INTRODUCTION: GERMAN RABBIS ABROAD AS CULTURAL AGENTS?

*Tobias Grill and Cornelia Wilhelm**

During the second half of the eighteenth century, the Haskalah, the Jewish enlightenment movement, emerged in Germany to reconcile science and rationalism with Judaism. Such a programme was considered a prerequisite for a rapprochement between Jews and Gentiles. The Maskilim, the Jewish Enlighteners, regarded it as absolutely necessary to adapt Jewish life to modernity, in order to preserve Judaism. One of the main goals of the Haskalah programme, which portended a renunciation of the traditional dominance of religious education, was the acquisition and dissemination of secular knowledge. German Jews increasingly attended common schools or established their own modern educational institutions where secular knowledge was imparted, while the teaching of religious subjects had lost much of its earlier significance. Consequently, religion ceased to dominate all spheres of life and became merely a part of it.

In light of the waning influence of religious practice at the beginning of the nineteenth century, some German Jews imbued with the ideas of the Haskalah decided to reform the liturgy of the synagogue, as well as certain religious customs. Judaism was to be made more attractive to a younger generation of Jews. While the laity initiated such reforms, younger rabbis, already educated in the 'spirit of the times', soon furthered the goal of purification of religion. Following the example of the Protestant churches, Jewish religious reformers aimed at modernisation through the aestheticisation of the synagogue service. Those changes encompassed the introduction of synagogue ordinances, choirs, sermons in German, clerical garb for rabbis and preachers, organ accompaniment (at least partially), the abridgement of the prayer book and the abandonment of certain customs which were regarded as outmoded or not compatible with modern

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times. In the course of these reforms, a new type of rabbi emerged; he combined Jewish learning with a thoroughly secular education. The modern German rabbi was now less engaged in ritual and was more involved in homiletics, communal representation, scholarship, education and philanthropy. Once primarily interpreters of the religious law (Halakha), the rabbis who exemplified German-Jewish modernity – even from the neo-orthodox spectrum – now regarded themselves as preachers, teachers, pastors and ethical models. Quite soon a university education and a Ph.D. degree became commonplace for all German rabbis, regardless which current of Judaism they championed.¹ According to Leopold Zunz (1794–1886), probably the most eminent representative of the Science of Judaism (*Wissenschaft des Judentums* in German or *Hokhmat Israel* in Hebrew), this development marked the ‘ostracism of Eastern barbarism’ (*Verbannung der östlichen Barbarei*²), because the engagement of Polish rabbis and teachers in German-Jewish communities was no longer necessary. By contrast, the adversaries of rabbinical reform often complained: ‘Ever since rabbis became doctors [holding a Ph.D.], Judaism became sick.’³ Such a dictum encompassed the opinion of more traditional Jews, usually from Eastern Europe, that modern German rabbis did not possess enough Talmudic knowledge.

Nevertheless, despite all the criticism, the modern German rabbinate soon became a model for other Jewries which also aimed at modernising Jewish religious practice and communal life. Since the 1830s and 1840s an ever-growing number of Jewish communities all over the world engaged a German rabbi of the new type who, in the eyes of his parishioners, was considered to reform Jewish life according to the German-Jewish example. In this respect, these German rabbis abroad were potential cultural agents. However, we should keep in mind that such a transfer of certain characteristics of modern German Jewry was not completely unproblematic. While at first these reforms usually would be perceived as an expression of progress and modernity, after some time those changes were regarded as ‘alien’ and therefore had to be adapted to the new surroundings and conditions. A good example for such an attitude was the German sermon, probably the central element of synagogue reform. In the beginning German rabbis, no matter if they were engaged by Jewish communities in England, the U.S., Russia, Sweden or Denmark usually preached in German, but after a while they were confronted with the demand to ‘nationalise’ the sermons, i.e., to deliver their homiletic talks in the vernacular of the country. Most German rabbis abroad would comply with such a demand; however there are exceptions, for example Rabbi David Einhorn in the U.S., who is said to have rejected the introduction of English sermons into synagogues with the following words: ‘[W]here the German sermon is banned, there the reform of Judaism is nothing more than a brilliant gloss, a decorated doll, without heart, without soul, which the proudest temples and the most splendid choirs cannot succeed in infusing with life.’⁴

Even though such an attitude was not common amongst all modern German rabbis abroad it nevertheless hints at a self-image of them as representatives of a superior Jewish culture and as potential cultural agents.

The essays in this volume of *European Judaism* deal with the manifold varieties of the history of the German rabbinate abroad. However, what seems to be the thread of all papers is the question of cultural transfer.

When Hirschell, the head rabbi of the Ashkenazic community of London died in 1842, there was a general agreement that the new rabbi should be a 'Doktor-Rabbiner', which actually meant that the future spiritual leader had to be a modern German rabbi, well acquainted with Jewish and general knowledge. Therefore it was probably not too astonishing that all four candidates who appeared before the electors were German rabbis. As **Haim Sperber** emphasizes in his paper on Rabbi Nathan Marcus Adler who was eventually elected, the 'English model of Chief Rabbinate was Germanic in essence', but was nevertheless 'not a mere copy of the German original.' All Chief Rabbis of England, first and foremost the Adlers, adapted or adjusted this transferred model to the English reality. As theories of cultural transfer always stress, such is the usual way of appropriating cultural goods.

That the Adlers' influence in shaping the (chief) rabbinate went even beyond England's shores can be seen in **Raymond Apple's** paper on the significance of German rabbis for Australia. According to him, 'for a long period Australia was a British colonial offshoot and its Jewish community followed the dictates of the Chief Rabbi of Britain, Nathan Marcus Adler, who, followed by his son and successor Hermann, brought the German rabbinic outlook to his religious leadership.' This being the case, many Australian rabbis were either German or trained in the spirit of the modern German rabbinate, displaying a synthesis of Jewish and non-Jewish culture.

Mirjam Thulin introduces to the reader the life and activities of Rabbi Marcus M. Jastrow in the U.S. in the last third of the nineteenth century and argues that Jastrow, due to his German background, played a decisive part in the emergence of Conservative Judaism in America by transferring German-Jewish concepts of religion and education to America. Probably most important and successful were Jastrow's efforts in the field of Talmudic knowledge and instruction, where he applied guidelines of a positive historical understanding according to German-Jewish *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Science of Judaism). That, however, an intended cultural transfer could also fail is shown by another academic project of Jastrow: The Maimonides College in Philadelphia was the first rabbinical seminary in the U.S. but nevertheless could not be sustained.

The activities of another German rabbi in the U.S. were quite similar to Jastrow's, including even some cooperation between them. As **Yaakov Ariel** elaborates, Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler wanted to Americanise the Science of

Judaism in the U.S., which was so deeply influenced by German immigrant rabbis. Although imbued with the German-Jewish cultural heritage, he and others were seeking to demonstrate American Jewry's own achievements, to show that it was not simply an offshoot of German Jewry which could be neglected. No longer did immigrant rabbis like Kohler wish to show their dependence on German-Jewish scholarly institutions and other enterprises. That being the case, these German immigrant rabbis who had been active in transferring the German-Jewish model to the U.S. now strove for emancipation from this model by, for example, establishing a Jewish Publication Society, an American Jewish Historical Society and what is probably most important, by founding their own institutions for higher learning where a new generation of American rabbis could be trained. While relying on their German-Jewish education, they also wanted to demonstrate that American Jewry was most capable of handling its own major scholarly projects. An outstanding example for such an attitude was the publishing of the *Jewish Encyclopedia* with Kohler as one of its main protagonists. While, as Ariel emphasizes, 'the overwhelming majority of those writing for, or editing, the *Jewish Encyclopedia* were educated in Germany', The *Jewish Encyclopedia* nevertheless 'very quickly became a flagship of the Jewish American scholarly community.'

By the 1920s the German-Jewish cultural model had lost much of its former significance in the U.S. due to the growing influence of rabbis and other community leaders with an East European background. But as **Cornelia Wilhelm's** paper shows, the rise of Nazism in Germany seemed to lead to a revival of the 'German rabbinate' in the States. Many German rabbis fled persecution and found a safe haven in the U.S. But times had changed fundamentally since the nineteenth century. On the one hand, German refugee rabbis found it difficult to adapt to American-Jewish conditions and its special religious outlook. On the other hand, American Jews were often worried that these newcomers might contest the American nature and identity of Judaism. As a consequence, it was no wonder that in many cases German rabbis were engaged as spiritual leaders only by German-Jewish refugee communities. Nevertheless, as Wilhelm emphasizes further, it is 'apparent that a disproportionately large number of German refugee rabbis had a major impact on the development of the American rabbinate in the post World War II period.' At the same time, the younger generation of German refugee rabbis in particular, like Joachim Prinz, were able to find their place in American Judaism, thus acculturating to their new environment.

Ruth Nattermann explores the fact that a significant part of American Jewry opposed the intention of German refugee rabbis to transfer a specific element of the German-Jewish model to the U.S. as a means to preserve the German-Jewish legacy after the Shoah. Her paper deals with the struggle to establish a research and memorial institute dedicated to German Jewry. Ac-

cording to Nattermann, the conflict regarding the creation of such an institute was mainly due to the tensions between Jews of Eastern European and central European origin; between tradition and modernity. In the light of the catastrophe of the Holocaust, those American Jews who were more traditional fundamentally contested whether *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and especially the German-Jewish religious reform movement were, in fact, Jewish. For them the German-Jewish path of modernity could also be seen as the path to destruction. Therefore, it was not necessary or appropriate to allocate financial means to help create a 'scientific monument' for German Jewry in the U.S. That eventually the Leo Baeck Institute was established was probably mainly due to the strong will of German refugee rabbis who saw their identity as German Jews and German rabbis at stake.

Although there were many German rabbis among the initiators and supporters of the Leo Baeck Institute it was never established as a rabbinical seminary. In contrast, the Leo Baeck College in London, which was founded only a year after the Leo Baeck Institute in New York, was devised as a rabbinical seminary for the Reform and Liberal movements in the U.K., which lacked such an institution up to that time. As **Jonathan Magonet** points out, German refugee rabbis, above all Rabbi Dr Werner van der Zyl, were the initiators and main leaders of the Leo Baeck College where the spirit, achievements and certain characteristics of the former *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Berlin were carried on. Effectively, the Liberal German Rabbinate, particularly by establishing the Leo Baeck College in London, had significantly contributed to the development and flourishing of Reform and Liberal congregations in the U.K.

While the creation of the Leo Baeck College in London would probably never have been achieved without the efforts of German refugee rabbis, **Steven Whitfield's** essay, by contrast, shows that the founding of Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts in 1948 was not accomplished as a result of the influence of spiritual leaders from Germany. Nevertheless, there was one German rabbi in the faculty of Brandeis who, as a highly renowned scholar, significantly helped to earn Brandeis University recognition as a distinguished place of higher learning, especially in Jewish Studies: Rabbi Dr Alexander Altmann. Before he had to flee Nazi Germany in 1938 he had studied at the Orthodox rabbinical seminary in Berlin.

Like Alexander Altmann, most of the German refugee rabbis were not willing to resettle in post-war Germany, in the 'country of the murderers' of European Jewry. One of a handful of exceptions was Rabbi Robert Raphael Geis. As **Andrea Sinn** elaborates in her paper, Geis decided to return to Germany despite the holocaust for two main reasons. On the one hand he was not able to adjust to his place of refuge – Palestine – neither personally nor profession-

ally, a fact that was not uncommon for German refugee rabbis in the Holy Land, and not only there. On the other hand he obviously felt a deep love for his former home country, a '*Heimatliebe*', which practically attracted him back to Germany. There he could take part in the religious and cultural reconstruction of Jewish communities. But as a Liberal German rabbi he was faced with Holocaust survivors who were mostly from Eastern Europe and usually more traditional in their religious convictions.

All papers published in this issue are the result of an international conference held in October 2009 in Tutzing near Munich. As organisers of this conference, we aimed to explore the complexities of the modern German rabbinate abroad. Although the significance of German rabbis in Jewish communities in other countries during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries could hardly be overestimated, it is quite curious to notice that rather little research on this subject has been done so far. For this reason we are very happy and grateful for the opportunity to present to the readers a selection of papers depicting the colourful history of the German rabbinate abroad. However, this can only be the beginning. Much more needs to be done. Until the present, the history of many German rabbis in foreign Jewish communities seems to be totally neglected by scholars. This is especially true of the impact of German rabbis in countries like Denmark, Sweden and South America,⁵ though others could be added to this list. Therefore, we hope that this issue of *European Judaism* encourages other scholars to undertake more research in this interesting field.

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Notes

1. On the emergence of the modern German rabbinate, see the excellent essay by Ismar Schorsch, 1981, 'Emancipation and the Crisis of Religious Authority: The Emergence of the Modern Rabbinate', in *Revolution and Evolution. 1848 in German-Jewish History*, ed. Werner E. Mosse a.o., Tübingen, pp. 205–248.
2. Zunz, L., 1876, 'Rede, gehalten bei der Feier von Moses Mendelssohns hundertjährigem Geburtstage, den 12. Elul oder 10. September 1829 zu Berlin', in *Gesammelte Schriften von Dr. Zunz*, ed. Curatorium der 'Zunzstiftung', Berlin, Vol. 2, p. 110.
3. See Mordechai Breuer, 1995. 'Tausend Jahre aschkenasisches Rabbinat. Der Werdegang einer Institution', in *Das aschkenasische Rabbinat. Studien über Glaube und Schicksal*, ed. Julius Carlebach, Berlin, p. 22; Michael A. Meyer, 1985. 'The German Model of Religious Reform and Russian Jewry', in *Danzig, Between East and West: Aspects of Modern Jewish History*, ed. Isadore Twersky, Cambridge, Ma., p. 78.
4. Quoted after 'Jewish Essays and Homiletical Literature', *Jewish Quarterly Review* 4.3 (1914), p. 517.
5. We tried very hard to find someone who could present a paper in this respect, to no avail.