

**JEWS AND JUDAISM
IN THE NINETEENTH
CENTURY**

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Jews and Judaism in the nineteenth century by Gustav Karpeles

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GUSTAV KARPELES

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BY
GUSTAV KARPELES

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JEW'S AND JUDAISM IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

I

We are standing on the border line between two centuries, a solemn moment which it behooves us to use for a review of the past and a survey of the future. To review the past will naturally be more profitable than to survey the future. A retrospect can yield instruction, but our view of the future is obscured by enveloping fog and heavy clouds. Sentimental reflections, however, avail naught. A long history overflowing with pain has taught the Jew the truth of what the Preacher uttered from out of the fulness of his experience: "The generations come, and the generations go, the earth stands forever." Nearly the same thought is expressed by one of the archangels in the Prologue to *Faust*, in his greeting to the dawn of a new day of eternity:

"The sun-orb sings, in emulation,
'Mid brother-spheres, his ancient round:
His path predestined through Creation
He ends with step of thunder-sound."

Eternity has neither days, nor years, nor æons, but man in his finitude must needs tell off a begin-

ning and an end on the circle of everlasting life and death, and his divisions testify, not to his finitude alone, but also to his arbitrariness.

And yet few will agree with the learned German professor who calls it the *naïveté* of a child or of a barbarian that makes us see something peculiarly demoniac in the day designated by human device as the beginning of a century. Century festivals go back to remote times. The ancients celebrated them with full consciousness of the serious demands of their day and of the problems awaiting solution. As the Hellenes of days long gone by derived fresh courage for their combats from their civic celebrations, so we moderns ought to emerge from the close of a circumscribed, well-defined epoch in our development fortified and reinvigorated for the work with which the future is surcharged. From this point of view an historical retrospect has practical value and ethical significance.

What has the century just closed given to modern Judaism? When we settle up our account with the century, what is the balance to our credit? These are the questions that require an answer.

It may safely be assumed that none is inclined to dispute the statement that the nineteenth century was one of the most momentous in the history of Judaism. Perhaps no one century since that of the destruction of the Temple and the birth of Jesus has equalled it in importance. Or, not to go back to so remote a period, can it be gainsaid that since the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, an interval of four hundred years, the inner and outer develop-

ment of Judaism has suffered no such radical changes as in the nineteenth century?

Historians call it the age of growing self-consciousness. This description does not convey exhaustively the significance of its content. At best such historical summing up is a hazardous practice. For definite views and sure results a description of events is more to the purpose.

A careful examination of the psychic and the external material offered by the century makes it appear that seven great currents flow through its history. They succeed or overlap one another, sometimes their courses intersect, and again they flow along peacefully in parallel lines.

The first of these currents prevailed in the time of ferment and combat, when apostasy and baptism were the order of the day. The second is denominated the science of Judaism. The third is the struggle for political emancipation. The fourth is marked by religious reform conflicts, the fifth by assimilative tendencies, the sixth by anti-Semitism, and the seventh by the rise and concentration of "Young Israel." For the sake of those who insist upon time limits it may be said that the first two currents characterize the first quarter of the century; the next two, the middle of the century, and the last three, the closing quarter. But it cannot be repeated too often that all such summaries and divisions are full of pitfalls, against which the student must be on his guard. For our purpose it is more profitable to pass the important events in review, and trace the course of each stream from its source to its mouth.

The first point that demands consideration is the appearance of Judaism at the opening of the nineteenth century. The mass of the Jews lived an unthinking routine life. Of the transformation about to take place, they had scarce a suspicion. The religious attitude was on the whole what it had been three or four hundred years earlier. Religious customs were rigidly observed, in the synagogue and in the home alike. Of spiritualization, of an inner exalted feeling, there was not a trace. No one had heard of the ethical mission of Judaism. Political oppression was but little less galling than before; in the countries of the East, indeed, it weighed even more heavily upon the Jews than formerly. Yet a breath of the new time had stolen its way into the narrow Jew streets. The young people were familiarizing themselves with secular culture, and they were beginning to nurse religious doubts.

The rapid progress of the Jew in modern living is astounding. Scarcely ten years after the death of Moses Mendelssohn there were Jewish circles in Berlin, Breslau, and Königsberg, even in Vienna and in Paris, in which the new attitude toward the problems of life had completely established itself. From the Jewish *salons* in Berlin and Vienna a generation fared forth which had armed itself for war against the old order. The Jewish women pointed the way, the full-grown men were not yet able to follow them, the only ones that kept pace with them were the young enthusiasts who had greedily drunk in Lessing's *Nathan* and the ideas of Voltaire and Rousseau.

Affairs in Berlin were typical of the Jewish conditions of the day. The Prussian capital was the centre of Jewish life, the meeting place of the West and the East, of the Slavic element with the Teutonic element. These two elements were still mutually exclusive, instead of complementary, as they are in reality, seeing that the one exercises conservative force within modern Judaism, and the other creative force. Put the two names Hirschel Lewin and Rahel Levin next to each other, and the whole abyss yawning between the old and the new is uncovered. Hirschel Lewin, the chief rabbi of the Berlin community at the beginning of the century, is the representative of the old; Rahel Levin, the wife of Varnhagen von Ense, is the typical representative of the new. These two did not speak the same language. From Rahel's *salon*, in which noted diplomats, princes of the intellect, members of the royal family, poets, and warriors, moved on a footing of intimacy, no bridge led to the Synagogue of the Heiderereutergasse, where the services were conducted entirely in Hebrew, with as strict regard to tradition as in the remotest corners of Russia or Galicia. Compromise was out of the question, an agreement not to be thought of, a separation inevitable.

An attempt to signalize the inner division by an outer, visible act had been made by a disciple of Moses Mendelssohn. The well-known David Friedländer has frequently been held up to reprobation for his letter to the Provost Teller (1799), in which he announced his determination and that of his followers to accept Christianity, provided the Church

would exempt them from subscribing to her historical doctrines. They were prepared to accept the Christian doctrines of the reason, but they could never go the length of the dogma of a Son of God. On the other hand, they held in common with Christians the belief in the unity of God, the incorporeality and immortality of the soul, and the destiny of man to aspire to perfection and happiness. The reader of history knows with what scorn the petitioners were repulsed.

In their despondency at the rebuff no alternative presented itself but the extreme measure of accepting Christianity in the gross, historical truths and all the rest. Friedländer and his *confrères*, indeed, did not arrive at this logically correct conclusion, but their children and grandchildren did. A veritable mania for baptism began to manifest itself. It possessed not only the ladies of the *salons*, but also the less aristocratic circles, the circles of the clerks and servant-maids. In the first quarter of the century a large part of the Jewish community of Berlin, in the opinion of some authorities fully half its members, were converted to Christianity. The same happened in Königsberg, Frankfort, Breslau, and other large cities.

With baptism immorality increased. The Jews but followed the example set them by their non-Jewish environment. "Vices prevailed among us," is the text of one lamentation, "which our fathers had not known, and which were purchased dearly at any price. Irreligiousness, debauchery, and effeminacy, the weeds that sprout up out of the abuse