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The Jewish Assimilation of Europe

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IN THE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES, HISTORIANS consistently framed Jewish crises as conflicts between the forces of assimilation and preservation, or in some cases liberalism and orthodoxy. Israeli scholars like Katz helped reinforce this frame in volumes like Tradition and Crisis, describing rationalist trends in modern Judaism like the Haskalah movement as an assimilating reaction to the liberalizing force of the European Enlightenment.¹ Szajkowski extended this narrative to the French Revolution, asserting that French Jewry was faced with a choice between the defense of ancient tradition and absorption into a radical new movement that was unappreciative of the nuances of their way of life.²

The reality is that French Jews were not constrained by this binary. Contemporary historians like Schechter and Sepinwall now contend that European Jews found ways to retain the essential elements and rituals of their religion and cultural identity while engaging with the broader gentile society

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Indeed, Jewish leaders, thinkers, and authors assimilated revolutionary language into the Jewish economy of ideas to benefit their communities and secure political capital for themselves in the new regimes. In a process that reflected the Haskalah movement in Eastern and Central Europe, French Jews carefully integrated Enlightenment and republican ideals into their own system of values, retroactively transforming the language of liberalism and eventually Napoleonic imperialism into ideas that, they proposed, were actually central and original to Judaism. In this way, the Jewish leaders and thinkers of France resisted assimilation into the gentle setting that surrounded them while adapting to the intellectual currents of the Revolution.

The relationship between the Revolution and French Jewish communities was complicated by the debt that revolutionary language owed to the philosophes of the European Enlightenment, who had sometimes tasked themselves with formulating answers to “the Jewish question.” Schechter proposes that the Jews were of great interest to Enlightenment thinkers in that they provided potent fodder for thought experiments about human nature and the reformation of character by education. The philosophes had so unanimously conceived of Judaism as both a people and a religion consumed by civic and financial vice that, Schechter argues, they felt comfortable discussing them in broad terms and intellectually experimenting with them as theoretical patients of regeneration. In most propositions, however, Jewish integration into French society was conditioned on the dissolution of the Semitic identity and absorption into Christianity.

Many of the authors of the Enlightenment were explicit in their condemnation of the participation of Jews in French society. In his Philosophical Dictionary, Voltaire infamously remarked that the Jews were “an ignorant and barbarous people,” complaining of their supposed greed and hatred for the people of the gentile nations that host them. Thus, influential elements of the European Enlightenment argued against Jewish participation in French society on the grounds that the integration of their religious culture (which allowed interest

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5. Francois Voltaire, Philosophical Dictionary (Penguin UK, 2004), 94.
collection as a legitimate financial practice) posed a threat to both the unity of the state and the contents of its purse.

The bitter irony of the most ardent defenders of social egalitarianism directing venomous attacks against the integration of a persecuted minority group into society at large was not lost on authors like Zalkind Hourwitz, a Polish Ashkenazi Jew who had relocated to Metz. In “Vindication of the Jews,” his answer in essay form to the question of Jewish participation and betterment in France, he lamented that “we are hard pressed even in an enlightened century, not to repair all the evils that have been done to [the Jews]... and to leave them peacefully to enjoy the rights of humanity under the protection of general laws.” Hourwitz’s response to the “Jewish question” appealed directly to the post-Enlightenment intellectual community of France by invoking the progression of society from a quixotic “Dark Ages” to rationalistic modernity and contrasting the vision of an Enlightened Europe with the reality faced by some of its most hated minorities.

Hourwitz also applied the theory of rights and social rehabilitation to the Jews themselves, positing that the simplest means of making the Jews “happy and useful” would be to “stop making them unhappy and useless. Accord them, or rather return to them the right of citizens, which you [the French gentiles] have denied them against all divine and human laws and against your own interests, like a man who thoughtlessly cripples himself.” Core to the theories of government proposed by Rousseau, John Locke, and other intellectuals of the Enlightenment was the sacred and inalienable nature of certain human rights supposed were considered to be fundamental to the expression and agency of the free man. Hourwitz, in constructing a rights-based argument for Jewish emancipation, forced the intellectual opposition to take the difficult step of arguing against universal rights. This modification in the argument was made all the more difficult by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, a document central to the ideological economy of the early days of the liberal Revolution that could be interpreted as granting full rights to all French persons. In response to a similar argument made by Ashkenazic leaders in Paris, Count Clermont-Tonnerre, a deputy to the National Assembly known for his support for Jewish emancipation but fearful of reprisal by the anti-Semitic deputies to Alsace, qualified his position by asserting that “the Jews should be

7. Ibid.
denied everything as a nation, but granted everything as individuals. They must be citizens.” The conservative approach to the Jewish question, in the face of Jewish thought leaders invoking the principles of the inalienable rights of man supposedly guaranteed to them by the Declaration, was to then shift the discussion from the personhood of Jews to their allegiance to the state.

Indeed, some Jewish authors had anticipated questions of their allegiance and made concessions to gentile society in hopes of the attainment of full participation. Hourwitz was no exception in this regard: to the modern eye, Hourwitz’s argument for full Jewish civil participation appears moderate, even conciliatory in tone. Some of the contentions he enumerates seem to apologize for the Jewish character and appeal to the desire among gentiles for Ashkenazic assimilation, as in the passage where Hourwitz argues that the granting of full rights and citizenship would be “the best means of converting [Jews] to Christianity” insofar as the deliverance of the French Jews from material hardship would help them to look to a “spiritual Messiah” instead of a “temporal one.”

In the same essay, Hourwitz argued against the continuation of Jewish traditions that contradicted European legal customs, particularly the juridical role of the rabbi in secular matters. It is clear that Hourwitz regarded Judaism as a voluntary religious affiliation first and a political or ethnic identity second—this was notably in direct opposition to the emerging Hasidic movement, which was itself a reaction to the Jewish Enlightenment of Eastern Europe. Despite his compromises on Judaism as a distinct and separate legal and political organization, Hourwitz’s essay nonetheless articulated an argument for Jewish freedom in the vocabulary of the intellectual moment. In doing so, he adapted the language of revolution to suit his people’s collective socio-economic needs, striking a nuanced balance between the preservation of his identity as a Jew and concessions made to the incongruities that necessarily arose from interacting with a prejudiced society that presumed legal and political authority over its citizens.

As might be expected, the partisans for Jewish rights were far from a unified front. Semitic authors used the language of revolution to support different visions of Jewish participation in French society, some more willing to compromise the rites and traditions of Judaism than others. The most pronounced

division in the French Jewish community was between the Ashkenazim in the northeast and the Sephardim in the southwest. The Sephardim in Bordeaux and Avignon were descendants of Jews expelled from Iberia and forced into the Christian tradition. Those who wished to retain their original faith were compelled to do so in secrecy until late into the seventeenth century. Perhaps as a result of forced assimilation, France’s Sephardic Jews had embedded themselves much more deeply in the economy of the southwest and enjoyed a relatively high degree of social and financial freedom compared to their Ashkenazic counterparts.

The Sephardim leveraged their socio-economic position by writing a petition to the National Assembly in 1789 for full civil rights predicated on the contention that the Jews of Bordeaux had more fully integrated into gentile society and thus could better live by the principles of the Revolution than the Jews of Alsace, who they characterized as superstitious separatists. The petition triggered a debate in the Assembly over the extent to which the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen applied to Jewish persons, a thorny subject given the heated exchanges over the Protestant question fresh in the deputies’ memories. During the debates, Sephardic leaders tried to distinguish themselves from the Ashkenazic leaders (also present at the Assembly) by arguing that their centuries-long integration into the economy and culture of southern France had acculturated them to Christian norms and regenerated their moral and political character. In their presentation to the council, southern Jewish leaders stressed that they had extricated religious authority from judicial power in their communities and that Sephardic Judaism was a voluntary faith and not a national identity, much as Hourwitz had. Unlike their counterparts in the north, they had relinquished the religious norms that supposedly conflicted with the values and norms of an enlightened nation, or so their argument went.

These contentions were expressed in terms agreeable to the post-Enlightenment mind, predicated as it was on a belief in the possibility of regeneration on an individual and communal level. The Sephardic leaders also appealed to

13. Sorkin, 94.
the concept of social covenants, arguing that the rights granted them by the Monarchy two hundred years prior distinguished them as viable French citizens, insofar as they had remained faithful to the contract made between them and the state. This proved a wise rhetorical maneuver, as Rousseau's theory of the social contract remained a powerful influence on Revolutionary legal thinking. The strategy of distinction from the Ashkenazim worked after an initial aborted vote, and Sephardic Jews were nominally granted the full rights and privileges of French citizenship by January of 1790.

The Ashkenazic leaders were, needless to say, disappointed that the National Assembly had not extended those same rights to the Jews of the northeast. On 28 January 1790, the Jews of Paris, Alsace, and Lorraine drafted a petition to the Assembly that a date for a deliberation on the extension of rights to the French Ashkenazi be determined as soon as possible. In this petition, the authors repudiated the claim that the Jews of northeast France were a separate people from the French (and the Jews of the southwest, for that matter), and that the so-called "tolerance laws" passed in regard to Protestant persons were just as applicable to them as they were to the Sephardim, who had cited them in their own defense a month earlier. The Ashkenazic leaders also turned the argument of citizenship and questions of foreign loyalty in their favor by recalling Rousseau's maxim that there exist two kinds of persons in relation to the state (foreigners and citizens), and then identifying themselves as non-foreigners by enumerating their essential functions in the local economies and their own patriotic desire to support the Revolution after suffering various financial abuses under the ancien regime. By attempting to disprove their foreignness, the Ashkenazic leaders identified themselves as citizens worthy of the nation, whether the nation recognized them as such or not.

They also refused to distance themselves from or compromise their religious beliefs; instead, they argued that the ideals of the Enlightenment were to be found in the oldest of Jewish traditions, that is, the Mosaic Law as related by the Torah. Far from encouraging civic malpractice, "[The Jewish] religion authorizes neither deception nor dishonesty; that far from ordering that foreigners be hated, it stipulates that they love them, that they be offered consolation and help; that the law of Moses is full of these principles of love and charity &c." The practice

15. Petition, 37.
of usury, a controversial practice and a frequent locus of anti-Semitic criticism, was therefore not to be abused according to the founding documents of the faith. Furthermore, the Ashkenazic leaders contended that the practices encouraged by ancient Jewish law were fully compatible with participation in French society as lawful citizens and that the dictates of the faith would encourage the fulfillment of their side of the social contract, rather than discouraging it, as some anti-Semitic deputies argued.

In this way, the Ashkenazi formulated a rights-based argument similar to the Sephardic petition to the Assembly but claimed the language and principles of the Revolution as original to the Jewish faith and its most ancient traditions. By incorporating the rhetoric of post-Enlightenment Europe into their economy of ideas, the Jews of Paris, Alsace, and Lorraine assimilated the thinkers of Europe into Judaism, rather than being absorbed and homogenized as a people into the currents of Revolutionary politics and ideology. Instead of renouncing their Semitic identity, French Ashkenazi leaders forcefully defended their right to meaningfully participate in the society of the nation using the language of the very same *philosophes* who argued for their complete assimilation. Their efforts bore fruit when the increasingly radical government of 1793 ratified a new constitution that effectively guaranteed their full rights and citizenship.

The Jews of France were remarkable for their ability to adapt both themselves to the political and intellectual currents of the day and to adapt the features of those currents to their own ends. This tendency extended to the conservative reactions to the Reign of Terror that culminated in Napoleon’s personal rule of France. The Jewish response to the Thermidorian Reaction, the Directory, and Napoleon’s political ascendancy was in no way homogeneous, but the maneuverings of Jewish leaders throughout the period were generally marked by pragmatic enthusiasm for the political order of the moment. Both the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim presented outward support, and even religious approval, of Napoleon as their political ruler, but did so in the context of a difficult relationship with the Consul-cum-Emperor.

Though Napoleon privately expressed distaste for the Jews as “the most despicable of mankind,”[^16] he pursued a strategy of socio-economic integration with the purported intention to, in his own words, “make them leave off usury, and become like other men . . . by putting them upon an equality, with Catholics, Protestants, and others, [he] hoped to make them become good citizens,

[^16]: Napoleon Bonaparte, *New Letters of Napoleon I: Omitted from the Edition Published under the Auspices of Napoleon III*, Edited by D. Appleton, 1897, 71.
and conduct themselves like others of the community...”\footnote{17} This rhetoric is comparable to the regenerative language of the Sephardic leaders in the Assembly debates and reflected Napoleon’s eagerness to maintain social order cloaked in the verbiage of the Revolution. The Sephardim were the most receptive to Napoleon’s overtures to the Jews, in spite of legal missteps like the so-called “Infamous Decree” of 1808 that limited Jewish economic participation and freedom of movement while encouraging renewed persecution against Sephardim and Ashkenazim alike.\footnote{18}

Regardless, the Jewish community of France quickly adapted to the changing political climate. Where Semitic leaders once used liberal language to argue their case, they now gave religious sanction to the Empire. Perhaps the most dramatic manifestation of this was the Jewish celebrations throughout France and its colonies of Napoleon as a quasi-Messiah. His decree emancipating the Ashkenazim and Sephardim to practice their religion freely on 30 May 1806 produced an outpouring of Jewish support. A striking depiction of Napoleon in the garb of King David granting freedom to the Jews of France was distributed in French newspapers, indicating a sort of naturalization of Napoleonic imperialism into the Jewish economy of ideas.

To settle the Jewish question, Napoleon convened a consistory of notable Jews to answer a series of leading questions regarding Jewish loyalty to the state versus their identification as a distinct nation. The purpose of the organization, which was later reconvened as the auspiciously named “Grand Sanhedrin,” was transparent: to solidify minority support for the Emperor by granting French Jews symbolic and actual rights while curtailing their independence as a nation apart from the nation. The Sanhedrin responded to Napoleon’s questions accordingly, issuing a regulation that encouraged French Jews to seek employment other than money-lending and to “treat [their country’s] citizens as their own brothers according to the universalist rules of moral conduct, and Jews who have become citizens of a state must regard that country as their fatherland.”\footnote{19}

In the same way that Napoleon blended imperial policy while claiming the

\footnote{17} Napoleon Bonaparte, quoted in Barry Edward O’Meara, \textit{Napoleon in Exile: Or, A Voice from St. Helena. The Opinions and Reflections of Napoleon on the Most Important Events in His Life and Government, in His Own Words}, Vol. 1 (AC Armstrong, 1885), 183.


principles of the Revolution, the Grand Sanhedrin awarded Napoleon status as an enlightened pseudo-Messiah, incorporating foreign concepts into their religious culture and adapting them to their own historical benchmarks.

Far from either dissimulating their identity or retaining it in conservative isolationism, the Jews of France proved remarkably adaptable to the changing political atmosphere surrounding them. From the early stages of the Revolution to the ascendancy of Napoleon, Sephardim and Ashkenazim adopted the language of the times to argue for their rights and full participation in French society, as is evident in the forceful arguments of Zalkind Hourwitz, the Sephardic and Ashkenazic representatives to the National Assembly, and the Jewish response to Napoleon's rising political star. In doing so, the Jews of France assimilated the rhetoric and ideals of European gentile intellectuals and leaders. In defiance of the usual question of Jewish assimilation or separation, they preserved their own culture while successfully adapting to the rapidly changing world around them, and indeed, adapting the world itself to them.