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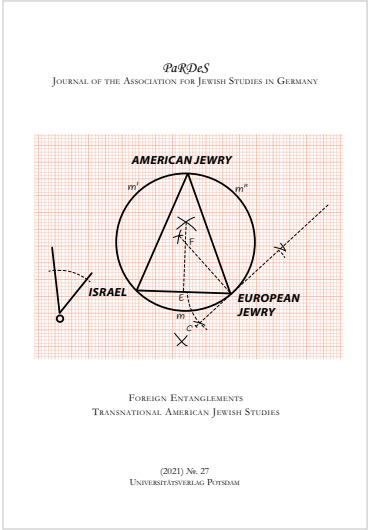

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American Jewish Ideas in a Transnational Jewish World, 1843–1900

by Yitzchak Schwartz

Abstract

As mid-19th-century American Jews introduced radical changes to their religious observance and began to define Judaism in new ways, to what extent did they engage with European Jewish ideas? Historians often approach religious change among Jews from German lands during this period as if Jewish immigrants had come to America with one set of ideas that then evolved solely in conversation with their American contexts. Historians have similarly cast the kinds of Judaism Americans created as both unique to America and uniquely American. These characterizations are accurate to an extent. But to what extent did Jewish innovations in the United States take place in conversation with European Jewish developments? Looking to the 19th-century American Jewish press, this paper seeks to understand how American Jews engaged European Judaism in formulating their own ideas, understanding themselves, and understanding their place in world Judaism.

1. Introduction

In the 1840s and 1850s, Jewish communities across the United States began to adopt new liturgy, impose reforms in synagogue ritual, and challenge traditional narratives of Jewish history and Judaism's mission. Since at least the 1880s, historians of American Jewry have put forward a plethora of explanations for these changes and their what influenced them.[1] Since the early 20th century, most scholars have characterized them as the result of some combination of ideas brought from Europe by Jewish laymen as well as rabbis,

[1] The earliest explanations define Reform as a return to true, biblical Judaism, necessary for Judaism's preservation. See Max J. Kohler, "The German-Jewish Migration to America," *The Jewish Messenger*, January 12, 1900, 2–3; Max J. Kohler, "The German Jewish Immigration to America," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 9 (1900): 87–105.

and American sociocultural pressures that led Jews to try and make their religious observances more palatable to their Protestant neighbors.[2] More recently, scholars have focused on the way a lack of embedded Jewish religious traditions in America allowed Jews to experiment with creating new kinds of communities and practices.[3] What these approaches have in common is that they conceptualize America as a religious black box of sorts, as if Jewish immigrants had come to America with one set of ideas that then evolved primarily, if not solely in conversation with their American contexts. Over the past two decades important studies by European scholars have begun to break this mold by focusing on the transatlantic and transnational activity of Jewish scholars and rabbis.[4] But how can we assess the impact of European Jewish ideas on American Jews outside of this specialist scholarly sphere? To what extent did American Jews outside of that sphere engage with debates and conversations taking place in Europe after they'd made their homes in the United States?

2 In his highly influential history of Reform in America, Leon Jick argues that the movement was motivated by a desire on the part of 19th-century American Jews to better fit into American culture rather than by any ideological influence from Europe *The Americanization of the Synagogue* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 1972). The classic example of the dominant approach prior to Jick, which characterized American reform as the ideology-driven product of the teaching of German-educated rabbis, is David Phillipson's *The Reform Movement in Judaism* (London: Macmillan, 1907). Also see Moshe Davis, *The Emergence of Conservative Judaism: The Historical School in 19th Century America* (Greenwood Press, 1977). Michael Meyer's work on American Reform Judaism takes a medium ground between these approaches, as I discuss below: *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995). However, Meyer ultimately sees Reform Judaism as being "fully developed in Europe and merely transplanted to the United States," 226.

3 Hasia Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 118–119. Annie Polland, and Daniel Soyer, *Emerging Metropolis: New York Jews in the Age of Immigration, 1840–1920* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 82–83. Shari Rabin, *Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: NYU Press, 2019).

4 The work of Christian Wiese and Adam Mendelsohn are particularly notable in this regard. See, for example, Christian Wiese, "Translating Wissenschaft: The Emergence and Self-Emancipation of American Jewish Scholarship, 1860–1920," in *American Jewry: Transcending the European Experience?,* eds. Christian Wiese and Cornelia Wilhelm (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Adam Mendelsohn, "Tongue Ties: The Emergence of the Anglophone Jewish Diaspora in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *American Jewish History* 93 (2007): 177–209. These themes are dealt with in many essays in Adam Mendelsohn and Ada F. Kahn, eds., *Transnational Traditions: New Perspectives on American Jewish History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014); and Christian Wiese and Cornelia Wilhelm, *American Jewry: Transcending the European Experience?.*

It may perhaps be expected that practitioners of American Jewish history, a field rooted in immigration history, the study of the movement of people, would assume ideas to move with populations. Yet as Judaic scholar Christian Wiese notes, American Jewish historians are also impacted by narratives of American exceptionalism that have at times also led scholars of Christianity in the United States to overlook the transnational context of American religion. This phenomena has only recently been recognized.[5] American Jewish historians have often cast the kinds of Judaism American Jews created as both unique to America and uniquely American.[6] These characterizations are accurate to an extent. The lack of embedded Jewish communal traditions in the United States and the government's disinvolvement with religious affairs allowed American Jews to experiment in ways perhaps not paralleled in other areas of the world. It certainly allowed American Jewish communities and individuals to introduce novel ideas and practices at a pace not found in most European Jewish communities. And some American Jews did indeed introduce religious changes that were more radical and thoroughgoing than their European Jewish counterparts.[7] That does not mean, however, that Jewish religious change during this period was entirely the product of these American realities.

5 Christian Wiese, Introduction to *American Jewry,* eds. Wiese and Wilhelm, 3. A good introduction to the ongoing attempt to bring transnational history into the field of American religion are the essays on religion in Paul Giles, *Transnationalism in Practice: Essays on American Studies, Literature and Religion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

6 In particular, many historians argue American Judaism is uniquely creative because of the voluntary nature of religious association in America. See Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 36. Benny Kraut similarly argued that this was the defining and unique feature of American Judaism: "What is American About American Jewish History and American Judaism? A Historiographic Inquiry," in *What is American About the American Jewish Experience,* ed. Marc Lee Raphael (Williamsburg, VA: The College of William and Mary, 1993), 1–23; Wiese, Introduction to *American Jewry.* Rabin, *Jews on the Frontier* revives this idea, arguing, along the lines of Kraut, that what she terms the "unfettered mobility" of 19th-century America allowed for unique kinds of religious experimentation.

7 On the more radical nature of American Reform Judaism and its roots in Jewish mobility in America, see Karla Goldman, *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery: Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 33–34, 74–75. This view was shared by German and American rabbis in the 19th century. Cf. Christian Wiese, "The Philadelphia Conference (1869) and German Reform: A Historical Moment in a Transnational Story of Proximity and Alienation," in *American Jewry,* eds. Wiese and Wilhelm, 136–158.

2. Jewish Ideas and Print Culture in the United States

The subject of American Jewish interaction with European Jewish ideas has often been confounded by attempts to create neat intellectual genealogies, a problem that dogs many practitioners of intellectual history. American Jewish thinkers rarely adopted European ideas wholesale, however, rendering elusive the chains of "influence" that some scholars have sought to trace. Distinct intellectual and ritual outcomes ought therefore not to be taken as demonstrate evidence of a lack of European influence.[8] American Reform thinkers have been subject to a good deal of this kind of genealogical intellectual analysis by Jewish intellectual historians, even as thinkers who identified with other religious approaches, disseminated in less academically oriented publications, have received scant attention in this regard. Historians have given equally scant attention to both European and American Jewish writing outside the realm of formal religious thought when considering the origins of American Jewish thinking about religion. We would perhaps be better served by looking not only for *influence* but also for how European events and ideas shaped American Jewish conversations, even if the outcomes of those conversations were distinct from outcomes in Europe. How, then, did American Jews *engage* European Jewish developments in formulating their own ideas, understandings of themselves, and understandings of their place in world Judaism?

While not always consistent, and never monolithic, American Jewish newspapers of this period reveal the contours of the public conversations about Judaism taking place in the American Jewish community and the degree to which a transnational conversation took place. They suggest that American Jews were thoroughly curious about Jewish life in other countries and that they closely followed Jewish culture, religious life, and politics in Europe. They also demonstrate close engagement on the part of American Jews with European Jewish ideas. This took the form of interest in new ideas – mostly, but not exclusively from Western Europe – from both Sephardic and Ashkenazic spheres. And the European figures that captured the interest of the

[8] Scholarship on Isaac Mayer Wise, for example, often paints Wise as an Americanizer, in contrast to academically trained German rabbis who took their ideas from the German Reform movement. See Meyer, *Response to Modernity,* 248–249. Jick's *Americanization of the Synagogue,* similarly argues against the European roots of American Reform as the explanation for its being so different.

American Jewish press were mostly male but also included women, such as the English writer Grace Aguilar.

Four periodicals – two that existed during the 1840s and early 1850s, and two that endured through the end of the 19th century – offer a basis from which to gauge the extent of transnational engagement on the part of American Jewish thinkers. Nineteenth-century American Jewish newspapers almost always represented specific approaches to Jewish religion on the part of their editorial teams. The editors of these four publications all presented American Judaism as embryonic and charged American Jews to create a Jewish community that, they hoped, would one day stand on par with the great Jewish communities of Europe. Through the 1870s, writers in these papers uniformly lamented the state of American Jewish life, which they saw as underdeveloped, lacking literary creativity, and religiously bereft – although they defined that religious lack, and its remedies, in different ways. While none of the editors of these papers could have imagined the 20th-century events that would leave America the cultural center of the Jewish world, they all envisioned an American Judaism that would serve that role.

Isaac Leeser's (1806–1868) *Occident,* published between 1843 and 1869 in Philadelphia, aimed to promote what Leeser often referred to as "correct," approaches to Judaism, which for him were those marked by his particular brand of Orthodoxy, through the publication of edifying sermons and polemical articles intended to refute the claims of Christian missionaries and would-be Jewish reformers. Robert Lyon (1810–1855), the editor of *The Asmonean* – founded in 1849, in New York, and published until Lyon's premature death – believed American Jews' path to greatness would be predicated on moderate religious reform as well as education, both in Jewish knowledge and high culture in general. For New York's *Jewish Messenger,* published from 1857 until it merged with *The American Hebrew* in 1902, the remedy for the state of American Judaism was edification through literary materials of a high caliber and for American Jews to see the timeless beauty of what its writers cast as Orthodox Judaism.[9] Finally, for *The American Israelite,* Isaac Mayer

[9] Writers in *The Occident* used the terms Orthodox and Reform and by this time these terms were well established in Europe. The terms were used much the way we use them today, Orthodox to refer to Jews insisting on traditional rabbinic understanding of Judaism and Reform referring to those Jews who wished, in various ways, to do away with rabbinic laws and customs.

Wise's (1819–1900) seminal newspaper, published first in Chicago and, from 1875, in Wise's adopted hometown of Cincinnati, American Judaism had the opportunity to seize greatness by creating a reformed Jewish community that would be thoroughly engaged in American bourgeois religious and political life.

These papers were aimed at young American Jews entering the middle class and catered to a literate audience. As such, they are artifacts of the middle class. Nonetheless, they provide a picture of the universe of discourse in which American Jews operated, at a time when middle-class ideas and writing increasingly set the tone and boundaries of public conversation in much of American life, especially in periodicals.

Looking to print culture provides a unique lens through which to understand American Judaism because, during this period, journals and periodicals were the chief means for sharing and debating opinions and research, including between personally acquainted individuals. The correspondence of American Jewish thinkers is surprisingly paltry when it comes to ideas. Isaac Leeser occasionally wrote to European rabbis but not nearly as often as one might think, given his extensive interest in and acquaintance with European Jewish affairs. Indeed, in a collection of almost 2,000 letters written to Leeser, only 63 are from outside of the Americas. Most of these letters concern charity efforts or offer congratulations on personal milestones, rather than intellectual matters. A good amount of them are letters from family members. In the limited correspondence preserved in Isaac Mayer Wise's papers in the American Jewish Archives, the same appears to be true of him.[10] Even David Einhorn, the German-educated Reform rabbi known for his involvement in European Reform, communicated with his European counterparts chiefly through print rather than by post.[11]

[10] Leeser's foreign correspondence in the Isaac Leeser Collections at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries mostly concerns *The Occident* and personal matters. Most of Wise's correspondence with European and American Jewish figures consists of pleasantries and advice on communal politics.

[11] See Christian Wiese, "Samuel Holdheim's 'Most Powerful Comrade in Conviction:' David Einhorn and the Debate Concerning Jewish Universalism in the Radical Reform Movement," in *Redefining Judaism in an Age of Emancipation: Comparative Perspectives on Samuel Holdheim,* ed. Christian Wiese (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 306–373.

Periodicals were where international debates took place. All of these publications displayed remarkable engagement with European Jewish affairs and politics, especially matters pertaining to Jewish emancipation. Even the *Occident,* which was mostly a magazine of sermons, contained impressive foreign news coverage, especially with regard to English Jewish news. Leeser's investment in foreign Jewish affairs was such that, in 1854, he hatched a short-lived plan to send American missionaries to China to save that Empire's dying Jewish community from imminent disappearance. *The Asmonean* likewise published on a wide array of world and Jewish news. *The Israelite* featured what was by far the most extensive coverage of Jewish life in Germany, while *The Messenger* carried a great deal of coverage pertaining to the Jewish communities of France and England.[12]

3. European Judaism in the American Jewish Press

The missions of each of these organs led them to engage with European Jewish life in unique ways. Each of them looked to European Jewish communities not only as newsworthy but as representing models and, in some cases, countermodels, for the nascent American Judaism. Looking to these communities, their writers and editors argued, could provide the directionless masses of American Jewry with lessons from recent and distant history for making their own way forward. The role models the papers picked thus reflected their own diagnoses of the maladies they believed were plaguing American Jewry.

The Occident regularly engaged in this kind of search for role models for American Jews. Writers glowingly reported on events such as synagogue dedications in the United Kingdom, emphasizing the decorum of the services at these events and the eloquent sermons given by England's dignified, worldly yet non-Reform rabbis. Leeser also frequently published sermons by modern

[12] For example: "On the Establishment of a Jewish Colony in the United States," *The Occident,* April 1, 1843, 28–30; S. M. Isaacs, "The Jews of Palestine," *The Occident,* January 1, 1854, 502; "Proposed Mission to China," *The Occident,* January 1, 1854, 510; Jewish Chronicle, London, "Consecration at Liverpool," *The Asmonean,* October 26,1849, 3; "The Jews in Hungary," *The Asmonean,* November 23, 1849, 8; "Foreign Intelligence," *The Israelite,* October 17, 1856, 115; "Foreign Intelligence," *The Israelite,* September 1, 1854, 63; "Bordeaux – A Pastoral," *American Israelite,* August 30, 1867, 5; "Foreign Items: Galicia, The Franchise," *The Jewish Messenger,* May 31, 1861, 166.

German and English rabbis. The recently deceased chief rabbi of Great Britain, Solomon Hirschell (1762–1842), a fierce opponent of reform, as well as his successor Nathan Marcus Adler (1803–1890) were particular favorites.[13]

The Asmonean and *Jewish Messenger* took a much more explicit tone in their use of European Jewish communities as role models. Over and over again, their writers emphasized the oratorical skills, decorous bearings, and enlightened nature of the Orthodox rabbis of Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. The latter also frequently published sermons by these rabbis that dealt specifically with the themes of the virtues of worldly engagement, patriotism, and balancing both with loyalty to orthodoxy.[14] *The Messenger* especially urged that American Jews adopt the model of English and French Orthodox communal organization and take a cue from their prolific Jewish literary production.[15]

Even as *The Messenger* and *The Asmonean* located role models in enlightened Orthodox and very moderate Reform Judaism in England and France, they found a countermodel in rapidly reforming Germany. A writer for *The Asmonean* maintained in an 1851 article that the example set by the rabbis of England had made it clear that American Jews could adopt greater decorum in the synagogue, including choirs and modern sermons, without embracing German-style reforms. An 1853 piece, reprinted from the *L'Univers Israélite,* summarized a speech given by a French rabbi in which he emphasized that the Jews of his country must not follow the lead of the Germans and turn the synagogue into "A Protestant Church." An 1881 article in *The Jewish Messenger* similarly warned American Jews that English Jews found the rapid adoption of German-style reforms in America shallow and silly.[16] As time went on,

13 "Gratitude Towards God, From the German," *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate,* April 1, 1843. The paper ran a series called "Specimens of German Preachers," featuring the sermons of German Orthodox rabbis in translation; see, for example: *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate,* April 1, 1844, 9.

14 See "English Judaism," *The Jewish Messenger,* December 4, 1891, 117; "The Ethics of Judaism," *The Jewish Messenger,* March 3, 1893, 5; "Jewish Thought in Germany," *The Jewish Messenger,* March 10, 1893, 4.

15 "Berthold Auerbach," *The Jewish Messenger,* Aug 10, 1888, 4; "Jews in English Journalism," *The Jewish Messenger,* November 30, 1888, 76.

16 "The Future of Judaism," *The Jewish Messenger,* February 16, 1872, 4; "The Modern Rabbis, Translated for the *Asmonean* from *L'Univers Israélite,*" *The Asmonean,* May 5, 1854, 20; Rabbi Dreyfuss, "The Two Elements, Translated for the *Asmonean* from *L'Univers Israélite,*" *The Asmonean,* May 12, 1854, 28.

however, *The Asmonean* began to take a more open attitude towards moderate reformers, even *as The Messenger* still lionized European modern orthodoxy.[17]

The Israelite, on the other hand, had an alternative set of role models. While Wise's paper celebrated the socioculturally integrated nature of England and France's Jewish communities, and while he frequently lauded their literary accomplishments, he cast German reformers as the ultimate model for American Jewry.[18] Wise, as historians are increasingly noting, was not at all fundamentalist in his prescription for reform and welcomed all stripes of religious "improvement." He did, however, believe that American Jewry needed to embrace a more universal mission and thoroughgoing reform than the communities of England and France. In general, *The Israelite* covered German more than French or English Jewish life, often focusing on rabbinic conventions and reformers.[19] Indeed, Wise's countermodels were the very role models of *The Messenger,* the Orthodox who stymied further religious change, the English chief rabbinate among them.[20]

4. European Jewish History as a Usable Past

In seeking role models for their fledgling communities, American Jewish newspapers also turned to European Jewish history writing. In the late 19th century, various narratives of Jewish history competed for the minds of European Jews. At stake were not just accounts of past events, but questions of the Jews' future. As historians of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement have argued, for 19th-century Jewish historians, writing Jewish history was a means of rediscovering the destiny of the Jewish people. American Jewish writers adopted and adapted European Jewish historical narratives, just as

17 See Robert Lyon, "Does the Orthodox Jew Believe in the Bible," *The Asmonean,* August 18, 1854, 140.

18 "Rev. Mr. De Sola's Remarks," *American Israelite,* December 7, 1855, 178; "Eighteen Hundred Fifty Five," *American Israelite,* December 28, 1855, 204.

19 "Modern Jews," *American Israelite,* December 18, 1863, 196; "Foreign Record," *American Israelite,* August 22, 1873, 6.

20 "The Chachamim of Bevis Marks," *American Israelite,* August 19, 1887, 3; "Our Fanatics," *American Israelite,* August 21, 1857, 52; "A Modern Bigot," *American Israelite,* August 28, 1857, 58.

they did narratives of the Jewish present, in ways that spoke to their aspirations for the Jews of America.[21]

The Occident is an exception to this trend. It rarely published historical material aside from on American Jewish history, which Leeser sought to document through published correspondence with members of Jewish communities across the country. Allusions to Jewish history and the divine providence that it revealed appeared often in sermons published by the paper, but the historical references were generally vague and secondary to the homiletic arguments made by the writers. *The Asmonean,* however, pursued Jewish history in a much more serious fashion, even as much less of its content was homiletic, a fact perhaps shaped by its lay-dominated editorial staff. Although not very regular, *The Asmonean's* historical articles suggest that its readers had a keen interest in Jewish historical matters and were familiar with some of the religious debates taking place in Europe.[22] Like their counterparts in Europe, writers for *The Asmonean* often marshaled European Jewish history writing in support of their religious agendas, in their case in support of moderate liturgical reform.[23] One piece, for example, emphasizing that instrumental music had originally been permitted on the Sabbath, came at a time when the paper was covering debates among American Jews about instrumental music in the synagogue. The same article argued that the rabbinic prohibition against men hearing women singing did not apply to sacred music. Another article, a translated selection from the German Jewish historian Isaac Markus Jost, focused on how Moses Mendelssohn's (1729–1786) example had led Orthodox Jews in Germany to introduce stronger secular education and more

21 On the ideology of the Wissenschaft des Judentums movement in the German-speaking lands, see Michael Brenner, *Prophets of the Past: Interpreters of Jewish History* (Princeton University Press, 2010), 8–11.

22 Arthur Beaugnot, "The Three Moses," *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate,* April 1, 1843, 23–26, consists of a biography of Moses Mendelsohn, excerpted and translated from his book *Les Juifs D'Occident,* which compares his views to those of Moses and Moses Maimonides on "the best manner for the passage of the Hebrew people through the vicissitudes of history." Max Lilienthal, "Sketches of Jewish Life in Russia," *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate,* October 1, 1847, 359; Abraham De Sola, "Notes on the Jews of Persia Under Mohammed Shah, Obtained from One of Themselves," *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate,* June 1, 1850, 141.

23 D. Oppenheim, "On the Age of Jewish Ritual, Translated from the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentum,*" *The Asmonean,* July 5, 1850, 145; M. H. Breslau, "Hebrew Poetry of the Middle Ages, Translated from the French," *The Asmonean,* Nov 29, 1850, 41–42. Marcus Heymann Breslau, an English lay intellectual and Hebraist, was frequently republished in *The Asmonean.*

orderly services into their communities. It was critical, however, of those who, under the influence of French Enlightenment authors, had endeavored to reform more than what "a due respect of established institutions, which are holy to every religious denomination, would allow."[24]

Both *The Israelite* and *The Messenger* carried more Jewish historical content than their predecessors, almost always either translated articles from the European Jewish press or summaries and selections from the work of European Jewish historians. From the 1850s to 1880s, historical articles in both papers generally followed the narrative of the German *Wissenschaft des Judentums* historians. That narrative celebrated Jewish involvement in the larger world in ancient times and in Islamic lands, especially in pre-expulsion Spain, while denigrating Jewish life during the Middle Ages, when, they argued, persecution had led European Jews to turn towards insularity and, intellectually, towards Talmudic casuistry over rationalistic, Bible-centered religious learning.[25]

In *The Israelite,* for example, the Rev. Dr. Max Lilienthal published a series entitled "Synopsis of Jewish History" that featured articles translated from several German sources, augmented by Lilienthal himself. The installment on the Talmud emphasized the worldly knowledge of the Talmudic rabbis. It painted an image of these figures as closer to the model of the 19th-century enlightened Jew to which *The Israelite* aspired than to that of the insular village Jew that writers for the paper often disparaged.[26] Other articles described Jewish historical contributions to world philosophy, especially the Jews' role in preserving Western philosophy during the Middle Ages through the translation and transmission of philosophical texts in the Islamic world. Translated historical articles bemoaned the ignorance of medieval and modern Jewry and held figures such as Mendelssohn, Benedict de Spinoza (1632–1677), and Uriel DaCosta (1585–1640) – all of whom, in *The Israelite*'s reading, had challenged rabbinic traditions – as heroes who had ushered Jews into a new, modern age. Many such articles made the common Wissenschaft argument that when Jews were tolerated, they had always made great contributions to the societies in

[24] For an example of the paper's move towards moderate Reform, see Heman Hoesrachi, "Sacred Music of the Israelites: A Historical Sketch," *The Asmonean,* December 31, 1852, 127; Isaac Markus Jost, "Modern History of Judaism," *The Asmonean,* October 15, 1852, 260.

[25] Ismar Schorsch, "The Myth of Sephardic Supremacy," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 34: 47–66.

[26] "Synopsis of the History of the Israelites," *American Israelite,* September 25, 1857, 93.

which they lived, a narrative that, as Ismar Schorsch has noted, at once served to encourage European nations to grant Jews emancipation and to charge modern Jews to shed their supposed insularity.[27]

The Jewish Messenger evinced a similar narrative of Jewish history, celebrating the ancient and early medieval periods while decrying the medieval isolation of the Jews. Writers for *The Messenger* derided what they saw as medieval Jewish casuistry and likewise celebrated what they deemed the progress made by European Jews since the advent of the Enlightenment.[28] They did so, however, with marked Orthodox slant: writers celebrated Mendelssohn as a harbinger of Jewish cosmopolitanism but they also emphasized that he was, as one article put it, a model of "how an orthodox Jew may combine Judaism and science and acquire the esteem of his Christian fellow-citizens." Indeed, some writers in the paper emphasized that Jews would *only* gain the respect of Christian neighbors when they were loyal to the rabbinic tradition.[29] As one 1868 editorial put it, the outside world, which judged Jews by reason, could never respect professors of a religion that disregarded its very central precepts.[30]

Over time, the differences between *The Messenger* and *Israelite's* approaches to engagement with European Judaism became even more pronounced. By the late 1870s, and especially in the 1880s, under the leadership of Wise's son Leo,

27 "Contributions to the Philosophic Literature," *American Israelite,* March 30, 1855, 301. This survey of Jewish philosophy was heavily based on European Jewish historians of the time but appears to have been written by a layman, based on several inaccuracies, misunderstandings, and generalizations. Also see "Acknowledgment of Hebrew Talents," *American Israelite,* August 31, 1860, 70; Jewish Chronicle, London, "The Jewish Pulpit," *American Israelite,* April 18, 1862, 333; "The Life of Uriel Acosta," *American Israelite,* April 25, 1862, 340; "Baruch Spinoza," *American Israelite,* May 9, 1873, 5; "The Importance of the Jews in the Maintenance and Revival of Learning During the Middle Ages, From the German of M. J. Schleiden," *American Israelite,* June 1, 1877, 4; "Post-Biblical History of the Jews," *American Israelite,* August 13, 1869, 9; Friedlander [Trans.], "Jewish Literati of the Middle Ages," *American Israelite,* May 16, 1879, 5; "Chachme Hadarot," *American Israelite,* December 24, 1880, 204; "The Jews – Their Condition in the Past Compared with that of the Present, with Reflections on their Future," *American Israelite,* April 9, 1869, 5. Schorsch, "Myth of Sephardic Supremacy."

28 "The Golden Age of the Jews," *The Jewish Messenger,* July 30, 1869, 2; "Some Jewish Rabbis," *The Jewish Messenger,* November 11, 1870, 4; "The Jews of Modern Times," *The Jewish Messenger,* June 14, 1872, 4. The latter article focused on French medieval and early modern rabbis, who were not what the author termed "casuists."

29 See "The German Spirit," *The Jewish Messenger,* December 30, 1870, 2. On Mendelsohn as an Orthodox reformer, see "Moses Mendelsohn," *The Jewish Messenger,* July 21, 1871, 6; "Mendelsohn and the Rabbis," *The Jewish Messenger,* January 29, 1886, 5

30 "Misrepresentation," *The Jewish Messenger,* July 10, 1868, 4.

The Israelite began to feature much less material about Germany and fewer pieces that cast German Judaism as a role model. Increasingly, the paper portrayed American Judaism in a much more self-confident manner, celebrating the community's successful adoption of Reform Judaism and congregational union. To *The Jewish Messenger,* however, the religious changes celebrated by their rival paper were decidedly unwelcomed. Its editors continued to lament American Judaism's move towards Reform, notwithstanding their enthusiasm for American Jewish embourgeoisement and acculturation. In *The Messenger,* France and England continued to be the role models of what American Judaism could be. For *The Israelite,* American Judaism was increasingly represented as the role model for everyone else, and European Judaism ceased to be as important a part of the conversation. As America became Jewish history's *telos,* late 19th-century writers created the understanding of the period this article seeks to revise.

5. Conclusion

Since the 1970s, most American Jewish historians have seen American Jewish religious change primarily as a consequence of Americanization, envisioning a process whereby Jews in America immigrated with various religious values and ideas that were then reshaped by life in the United States. The historians who have challenged this model have mostly been scholars of Reform Judaism, such as Michael Meyer, who posits that Reform in America was a product of what he refers to as both "Americanization and Germanization." Historians like Meyer, however, see German influence on Reform as coming from German-trained rabbis and late German immigrants who imported German ideas rather than from continuous engagement with such ideas. Analysis of transnational intellectual engagement among American Jews has most often been restricted to the ideas of German-born rabbis – and mostly those rabbis who were theologians or philosophers. Figures like Wise have often been dismissed as mere poplarizers or even bastardizers of German Reform principles.[31]

Perhaps a better prism through which to approach American Jews during this period is that of historian Moshe Rosman, who proposes that when we

[31] For examples of this kind of dismissal of popular Reform leaders, see Jick, *Americanization of the Synagogue,* especially 183–184; Benny Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Hebrew Union College Press, 1979), 5.

approach Jewish history in Poland, we think of Jews as functioning between two cultural poles – the Jewish tradition and transnational Jewish cultures on the one hand, and Polish history and culture on the other.[32] In assessing the American Jewish intellectual and religious experience we can certainly observe a strong dialogue with American ideas and religious forms. Why would we expect anything else? Looking closely at popular sources, however, reveals an equally potent transnational engagement with European Jewish communities. There is no way to write an American Jewish religious history of this period that would not be transnational.

[32] Moshe Rosman, *How Jewish is Jewish History?* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007), 92.