting the indifference of the state and state officials towards poverty.

Picking up on the previous discussions, the seventh panel dealt with concepts of marriage and love in the age of modernity. Natalie Naimark-Goldberg discussed perceptions of marriage in maskilic texts in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. She showed how the traditional notion of arranged marriage as a means of social cohesion and economic stability became subject to change in at least two ways. First, correspondences, nuptials and poetic writings began to emphasize the idea of romantic love and erotic satisfaction, adding an individual and emotional layer to Jewish perceptions of marriage. Second, maskilic texts display a critical reflection about Jewish marriage practices as such, including early marriage and in rare cases even the very concept of matrimony.

Christian Bailey explored late nineteenth-century perceptions of one notion of love that has been equally central to both Judaism and Christianity, namely that of neighborly love. First mentioned in Leviticus 19:18, the concept of neighborly love became a crucial paradigm of Jewish and Christian perceptions of oneself and the other and is related to other biblical concepts of love, those of God, the stranger and humanity. Against the background of *Kulturkampf* and antisemitism, Bailey explored the conceptual history of neighborly love in the Kaiserreich, highlighting how it became a concept much debated among Jewish and Christian intellectuals, philosophers and theologians, who were shaped by the idea of Protestant “inwardness” and Jewish “universalism.”

The eighth panel introduced religion, “Bildung” and entertainment as means of respectability and sociability. Simone Lässig sketched the image of an epoch in transition from which a new Jewish middle class emerged, using the example of Louis Lesser. A young Jew from Dresden, he was eager for a new kind of knowledge, a “Bildung” beyond Judaism that became available through new opportunities of social and cultural encounters between Jews and non-Jews.

Andreas L. Fuchs explored the entanglement of aesthetic education, music and religiosity in nineteenth-century Reform Judaism through the introduction of a new kind of synagogue music. Fuchs highlighted the influence of Western models of music on the one hand and the

efforts of composers like Salomon Sulzer on the other hand to situate their work within and legitimize it by Jewish tradition.

Peter Jelavich focused on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and on popular culture as a “major agent of cultural change” in modern Jewish history. Through mass entertainment such as vaudeville theater and film, German Jews established a cultural space that was equally distant from religion and morality (“*Sittlichkeit*”) as it was from bourgeois culture (“*Bildung*”) while at the same time promoting cultural and social plurality as well as acceptance for difference and diversity.

Overall, the eight panels reflected the wide range of topics the conference was able to address. They delivered an insightful discussion about the scope of cultural and social transformation since the late eighteenth century and the various strategies employed to navigate and negotiate change. While the first two panels focused on the religious and the secular, on authority and the politics of knowing in relation to old and new practices of knowledge production and dissemination, the following panels primarily explored concrete products and producers, institutions and distributors of cultural change. Most significantly, several papers addressed the role of gender and/or introduced emotion as a valuable category. Finally, the last panel focused on practices and modes of respectability and sociability and how they played out in a spatial and performative dimension.

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