

Contexts of Modernity

A critical focus of Judaic Studies research is the intersection of trends and crises of modernity with the Jewish communities of America, Europe and Israel. The four essays in this section bring a wide range of historical, philosophical, textual and linguistic scholarship to bear on the relationships between Judaism and the transformations of modernity. Though the essays take up different facets of Jewish history, law and culture, each brings a precision of scholarship and argument to bear on this complex subject.

Jay R. Berkovitz draws attention to two important trends that are crucial for enriching our understanding of the modernization process: the significance of new social and religious controls and the changing role of ritual. In part one he demonstrates how “the first stage of modernization was already underway in the century preceding 1789.” Driven by economic transformation, modernism challenged the autonomy of Jewish communities even as it brought new, assimilative opportunities. Traditionally, Sephardim had been inclined to integration and clandestine religious identity, and Ashkenazim to separatism. Berkovitz finds general trends in the particular changes that varied from community to community. Berkovitz also shows that economic, class and gender tensions are reflected in changes in sumptuary law through which Jewish communal leaders attempted to preserve “the hierarchies of social status.” The assertion of internal controls is a measure of the erosion of religious lifestyle. The need for control reflects communal anxiety. The pressure of assimilation is felt, for example, in the anxieties about youthful transgressions of authority and discipline regarding social behavior. Increased cooperation with the gentile world is accompanied by an increased sense of jeopardized autonomy. Communal boundaries are felt to be threatened. The movement toward laicization placed increased focus on the public interest, diminishing the authority of rabbis.

In part two Berkovitz emphasizes the new role that religion played in helping Jews interpret the meaning of emancipation. Whereas in rural Alsace ritual remained central to the daily rhythms of life and culture long after the 1789, in the cities ritual came to embody the experience of citizenship, nationalism and religious pluralism. Increasingly, ritual assumed more of a performative function that dramatized the epoch-making events of the nineteenth century. They also reveal how various sectors of the French-Jewish community drew on the texts and paradigms of the Jewish tradition in order to interpret the religious and social implications of civic equality.

Howard Tzvi Adelman, like Berkovitz, deals with the interpenetrations of Jewish and surrounding societies and the concerns about purity and contamination that these

interactions entail, but the focus shifts from France to Germany. Adelman's essay recounts his travels in Germany in search of history and memory, evoking the writings and experience of the turn of the twentieth-century German Hebrew poet Tchernichowsky. He finds himself sensing the same ambivalence toward Germany that characterized previous responses, and responses to responses. Combining the roles of tourist, teacher and guide, Adelman's reflections inexorably take him back to the Nazi era, its links with the medieval massacres of Jewish communities, and its echoes in the present. The victimization of Jews during the Black Death of 1349 evokes the violence of Kristallnacht in 1938.

Adelman conveys a fine sense of the "struggle with the tension between universalism and particularism" that affects both Germans and Jews, the shifting boundaries of identity. He tracks the subtle ironies and parallels that interlace both German and Jewish identity, while reminding us of the catastrophic hatreds of the past. In a final irony, the Germany he finds today is one that eats hallah without consciousness of its cultural companionship with its Jewish past.

Adelman's observations and reflections lead to **Leonard H. Ehrlich's** incisive philosophical analysis of what was and is at stake in the encounter between Judaism and modernity. He distills essential features of Jewish history to show that the encounter with modernity during the past 250 years marks a decisive caesura, one that "makes the very existence and future of the Jewish people and of Judaism problematic as never before." He explores the paradox of emancipation, in which Jews are torn between civil equality and the need to respond to continuing labeling of themselves as Jews. On the one hand, Jews become powerful contributors to the forces of modernity, but, on the other hand, they are radically threatened by the very same forces, which undermine an authentic Judaism, a form of life "in accordance with the direction received from the divine ground of Being."

For Ehrlich, it is this radical challenge that defines the import of the Nazi ideology and Nazi totalitarianism in its drive to annihilate not only the Jews but Judaism from modern life. "The aim of the 'Holocaust' was not only the physical extermination of the Jews, but the destruction of Judaism itself, the annihilation of Jewish spiritual essence." This essence includes the conviction that "man's destiny is to realize himself in justice," and is thus a direct threat to the totalitarian will.

In the last section of his essay, Ehrlich turns to the need for a Jewish political power base, a need that emerged in the developments of modernity even before the Nazi onslaught, but has now become critical to the continuity of a living Judaism that can affirm the possibility of a redemption that takes place in the world of human temporality.

Charles David Isbell turns our attention to a different challenge to modern Judaism, fanatic fundamentalism. Reaching back in Jewish history, he points out fine and crucial distinctions among ancient Jewish groups, for example, the difference between "Zealots," who "acted out of deep religious conviction," and the "sicarii," whose rebellion against

Roman authority extended to open violence, including violence against fellow Jews. A fanatic minority, the sicarii brooked no opposition, and claimed the godlike right to decide life and death. They can be seen as doubles of the violent sects that seek Jewish destruction and models for the murderous extremists in our own time, such as the assassin of Prime Minister Rabin.

The rabbinic commentaries understand the fall of the Second Temple as retribution for the hatred of one Jewish sect for another, and Isbell uses their example as a warning to contemporary Judaism about the danger of the internal terrorism they denounce. While this view certainly does not mitigate the responsibility of vicious Nazi ideology for Jewish suffering in our century (for “it could not have been avoided merely if all Jews had become haredim overnight), it does foreground a present and continuing danger to the Jewish community in its caution against extreme physical violence and a monolithic view of Judaism.

Isbell concludes with a stark reminder that modern-day haredim -- “whether their tactics extend to the extreme of murder or remain limited to the denial of full recognition and respect” -- must be recognized as terrorists, enemies of the most radical ethical talk of Judaism, the moral repair of the world.

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