

The Jewish Museum

Under the auspices of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America

THE MODERN JEWISH EXPERIENCE

Beginning in the 18th century, Jewish life was transformed by its encounter with modernity. The modern age introduced new knowledge and technology, mass migrations and nationalism, secular culture and capitalism, to every corner of the world. Jews were challenged to redefine themselves as individuals and as a people as new opportunities for employment, education, and participation in society became available to them.

Jews were often in the forefront as creators of modern culture, especially in the arts, politics and the sciences. For the first time many of them became citizens of the nations in which they lived. However, they also encountered new forms of persecution and threats to their communal identity.

Like other peoples, Jews also reasserted their own claims to nationhood, eventually reestablishing a Jewish state in their ancient homeland. Modernity spurred many of them to seek new ways of interpreting traditions. They created new religious and political movements, new communal and international institutions, and new forms of participation in the cultural and economic life of their countries. There were many conflicting choices that confronted Jews everywhere: assimilation or nationalism, religious orthodoxy or reform, capitalism or socialism.

Enlightenment and Emancipation

In the modern world, Jewish life was dramatically transformed by the 18th-century philosophy of the Enlightenment. The concepts of liberty, equality, and the betterment of humankind through education and historical progress spread throughout Europe, sparking a new attitude toward Jews and a reconsideration of their status. Some western European thinkers wanted to make the Jews "useful" to the state by encouraging them to obtain a secular education, enter new occupations, and integrate into society as a whole.

The Jewish Enlightenment (haskalah) movement was spearheaded by German Jewish intellectuals who sought to increase Jewish involvement in general European culture, while creating a modern Jewish culture in which Jews could still retain their identity.

Over the next two centuries, and in varying degrees from country to country, Jews were emancipated: freed from old restrictions, made full citizens, and given equal rights before the law. The price, however, was the loss of Jewish autonomy in legal, communal, and educational matters. The emergence of Jewish civic equality, moreover, was a slow and uneven process, with advances often followed by setbacks.

Anti-Semitism

In Europe during the 19th century, the growth of industry, the development of large cities, and the triumph of bureaucratic states completely upset the lives of most people, even as these advances

created new opportunities. Anti-Semitism provided an outlet for these frustrations. The Jews were perceived as responsible for the changes, since they benefited from emancipation and modernity. The term "anti-Semitism" is itself a modern invention, first introduced into political discourse by the German journalist Wilhelm Marr, author of the 1867 pamphlet "The Victory of Judaism over Germandom."

Antagonism toward Jews was manifested in various ways. These ranged from the persecution of individual Jews and the exclusion of Jews from certain social and professional contexts, to extreme violence against entire Jewish communities. Unlike traditional Christian anti-Judaism, modern anti-Semitism was secular in its sources and its expressions. Jews were characterized as a separate and distinct race, incapable of being absorbed into European society. Even worse, Jews were maligned as parasites hostile to the nation – "a state within a state." Extreme anti-Semites claimed that the Jews were engaged in a global conspiracy to undermine Christianity and Western civilization.

This anti-Semitism evoked different responses from Jews, ranging from attempts at assimilation to conversion, calls for nationalism, forceful resistance, and flight.

National Identity

By the end of the 19th century, new and more vicious types of anti-Semitism were appearing which caused many Jews in Europe to become disillusioned with the promises of Enlightenment and emancipation. They felt that they would never be fully accepted, no matter how much they assimilated with society at large. In Russia, the government encouraged pogroms; in Germany and Austria, small but organized anti-Semitic political parties emerged; in France, a resurgent nationalism often took the form of explicit anti-Semitism.

All over Europe, national groups that had not yet achieved political autonomy were organizing in the struggle for self-determination. Modern Jewish nationalism advocated an independent political structure for Jews. Jewish nationalists felt that Jews would be able to determine their own destiny only if they created a separate society.

Zionism

Zionism, led by Theodor Herzl, is the name for the organized movement of Jews who wanted to create a national home in Palestine. They believed that the historic homeland of the Jewish people, the land of Israel, was the only place that could attract enough Jews for the building of an independent political entity.

Zionism combined the age-old love for the ancient homeland with a realistic plan for creating a politically autonomous society speaking its own Hebrew language.

Cultural Roles

Jews as a social group did not begin to participate actively in European culture until the end of the 18th century. Many Jews viewed cultivation in art, literature, music, and philosophy as the main avenue to social integration.

Jewish intellectuals were attracted to the secular and modern elements in European culture. Jews became prominent as innovators in science, often developing new specializations and even founding new fields, such as psychoanalysis (e.g. Sigmund Freud), as they sought to distinguish themselves in a still unfriendly environment. This quality of "outsiderness" or marginalization has been cited as an explanation for the disproportionately high number of Jews who pioneered modern culture and who joined the most avant-garde movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. The link between Jewish intellectuals and the avant-garde was a focus of attacks by anti-Semites, since anti-Semites were often also critics of modern movements in art, music, and literature.

Religious Identity

Beginning in the 18th century, enlightenment and emancipation began to change the conditions of Jewish life. Religious identity had involved every aspect of life: belonging to the community and observing religious laws were inseparable. As Jews began to function within the larger society, it became difficult for them to preserve many of their traditional ways of life. A crisis of religious identity ensued. And by the end of the 19th century, many Jews thought of Judaism primarily as a set of religious beliefs, rather than as a community or a way of life. The different movements and approaches to Judaism, which developed differently in their European and American adaptations, remain the basis for much of organized Jewish religious life to this day.

The Holocaust

In Hebrew it is referred to as The Holocaust which literally means annihilation. It refers to the period in history between 1933 and 1945 in which the Nazis and their allies killed close to six million Jews and destroyed Jewish life in most of Europe. Building a vast organization dedicated to annihilating people they believed had no right to live, they then perfected industrial techniques of mass murder. Their prime obsession was eradicating the Jews, yet Jews were not their only victims: Gypsies, political opponents (Communists and Socialists), Polish intellectuals, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the physically and mentally handicapped all died at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators.

New Directions

Since World War II, world Jewry has confronted two monumental transformations. As a result of the destruction of two-thirds of European Jewry in the Shoah, the United States became the most prominent center of Jewish life in the Diaspora. In 1948, for the first time in almost 2,000 years, a center in the ancient homeland of the Jewish people was created, through the establishment of the new State of Israel. After Israel won independence, Jewish communities that had thrived for centuries in Arab

lands were threatened; many of their members relocated to Israel, France, and North America. Late, political conditions in the former Soviet Union and in Ethiopia prompted the migration of large numbers of Jews from these regions.

Israeli and Diaspora Jewry are constantly redefining themselves and their relation to each other. Jewish scholarship has flourished both in Israel and the Diaspora.

There are new directions in Judaism which are marked by the desire to balance a deep Jewish reverence for the past with the need for meaningful participation in contemporary society.

Vocabulary:

Anti-Semitism - Discrimination and prejudice against Jews.

Assimilation - An immigrant or culturally distinct group which becomes absorbed into the prevailing culture.

Culture - The arts, beliefs, institutions, and other products of human work and thought expressed in a particular community or by a particular group.

Diaspora - The body of Jews or Jewish communities settled outside of Israel.

Gentile - Someone who is not Jewish.

Identity - The characteristics, qualities, associations, and affiliations through which a person sees him or herself.

Modernity- 1. Something which is typical of the present or recent times. 2. Something, which relates to advanced style, technique, or technology.

Nationalism-The belief that nations would benefit from acting independently rather than collectively, emphasizing national rather than international goals.

Pogrom -An organized and often officially encouraged persecution or massacre of a minority group, esp. one conducted against the Jews.

Shoah - This is Hebrew for Holocaust. The literal translation is annihilation. It refers to the years between 1933 and 1945 when the Nazis and their allies killed close to six million Jews and destroyed Jewish life in most of Europe.

Torah- This is the first five books of the Hebrew Bible and is the entire body of Jewish law and teaching. It is in scroll form when it is used for liturgical purposes.

Zionism - It is the name for the organized movement of those Jews who wanted to create a national home in Palestine.