At the Crossroads: Politics of Inclusion and Emancipation

In the course of the first half of the nineteenth century, the program of emotionalized religiosity that was advanced by the maskilim David Frankel, Joseph Wolf, and other reform-minded pedagogues and ideologues in Sulamith reached increasingly larger segments of the German-Jewish population. In this period, German Jews became economically integrated into the middle class and adopted bourgeois life styles. The embourgeoisement of the Jewish religion formed an integral part of this process of upward mobility and acculturation. Moreover, Jews often believed and were made to believe that they needed to cultivate enlightened, aesthetically appealing, and spiritually uplifting forms of worship in order to earn full citizenship. In fact, when Jewish men introduced the first reformed prayer services in Germany in the Napoleonic kingdom of Westphalia in the early part of the nineteenth century, they stated publicly that synagogue reform was to express and to consolidate their new status as German compatriots.

The political discourse of rights that these leaders used, in which men acted as brothers among brothers rather than as fathers, excluded women. However, this language of rights, emancipation, and politics did not dominate German-Jewish religious culture. Jewish leaders also consistently fostered a Jewish religiosity that they located in the family, that addressed men as well as women as parents, and that highlighted the role of the Jewish mother.

In the second decade of the nineteenth century, several newly founded Jewish periodicals followed the example of Sulamith and began to agitate for a greater inclusion of women in new forms of religious life. In the same vein, Gotthold Salomon published the first work of modern religious meditations...
for Jewish women, and in the 1820s, the trend of a family- and women-oriented Judaism gained further momentum. Salomon and Eduard Kley came to serve as preachers at the Hamburg Reform Temple and published volumes of sermons in which they exalted family life and praised women as exemplars of morality and religiosity.

Reformers lauded the female sex, emphasized the importance of women's supposedly beneficial influence on Jewish society, and promoted synagogue attendance and religious education for women. Yet sometimes they could not avoid acknowledging that Halakhah persisted in severely restricting women's access to central religious practices, and on occasions they remarked on the peculiar if not inferior status of women in Jewish law. Surprisingly little discussion took place on these issues. In one of the few interventions, Reform rabbi Abraham Geiger published a comprehensive critique of women's position in rabbinc Judaism and proposed to emancipate women within the strictures of Halakhah. Eight years later, when the reform-minded faction of the German rabbinate convened the influential rabbinical conferences of the 1840s, Samuel Adler submitted a petition for women's equality in Jewish law to one of the meetings.

I shall examine here in some detail the arguments brought forward by those who suggested a feminist revision of Halakhah and the ideological frameworks in which these proposals were embedded. However, in the nineteenth century, the Reform movement failed to improve women's status in Jewish law. Deliberations at the rabbinical assembly of 1845 and the report that the Committee on the Religious Status of Women in Judaism prepared for the conference of 1846 did not effect results. The increased attention to women and the greater importance that rabbis, preachers, and educators assigned to them did not translate into women's emancipation in Jewish law. It was not the reform of Halakhah that facilitated the improvement of Jewish women's position in nineteenth-century Judaism. Instead, change resulted from a cultural shift toward an enlightened and bourgeois religiosity away from the religious practices that had stood at the center of halakhic Judaism.

THE EARLY YEARS:
EMANCIPATORY DISCOURSE
AND BOURGEOIS RELIGIOSITY

Women were highly visible in the program of social and cultural betterment with which Sulamith aimed to further the integration of Jews into German society. Yet in the same period, Jewish men tended to disregard women when men's articles, sermons, and speeches focused on questions of German Jews. Feminist emancipatory politics did not form
a platform for the elevation of women. In July 1810, for instance, the Jewish consistory of Westphalia inaugurated Germany’s first Reform temple in Seesen, and the addresses given by the two leading members of the consistory, Israel Jacobson and Jeremiah Heinemann, catered solely to men. We possess no evidence as to whether women attended the ceremony and, in fact, the celebration may very well have been an exclusively male event. Although the new synagogue was to serve as the place of worship for the small local Jewish community, the school attached to the sanctuary was just for boys. Moreover, the Jewish consistory of Westphalia had designed the dedication ceremony as a political affair of great symbolic importance and not as a communal celebration. It had invited a large number of Christian dignitaries, including pastors, priests, and government officials, as well as Jewish and non-Jewish businessmen and notables. The purpose of the dedication ceremony of the Seesen temple was to evince the dignity of the country’s Jewish citizens and the worthiness of the Jewish religion in light of the emancipation that the Jews of Westphalia had gained in the Napoleonic kingdom.

Three years earlier in the newly established Kingdom of Westphalia, the French ruler Jerome Bonaparte had granted his Jewish subjects full civil equality and religious freedom. The Napoleonic government had also created the Jewish consistory of Westphalia—an administrative body headed by a president, three rabbis, and two Jewish laymen that possessed the authority to regulate Jewish life in Westphalia. Israel Jacobson held the presidency of the Jewish consistory. He had been born in 1768 in Halberstadt into a wealthy family, had studied for the rabbinate but instead had become a successful businessman. Jacobson was deeply committed to the political and cultural integration of German Jewry and wished to adapt the Jewish religion to contemporary sensibilities. As president of the consistory, he was able to play a leading role in the Jewish Reform movement that had begun to take shape. After the demise of the Kingdom of Westphalia and the Westphalian consistory in 1813, Jacobson relocated to Berlin and spearheaded the reform of Jewish worship in the Prussian capital. Ten years younger and not as affluent as Jacobson, Jeremiah Heinemann was less prominent, though he was equally committed to reforming Judaism. With David Fränkel, he represented the Jewish laity in the consistory and served as Jacobson’s personal secretary.

The construction of the Reform temple in Seesen, with its bell and clock tower, its organ, and its novel interior arrangements was perhaps the most celebrated achievement of the Jewish consistory of Westphalia, and was in itself a statement of how emancipated Jews worshipped. Thus, in their speeches at the inauguration of the temple in 1810, Jacobson and Heinemann hailed the arrival of a new epoch in which differences of religion...
no longer separated Jews from their Christian neighbors. Heinemann emphasized the importance of “education and instruction” to prepare young people for world citizenship, and he applauded the newly won freedom to practice one's religion. The public worship that emerged now, Heinemann believed, would promote virtues from which humankind at large would benefit.\(^5\) In the same vein, Jacobson praised the progress of this age of reason. It was a progress that led not only to the improvement of schools and synagogues, but also united men of all faiths as brothers and equals.\(^6\) However, women were not mentioned in this enlightened discourse of emancipation and citizenship, progress and reason, freedom and equality. Jacobson addressed the assembly consistently as “brothers,” and both he and Heinemann referred to religion and virtue strictly in the context of male civic responsibilities and rights. In fact, the emancipation of Jews in Westphalia—as emancipation elsewhere and later in the nineteenth century—extended exclusively to men. Women continued to lack the civic rights and duties of their male contemporaries, and feminists have claimed that the exclusion of women and their subjugation and disenfranchisement in modern society lay at the core of the new social order established by men at the time.

According to the feminist account, the classic social contract theories with which men legitimized the overthrow of the old society of orders conceived of civil society as a male fraternity. By definition, the theories by which men claimed their natural liberty as free and equal individuals excluded women. For male ideologues from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Sigmund Freud, women were trapped in the physical concreteness of childbirth and motherhood and could not participate in civil society. Feminist scholars have held that in the story of the original social contract that led to the founding of the new bourgeois and capitalist order, women were banned into an increasingly distinct private sphere. Only men could inhabit the political realm, a place where they no longer acted as fathers. When men in the emerging bourgeois society engendered their political rights, they contracted together as brothers. Similarly, as brothers they formed a civil fraternity of free and equal male individuals. In these readings of the accounts of the original social and sexual contract, men had “no desire to become fathers in the classic patriarchal sense.”\(^7\) Rather, they established the political body of civil society, the public realm of middle-class society, through universalist and exclusively male fraternal bonds.

This gendered division of public and private realms was never fully realized. Scholars agree today that women and other groups and people who did not qualify for the fraternity of free and equal individuals could find access to alternative public and political spheres.\(^8\) Yet it is striking that when, in the first decades of the nineteenth century in Germany, Jewish
men acted in the political realm within the parameter of classic social contract theories, they addressed only men and treated equality, progress, and reform as male-to-male issues. Thus when Jewish men turned to non-Jews as brothers, women were absent or at least invisible. On the other hand, when Jewish men pursued cultural integration rather than political emancipation and used the Jewish community or the Jewish family as their frame of reference, women played a significant role in speeches, sermons, writings, and programs of religious reform. Jewish men acted as brothers in an exclusively male political realm, but, as we shall see, they also valued their own functions as fathers, praised the female contribution to Jewish culture, and exalted the feminine aspects of Judaism in a new culture of bourgeois religiosity.

In 1813, the Kingdom of Westphalia and with it the Jewish consistory came to an end. The Reform movement in the region consequently faltered as a political project. Nevertheless, Israel Jacobson and Jeremiah Heinemann moved to Berlin and, under different premises than in Westphalia, continued to work on the educational, religious, and cultural rejuvenation of German Jewry. Heinemann established a boy’s and a girl’s school, both of which he directed. He also founded the periodical Jedidja, which he described as “the representative organ of Heinemann’s educational institutions,” aiming to enhance “the religious, moral, and aesthetic Bildung of humankind” at large. Heinemann had conceived Jedidja as a counterpart to Sulamith, whose editor David Frankel he knew and respected. In fact, “Jedidiah” is a name for the biblical Salomon who, according to the tradition, sang the praises of his beloved, Sulamith, in Song of Songs. Like Sulamith, Jedidja and its successor, the Allgemeine Archiv des Judenthums, advocated a Judaism based on Bildung, morality, and edifying sentiments, reported on the progress of synagogue reform, and emphasized the role of mothers for the religious and moral education of their children. In a wedding sermon reprinted in Jedidja, for instance, the author expounded on the tender nature of the mother who finds the way to the heart of her child, on her responsibility for the moral character of her offspring, and on her duty to serve always as an example of virtue and Sittlichkeit. Thus, in Jedidja and in the Allgemeines Archiv des Judenthums, Heinemann advanced a culture of Jewish religiosity that was not framed by a discourse of citizenship and male rights. Rather than on rights, Heinemann focused on inner values, on the improvement of the heart and the soul, and on religious sentiments. Far from being directed only toward men, this program of moral refinement and intellectual elevation demanded the inclusion of women. Contemporary notions of women’s high
propensity for moral and religious values, as well as ideas on mothers’ crucial pedagogical functions, required that particular attention be given to the female sex. Accordingly, Heinemann provided for the education of girls in his private school and showed concern for the religious and educational needs of women.

In January 1817, Jeremiah Heinemann invited his students’ mothers and other women to attend “religious and aesthetic lectures,” which were to be held in his apartment.\(^\text{14}\) Heinemann himself, who also served as a teacher of religion in his girls’ school, committed to holding weekly talks on religion, while his colleague Hellmuth Winter, a philosopher and pedagogue with a university degree, was scheduled to speak about aesthetics. Winter was to introduce Jewish women to the treasures of classical German literature. According to Heinemann, his lectures on biblical history would emphasize the moral teachings of the Bible; additional religious instruction would lead to “fine universal Bildung [Weltbildung] through the ennoblement of the taste and the refinement of the sentiments.” The talks on German literature aimed at cultivating the moral sensibilities of the Jewish women.\(^\text{15}\) “Indeed,” Heinemann claimed, “the seeds of religious and moral human culture [Menschenkultur] lie in aesthetic Bildung.”\(^\text{16}\)

In Heinemann’s description of the projected lectures and of the classes into which women could enroll additionally, the confluence of religion and Bildung, of morality and beauty, and of the Bible and Schiller could not be more striking. Like other pedagogues, scholars, and theologians of his time, Heinemann promoted a Jewish culture of religiosity in which Bildung and religion overlapped. In the view of contemporaries, this religion of Bildung helped develop an individual’s moral capacities through selfreflective edification. According to Heinemann and other advocates of this novel brand of Judaism, women not only possessed a predisposition for the beautiful and the sublime, but had the vocation to be the bearers of morality, religiosity, decency, and beauty.

THE BEGINNINGS OF MODERN DEVOTIONAL LITERATURE FOR WOMEN

It remains uncertain whether the lectures that Heinemann advertised in Jedidja ever took place. Yet it does appear that Jewish women in Berlin showed interest in a new type of religiosity and in religious talks in the German language.\(^\text{17}\) In the private synagogue that Israel Jacobson, after having left Westphalia, opened in his Berlin home in 1815, regular German-language sermons formed a main attraction for many worshippers. Within merely a few months, his quarters proved too small for the up-to-four-hundred
worshippers. Thus, Jacob Herz Beer, one of the wealthiest men in Berlin at the time, and Amalia Beer, his well-educated wife who played a leading role in the cultural and intellectual life of the city, offered to house the services in their roomier home. The reformed worship in the Beer temple, as it was called, gained extensive popularity among both Jewish men and women. In Berlin between 1815 and 1823, a generation of Jewish preachers and scholars—among them Leopold Zunz, one of the founders of Wissenschaft des Judentums—delivered their first sermons to a captivated and growing audience.18

Gotthold Salomon, teacher at the Dessau Free School and, as we have seen, a contributor to Sulamith from its inception, was one of these mostly young men who preached in High German at the new services in Berlin. Salomon had been born in 1784 in a village in Anhalt-Dessau and had come to Dessau at age sixteen as an impoverished Talmud student. He attended a yeshivah in Dessau, but also pursued secular studies. In 1802, Salomon was hired at the Jewish Free School of Dessau to teach Hebrew and German. He distinguished himself by giving inspiring lectures in the classes of modern-type religious instruction that the school had introduced, and began to give edifying talks in German on Sabbath and holidays at the meetings of a Dessau dowry association. Finally, in the fall of 1815 Salomon traveled to Berlin and delivered his first devotional speech during a synagogue service in Jacobson’s house. This marked the beginning of his career as a preacher that would earn him the title “father of modern Jewish homiletics.”19

Although in his contributions to Sulamith Salomon focused on women’s place in contemporary Jewish society, in the sermon at Jacobson’s private synagogue he did not emphasize women’s specific spiritual or moral vocation.20 Yet neither did he conceive of men as brothers, citizens, and equals within the parameters of the discourse of a male brotherhood that excluded women. In his sermon, Salomon talked about virtue and moral improvement and turned to men as members of families, as brothers and fathers. He thus addressed both men and women: “brothers and sisters” as well as “fathers and mothers.”21 As a preacher, Salomon had begun to propagate a religious culture that combined a high regard of the Jewish man as a family man with a high esteem for women’s moral capacities and for female religiosity.

A year after his first sermon in Berlin, Salomon published a three-hun-dred-page book attesting to his concern for women’s religious needs. With Selima’s Stunden der Weihe, eine moralisch-religiöse Schrift für Gebildete des weiblichen Geschlechts (Selim’s Hours of Devotion, a Moral-Religious Work for the Educated of the Female Sex), Salomon created the first piece of modern German-language devotional literature for Jewish women.22
Consisting of essays on subjects such as human destiny, religion, nature, revelation, immortality, prayer, Jewish festivals, and the confirmation ceremony, the book contained religious meditations that were directed specifically to women. Salomon ascribed the authorship of Selima's Stunden der Weihe to the fictional character of Selima, a young woman from a wealthy, pious, and culturally refined German-Jewish family. In his introduction, Salomon described Selima and her family as models of virtue, religiosity, and moral conduct. Selima’s mother did not indulge herself with balls and amusements. Rather she took her role as the educator of her children seriously and provided her son and even more so her daughter with exemplary moral and religious guidance. Moreover, Selima received a well-balanced education in drawing, music, German literature, history, and needlework as well as religious instruction. Consequently, Salomon recounted, the young woman reached the highest standards of noble womanhood: she had a pure and friendly soul, a chaste heart and simple manners, most perfectly developed tender sentiments, and a special closeness to the Divine. Indeed, God’s presence, which revealed itself in the beauty of nature, moved Selima deeply when she took walks with her girlfriend or her parents. With her companions, she then mused on human and celestial matters, and later recorded her impressions. Salomon called these meditations Selima’s “hours of devotion,” using the term devotion very broadly.

In one of these devotions, Selima wandered with her mother one evening “in the temple of nature, lit by the moon and by stars.” Inspired by the majesty of the sky, her mother talked to her about the dignity of human existence. The human condition, according to Selima’s mother, was distinguished by God’s gifts of reason and language, by humans’ freedom to choose between good and evil, and by the striving for eternity. Thus, Selima’s mother—or rather Gotthold Salomon—linked reason and culture with morality, and with the human capacity for transcendence. Here he conceived religion in the most universal of terms. It constituted an experience of the Divine that led to social grace and moral integrity. Selima’s Stunden der Weihe, however, also possessed specifically Jewish sections. Salomon introduced the readers to biblical history, and the book included meditations for the Jewish holidays with titles such as “thoughts and sentiments at the commencement of the Day of Atonement.” In these meditations, Salomon built on the established literary traditions of Jewish women’s prayers, called tkhines. More significantly, however, Selima’s Stunden der Weihe promoted a religiosity that encouraged women to let themselves be uplifted by beauty and by noble sentiments and to develop their spiritual, intellectual, and moral faculties harmoniously.
According to Phōbus Philippson (born in Dessau in 1807), who was the son of Salomon's friend and colleague Moses Philippson and who knew Salomon as a teacher and preacher, Selima's Stunden der Weihe enjoyed wide popularity. Salomon, Philippson remembered, received much praise for the good that his pioneering work of modern Jewish devotional literature had done: “Numerous cultivated [gebildete] women only now formed an idea of the character of their religion, . . . and the defection from the religion of their fathers which had become popular at the time was prevented for many a female contemporary.” Indeed, in the introduction to Selima's Stunden der Weihe, Salomon reported that initially his distributors had hesitated to support the work, since, he was told, “our ladies were much too enlightened” to read religious literature. Most likely, developments in Berlin rather than in Dessau or in other German-Jewish communities inspired the perception that Jewish women had turned their back on religion and threatened to leave the fold.

The Berlin Jewish community, at the time, was experiencing conversions to Christianity in which women took the lead. In the first two decades of the nineteenth century, a group of wealthy and distinguished Jewish families left Judaism. A few highly educated Jewish women, moreover, who belonged to the literary, cultural, and financial elite of the Prussian capital, divorced their Jewish husbands in order to marry Christians. Due to their prominence, the behavior of these salon women, as they are known, shocked Jewish observers far beyond the limits of Berlin. The salon women, however, formed only a small cohort of not more than two dozen individuals, not all of whom converted, living under a set of very specific circumstances. Many other Jewish women in the second decade of the 1800s, in fact, may still have been unfamiliar with German literature and may have preferred to read religious texts in Yiddish. Thus, when Salomon sought to publish Selima's Stunden der Weihe, a readership for Jewish women's devotional literature in High German, printed in Latin letters, was far from guaranteed. While contemporaries perceived highly educated women as estranged from Judaism, it appeared doubtful whether less acculturated women would be attracted to a book such as his. Salomon indeed published his work with the help of subscriptions; in the introduction he described the difficulties he had encountered in financing the volume and in recruiting subscribers. Eventually, however, thirty-nine men and ninety women, some of them Christians, signed up to order Selima's Stunden der Weihe, attesting to a substantial interest of Jewish women in the project. Seven women from Leipzig, six from Magdeburg, and twenty-five from Dessau supported the publication, while Salomon mustered only eight subscriptions from Berlin.
and Israel Jacobson stood out with ten orders each, while Amalia Beer requested six copies. Salomon, in fact, dedicated Selimas Stunden der Weihe to Beer.

Amalia Beer can be considered the counter model to the Jewish salon women, many of whom had only a precarious attachment to Judaism. Though she was thoroughly integrated into the cultural, non-Jewish elite of Berlin, Beer remained committed to the Jewish religion. The entire Beer family, in fact, not only stayed within the fold but involved itself in the nascent Jewish Reform movement. Thus, Beer, her family, Salomon, Heinemann, Jacobson, and other reformers worked to create an alternative to a Judaism that had lost its attraction for a segment of the economic and cultural elite of the Berlin Jewish community. They devised new forms of Jewish religiosity that conformed to nineteenth-century bourgeois culture. While one cannot conclusively determine whether the conversion wave in Berlin truly accelerated or even caused reforms in Jewish worship and education, it appears reasonable to assume that the absence of viable alternatives to rabbinic Judaism drove some Jews away from Jewish practice. Certainly, reformers themselves expressed an urgency to adapt Judaism to modern society in order to prevent conversions. In the eyes of male Jewish leaders, women seemed particularly vulnerable to apostasy. Jewish reformers deplored the marginal position of women in rabbinic Judaism, the absence of formal religious instruction for females, and the lack of adequate religious literature directed toward women. These evils, they worried, drove women, whom the reformers felt lacked strength of character, to indifference and defection. Thus, Selima's Stunden der Weihe was credited with preventing female conversions. Such a claim can hardly be substantiated. Yet the publication of Salomon's book of devotions contributed to the formation of a modern religious culture in which women occupied a well-respected and highly visible place.

Throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, men and women in Germany continued to convert from Judaism or just disengaged from Jewish religious practice. At the same time, however, the articles in Sulamith, Jedidja, and Selimas'Stunden der Weihe represented models for an emerging German-language religious literature for women. Not only did women find an alternative to both rabbinic Judaism and life outside of the Jewish community, but female religious culture also ceased to be marginal and secondary to male Jewish practices. Womens Judaism, as it found expression in religious literature for and—as we shall see later—also by women, converged with the religious sensibilities of nineteenth-century German Jewry at large. In a religious culture framed not by a discourse of rights but by the ideals of Bildung, Sittlichkeit, and emotional sensitivity, women and the Jewish family came to the fore.
In the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Jewish leaders in Berlin and Dessau held the lead in forging a reformed Jewish religiosity and in propagating one of its most significant innovations: the German-language sermon in public worship. The consistory in the Napoleonic Kingdom of Westphalia had pioneered synagogue reform, but had disbanded after only a few years. The Jewish Free School in Frankfurt, the Philanthropin, was another institution in which reform-minded educators experimented with giving edifying speeches to students. Yet these devotional exercises were not worship services. Only in Dessau did Joseph Wolf, the co-founder of Sulamith, deliver German-language sermons in a synagogue as early as 1808. In Berlin, as we have seen, Jewish preachers also developed their skills in Jacobson’s private synagogue and in the Beer temple. However, the Prussian government, perceiving the reform of Judaism as dissent and as a potential source of political subversion, closed this temple in 1823. Subsequently, the center of the nascent Reform movement shifted to Hamburg, where Gotthold Salomon and Eduard Kley, a reformer and educator from Berlin, acted as preachers in the newly established Hamburg Temple. In what became the prototype of the German Reform synagogue, Salomon and Kley shaped the genre of the modern Jewish sermon.
Kley had been born in 1789 in rural Silesia and had received the basics of a traditional Jewish education. Yet his family, poor and open to innovations, also sent him to the Jewish Free School in Breslau. In 1809, Kley moved to Berlin, where he lived with the family of Jacob Herz and Amalia Beer, tutored their son Michael, and attended university lectures by leading thinkers of the period such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich Schleiermacher. From 1815 on, he also preached at the reformed synagogue services in Israel Jacobson’s house, and in 1817, he left Berlin in order to become the director of the Jewish Free School of Hamburg.40 In Hamburg, Kley was instrumental in founding the Hamburg Temple, Germany’s model Reform congregation, and acted as the synagogue’s first preacher. Soon, the Hamburg Temple looked for a second preacher and hired Gotthold Salomon who assumed the position in 1818. Together, Kley and Salomon turned Hamburg into the capital of contemporary Jewish homiletics. Salomon, in particular, gained fame for his talent as an orator and became “the favorite preacher of the female sex.”41

Salomon developed a style of preaching that completely dispensed with transmitting any concrete knowledge and fully focused, instead, on being “edifying, exciting, yes gripping [fortreißend]”42 Contemporaries remembered Salomon as a preacher who “knew to uplift the souls, to penetrate deep into the hearts, to illuminate and to embellish [verklärer] the vibrations of the soul [Gemüthsstimmungen], to awaken thoughts in noble form . . . , and to shape warmly felt convictions.”43 Reportedly, his rousing delivery and the lively character of his sermons, distinguished by the frequent use of metaphors, parables, and rhetorical questions and interspersed with Bible verses and his own poetry, endeared him in particular to Hamburg’s women.44 Yet Salomon not only stood out by creating a new style of preaching that appealed to women. In his sermons, he also devoted time to issues of domestic religiosity and feminine virtue.

In Das Familienleben (Family Life), a collection of three sermons published in 1821, Salomon developed a theology that was centered on the subject of women and the family.45 In these sermons, he described the home as the house of God in which love inspired true religiosity: “parental love, the children’s love, love between the spouses, Menschenliebe (love of humanity), [and] love of God.”46 Furthermore, Salomon expounded, domestic prayer and the observance of holidays sanctified the home. Salomon urged fathers and mothers as well as sons and daughters to let love, faithfulness, and piety reign in their homes. Then he turned to women and exclaimed: “The home is your world, you women! You alone can and should give it the most pleasant form and transform it into a house of God.”47 Taking as his departure the verse from Proverbs that praised the woman of valor: esthetically, beauty is deceptive; beauty is illusory; it is for her fear of
the Lord that a woman is to be praised,” Salomon exalted the so-called female virtues such as piety, morality, and modesty that adorned a refined Jewish house.48

Women should develop their intellect too, Salomon stated, and needed to direct households in which orderliness, punctuality, and industry reigned. He insisted, however, that a woman's religion “pre-eminently remains a matter of her soul.”49 And women's spiritual and intellectual capacities together, Salomon concluded, found their highest expression in women's vocation as mothers. “In the house of the pious woman, you find elevated motherly love,” he stated.50 A devoted mother, he contended, cared not only for her children's physical needs, but was also aware that an immortal whose soul and heart required her guidance had been born. In fact, too many mothers lacked the full understanding of this “high dignity of their profession” and, consequently, “we miss in our youth the purity of manners, which alone should be the element of youthful life.” In accordance with nineteenth-century ideas of women's high sensitivity for the sublime and the contemporary emphasis on women's roles in early childhood education, mothers played a privileged role in Salomon's theology. Thus, Salomon proclaimed: “You indeed, worthy women! Pious mothers! ... to form humans [Menschen bilden], to enchant humans, to educate them for the earth and the heavens—this has become your lot!” In Das Familienleben, Salomon confirmed the conception of the day that the house was “the cradle of everything great,” and that women had the ability and the responsibility to turn a home into a haven of cultural refinement, familial love, and religious faithfulness.51 As mothers, models of virtue, and pillars of family life, women occupied a central position in the world of Salomon's homiletics.

Salomon addressed Jewish men too. He expected fathers to participate in raising their children with tenderness and devotion and to lead them toward domestic piety. In a New Year sermon, for instance, Salomon lauded the biblical Jacob as a “deeply feeling, tenderly loving father,” and exhorted the men of his congregation to follow the example of the patriarch Jacob and “to embed the principles of morality and religiosity in their [the children's] spirit and soul [Gemüthe].”52 In fact, in bourgeois families in the early part of the nineteenth century, educating children in this sense was a responsibility that husband and wife shared. Caring for the physical, emotional, moral, and religious well-being of children played a central role in the relationship of a couple, and contemporaries experienced parental love and love between the spouses as closely connected. Accordingly, many fathers strove to be involved in the raising of children; educators and ideologues certainly advised them to do so. At the same time, however, contemporaries certainly advised them to do so. At the same time, however, contemporaries...
for deeply bonding with their children. In *Das Familienleben*, Salomon claimed that “a father’s spirit [Geist] cannot disclose itself [sich mitteilen] to a child, but a mother's pious heart can.”

In another sermon, he declared that men, “the priests of the home,” who had to divide their time and their energy between public and domestic duties, were “occupied too much and too fully outside of the [domestic] sanctuary” to provide full moral and religious guidance to their children. Therefore, in the family-centered theology of the Hamburg preachers, the priestesses of the home—the women—carried the main burden as guardians of Judaism, promoters of virtue and morality, and educators of the young.

In the 1820s and 1830s, as Hamburg became the center of the German sermon, Kley and Salomon together published no less than fifteen volumes of sermons. As Salomon explained, the sermons served to illuminate “life in its domestic, social, and civil aspects” in order to ennoble it, and many of them focused on the Jewish home and Jewish family life. For Salomon and an increasing number of German-Jewish rabbis and preachers, the home and the family gained importance as the place where morality, religiosity, and *Bildung* were cultivated and imparted to the next generation. Thus, by directing their attention to the domestic sphere, Kley and Salomon turned to men and women as fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters. The Hamburg preachers related to men not primarily in their capacity as political subjects or individuals. Rather than understanding themselves as part of a male brotherhood of independent citizens who disregarded family ties, Salomon and Kley perceived men as rooted in the family and defined by their position there. Yet, within the family, men’s primacy, superiority, and religious leadership were all but secure. Not only did women figure prominently in sermons such as in Salomon’s *Das Familienleben*, but Kley and Salomon also elaborated in detail on the glorious role of the virtuous Jewish wife and mother in Jewish culture, a role that a man was unable to match.

**REFORMERS ON JEWISH WOMEN AND HALAKHAH**

The culture of bourgeois religiosity that *Sulamith* had introduced to a Jewish public and that Salomon and Kley propagated in their sermons was distinct from, though not incompatible with, halakhic or rabbinic Judaism. Joseph Wolf, David Fraîkel, Jeremiah Heinemann, the Hamburg preachers, and other reformers and educators advocated a rejuvenation of Jewish practice. They criticized many an established custom as inspired by carelessness or even superstition and as lacking in dignity, emotional depth,
and spiritual content. However, these Jewish leaders tended to refrain from criticizing the basic framework of Jewish law. In their sermons and essays, they were concerned with issues such as morality, virtue, the cultivation of religious sentiments, and love among family members. Neither of them challenged Halakhah nor required the endorsement of the principles of rabbinic Judaism. When the educators, ideologues, and preachers argued that Jewish women's religious needs should no longer be neglected, these Jewish leaders agitated for welcoming women and girls in the synagogues and for including women into modern programs of religious instruction. They also expressed high esteem for women’s roles as mothers and guarantors of Jewish family life. Only rarely did reformers touch upon women's position within Halakhah.

As an early exception, David Friedländer declared in 1788 that halakhic Judaism and traditional practice fell short of meeting the cultural and moral standards that contemporary notions of gender organization required. Due to the “oriental” environment in which the Israelites had obtained their revealed religion, Friedländer claimed, Judaism disadvantaged the female sex in legal and spiritual matters. He furthermore explained that mosaic legislation treated women unfairly in matters of property law and disparaged women in the religious realm by requiring them only to perform three positive religious commandments. Modern women, however, shared responsibilities, duties, and rights with men. In particular, according to Friedländer, women had to care for and to educate the youth, and were bound to fulfill a large range of domestic and civil obligations. “Therefore, it is naturally necessary to think about the formation of women's hearts and intellects, and from a young age on, girls need instruction in religious and moral laws.”58 Friedländer thus pointed to inequalities between men and women in Jewish law. Yet as a remedy to women's disadvantaged position, he suggested the same measures that Sulamith would later propagate and that, in fact, did not affect women's status within Halakhah at all.

In one of the rare instances in which a contributor to Sulamith discussed the issue of women in Jewish law, David Frankel defended the status quo. In fact, Frankel maintained that the laws of Judaism by no means depreciated the female sex. The parts of the Bible and the Talmud that seemed to advocate the oppression of Jewish women could not be taken as normative, according to Fränkel, and passages that praised and exalted women such as the biblical Deborah by far outweighed any negative assessments. Frankel even argued that the prayer in which Jewish men thank the Divine for not having been created as women in no respect implied that men were superior to women. Rather, in this prayer men expressed gratitude for not being exposed to the “manifest pains and discomforts” that...
Then Fränkel took up one of the central issues that determined women’s inferior position in halakhic Judaism: women’s exemption from an entire category of ritual obligations. Friedländer had referred to this state of affairs, when he had stated that women were only expected to perform three positive religious commandments. According to rabbinic texts—above all the Talmud—that had been binding for Jewish communities throughout the centuries, women are not required to perform time-bound, positive *mitzvot* (religious commandments). Women, for instance, are not required to dwell in a Sukkah at the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot) and to hear the Shofar (ram’s horn) blown at the New Year (Rosh Ha-Shana). Moreover, women are exempt from the duty of performing daily time-bound *mitzvot*, most importantly the laying of tefillin (phylacteries)—a practice that goes hand in hand with saying the centerpiece of the Hebrew liturgy, the *Shema*, and reciting the prescribed benedictions. Thus only men are responsible for what Jews for ages have considered to be the chief practices of daily worship.

In *Sulamith*, Fränkel endorsed this state of affairs by deploying arguments that modern Orthodox Jews repeated later. He argued that women’s exemption from active, time-bound *mitzvot* stemmed from the high esteem in which the ancient rabbis held women and their domestic responsibilities: “To the mistress of the house, time is more precious for fulfilling her domestic duties [sic] and cannot be wasted with ceremonial obligations.”

In this article, Fränkel point by point rejected the idea that Judaism placed women below men. He defended women’s dispensation from highly valued religious responsibilities and justified women’s exclusion from rabbinic learning. He vindicated the halakhic framework that had organized gender differentiation and gender hierarchy in Jewish society for centuries. Fränkel, however, refused to interpret the marginal position of women in the culture of halakhically defined male learning and prayer as a mark of women’s inferior position in Judaism. Rather, he argued that women’s distinct status in Jewish law testified to the great importance of the female contribution to Jewish life outside the realm of ritual obligations and religious study. Indeed, it was in this domain of Jewish culture, in a religiosity of the heart and not in a culture defined by textual study and fulfillment of ritual obligations, that the Jewish reformers in nineteenth-century Germany were most heavily invested.

Yet in 1837, without much preceding debate, the young rabbi Abraham Geiger published an essay that placed the issue of women’s status in halakhic Judaism on the agenda of what by then could be called the Reform movement. Born in Frankfurt in 1810, Geiger had pursued Talmudic studies as generations of Jewish men had done before him, but he had also attended a university, where he assumed his first position as a rabbi in the
small community of Wiesbaden in Rhineland at the age of twenty-seven, he belonged to a new generation of university-trained rabbis in Germany. In Wiesbaden and later in Breslau and Frankfurt, he served as a preacher and educator. Thereby he resembled the men in whose footsteps he followed as a Jewish reformer. Yet unlike the autodidactic maskilim of the previous generation, Geiger was also a modern scholar, steeped in the contemporary critical methods of linguistics, philosophy, and history. In fact, Geiger played a leading role in Wissenschaft des Judentums, the new scholarship that treated Judaism as an object of academic inquiry, and he counted among the most important thinkers of the Jewish Reform movement. In the course of his career, he became a prominent though highly controversial Reform rabbi.

When Geiger turned his attention to the issue of women’s place in the Jewish religion, he created the classic text of the early Reform movement on the status of women in Judaism. With the essay, “The Position of the Female Sex in the Judaism of our Times,” Geiger challenged the different positions of men and women in the religious economy of rabbinic Judaism. A full-fledged attack on the halakhic system of gender organization, his article concluded as follows:

Let there be from now on no distinction between the duties for men and women, unless flowing from the natural laws governing the sexes; no assumption of the spiritual minority of women, as though she were incapable of grasping the deep things in religion; no institution of the public service, either in form or content, which shuts the doors of the temple in the face of women; . . . Then will the Jewish girl and the Jewish woman, conscious of the significance of our faith, become fervently attached to it, and our whole religious life will profit from the beneficial influence which feminine hearts will bestow upon it.

Here, Geiger demanded the complete emancipation of women in Jewish law. By suggesting to remove any “distinctions between the duties for men and women,” he called into question the exemption of women from the religious obligation to perform time-bound mitzvot. He denounced women’s exclusion from public worship, and earlier in the text, criticized at length the legal framework of the Jewish marriage in the Bible and the Talmud. Geiger claimed that rabbinic Judaism held women in a state of “spiritual minority” and compared the legal position of women in rabbinic Judaism to that of slaves. When he did so, every educated Jewish reader could recognize a pivotal passage of the Mishnah, in which women, slaves, and minors fell into the same category, as Geiger’s reference. The text in the Mishnah states: “Women, slaves, and minors are exempt from reciting the
Shema and from putting on phylacteries, but they are subject to the obligations of prayer. . ."64

Highly contested to this day, women’s exclusion or exemption from the obligation to say the Shema and from the performance of other timebound, active mitzvot has been fundamental to the gender organization of Jewish society and culture. In rabbinic literature throughout the ages as well as in contemporary debates, a number of important questions have arisen as a consequence of this exemption. If women are not obliged to perform time-bound, active mitzvot such as saying Hebrew prayers every morning and evening, and if they are not required to study Torah, are they allowed to do so? Are women welcome to take on the ritual obligations of a Jewish male voluntarily, or should they be discouraged from doing so? If a woman does perform w/te’rath that she is not expected to fulfill, what is the value of her deeds? In a spiritual economy in which the performance of mitzvot that are commanded by God rank highest, what type of spiritual merits can women acquire? Women are obligated to address God in informal prayers at times that seem convenient and appropriate to them, but the status of these prayers remains undefined in rabbinic texts. While some have claimed that women’s religious practices possess value and prestige of their own, others such as Geiger have contended that in rabbinic Judaism women are kept in an inferior position, on a par with slaves and children.

In fact, women’s suspension from the performance of time-bound, active mitzvot and their exclusion from the communal learning of rabbinic texts entailed more than legal disabilities. Hebrew prayer and religious study constituted the most highly valued practices in Jewish culture and women’s position in rabbinic Judaism can be understood as "spiritual coverture":

Because of the system of commandments within which significance and value are placed on the fulfillment of a commandment which one is obligated to perform, and since women are exempted’ from the fulfillment of many commandments, they were understood as being able to achieve spiritual merit only through the enabling of their husbands to perform these commandments.65

Moreover, women’s exemption from the obligation to recite the Shema has played a crucial role in determining women’s place in the principal institution of Jewish communal life, the synagogue.66 Talmudic rabbis, nineteenth-century scholars, and contemporary Jews have each developed various approaches when evaluating women’s exemption from the duty to perform time-bound, active mitzvot. When it comes to forming a prayer quorum, however, the dictum of Talmudic sources, medieval halakhists,
and modern Orthodox Jews is unequivocal: women are excluded, not exempt. A Jewish prayer quorum, called minyan, is defined as consisting of ten adult men, and the presence of a minyan is a prerequisite for reciting certain parts of the Hebrew liturgy. Ten or more Jewish males form a Jewish community of worship. From antiquity to the second half of the twentieth century, women at public prayer were not ever counted as part of the required group of ten participating worshippers. Whether a woman chose to perform time-bound, active mitzvot and to say the Shema or not, she was still not eligible to be counted in a minyan.67 Although Geiger did not explicitly refer to women's inclusion into a halakhically defined prayer quorum, his demand that “no institution of the public service” should shut “the doors of the temple in the face of women” clearly aimed at emancipating women into the Jewish community of worshippers.68 The proposal formed part of Geiger's radical critique of women's marginalization in Jewish society. By suggesting the abrogation of women's specific position in Jewish law, Geiger called for the end of women's inferior status in Jewish culture.

Before Geiger, no Jewish scholar or leader had ever proposed to completely abolish the distinctions between men and women in Jewish law. Geiger, in fact, advocated a fundamental revision of Halakhah, and his line of thought deserves some attention. He based his proposition to emancipate women within Halakhah on a larger discussion of the historicity and relativity of Talmudic law. Halakhah had always been flexible. Throughout the centuries, rabbinic authorities had adapted the corpus of legal rulings to the social conditions and the cultural sensitivities of their times. They had inserted themselves into the text, had reconsidered and reinterpreted prior halakhic statements, and had offered new conclusions from within the texture of rabbinic discourse. Sometimes, as in early modern Poland, rabbis had de facto even condoned communal practices that did not conform to halakhic norms.69 Geiger, however, neither made a halakhic argument, nor did he stay within the framework of Talmudic reasoning, nor did he resign himself to a reality that violated the integrity of the body of Jewish law. Rather, trained in the method of contemporary, secular, critical, and historical scholarship, he engaged with rabbinic Judaism in a novel manner. According to Geiger, Judaism could be separated into a kernel that conformed with the “spirit of the faith” (Geiste des Glaubens) on the one hand and elements that Judaism had assimilated in its “incidental external historical development” (zufällige äußere geschichtliche Entwicklung) on the other.70

This approach formed the centerpiece of Reform ideology and differed dramatically from the thinking of earlier Jewish scholars, including the theology of Moses Mendelssohn.
While Mendelssohn had promoted the integration of Jews into the surrounding culture and society, he had held on to the notion that Talmudic law constituted immutable, divinely revealed legislation. Within decades after his death in 1786, however, a new generation of Jewish leaders conceived of Judaism as shaped by historical forces.\textsuperscript{71}

Not long after the turn of the century, pedagogues and ideologues began to distinguish between a spiritual essence of the Jewish religion and ceremonial forms, some of which they believed were now outdated. Thus they sought to separate “the wheat from the chaff” in order to restore Judaism to its purest and most noble form, and they set out to reform synagogue worship.\textsuperscript{72} In order to identify the elements that formed the essence of Judaism on the one hand, and the external layers that had accumulated as the shell of the Jewish religion on the other hand, reformers began to turn to the modern discipline of history. Jewish scholars now read Jewish texts according to contemporary methodologies of philology and historical criticism; they studied Judaism as a historically evolving culture. For them, the historical scholarship permitted access to truth that formerly only revealed law, Halakhah, and philosophy had offered. The study of history, according to contemporaries, gave insight into the laws governing the development of Judaism throughout the ages, and those who devised what was becoming Reform ideology claimed to build the future of Judaism on the stable ground of science.\textsuperscript{73}

Abraham Geiger, as one of the leading thinkers of the Reform movement, contributed greatly to the \textit{Wissenschaft des Judentums} (Scholarship of Judaism), as the new scholarly project was called. In path-breaking scholarly works, Geiger analyzed the textual make-up of the most sacred books of rabbinic Judaism—the Bible and the Mishnah—and concluded that these documents represented culturally and historically specific stages in the history of the Jewish people. According to Geiger, the Jewish spirit rather than Jewish law lay at the core of Jewish life, and the external, organizational shape of Judaism underwent constant change.\textsuperscript{74} In his article on the status of women in Judaism, Geiger followed the same approach. In biblical Judaism, Geiger argued, the “oriental” environment in which Judaism had evolved had shaped the social and religious position of the female sex. The cultural context of the Middle East, he explained, had laid the legal foundations according to which women held a position akin to slaves. The unmarried daughter was unremittingly at the mercy of her father; a man took control over his bride by way of purchase; he could acquire more than one wife; and he was entitled to dismiss her when she displeased him. Geiger, however, insisted that Judaism also distinguished itself from the surrounding society by investing marriage with “a higher sanctity” (höhere Weihen) than Middle Eastern cultures.\textsuperscript{75} Biblical Israel valued women
highly, protected them from abuse, and did not confine them to harems; by contrast, “oriental” women were degraded to objects of male lust. Jewish women, Geiger claimed, could indeed rise to be judges like Deborah and prophetesses like Huldah. And as history progressed, Talmudic rabbi’s introduced some further improvements, such as the required consent of a woman to enter a marriage. Yet only centuries later, Geiger reported, “European manners and Germanic conceptions” provided Ashkenazi Jewry with the cultural framework in which Jewish society could begin to shed its “oriental” heritage. In order to remedy the discrepancy between Judaism’s inherently high esteem for womanhood and the denigration of women by the halakhic code, Rabbi Gershom of Mainz overruled earlier Talmudic stipulations, outlawed polygamy, and improved the legal position of the Jewish woman. However, Geiger deplored the fact that 800 years had passed since then and “again, we have stood still.”

Geiger’s call for the emancipation of women in Jewish law thus evolved out of the Reform movement’s historical approach to Judaism. Jewish law and custom, in this reading, progressed steadily, ascending from their “oriental” origins to the heights of modern European civilization. In fact, Jewish reformers in nineteenth-century Germany widely adopted the notion that the legal and social position of women in Jewish society stemmed from the “oriental” environment of Jewish antiquity and needed to be adapted to occidental conditions. In 1788, David Friedländer had already expressed this view, and in 1907, when Reform rabbi David Philipson discussed the role of Jewish women in public worship in his history of the Reform movement, his account and interpretation closely resembled Geiger’s analysis of the “oriental” position of women in traditional Judaism. According to Geiger, the “oriental” character of biblical and rabbinic Judaism expressed itself acutely in the Jewish marriage law, and in his article of 1837, he devoted much space to criticizing the financial transactions surrounding betrothal and marriage as well as the custom of halizah. These practices, he argued, inscribed the legal inferiority of Jewish women and brought the female sex into a state of shameful dependence on and subjection to their male kin.

Geiger, however, was not only concerned with remedying the legal status of Jewish women in the institution of marriage. He also criticized women’s inferior position in the spiritual realm and their exclusion from religious life. Jewish women, he claimed, were made unwelcome in the synagogue by both the form and the content of Jewish prayers. The service was held in a language that was intentionally kept foreign to women, and the daily morning liturgy included a blessing that excluded and denigrated the female sex: “Praised be God, who did not create me as a woman.” “How can
sparks of true religiosity, when even the prayer declares her to be inferior?” Geiger exclaimed. Such treatment, according to Geiger, rendered women “incapable of grasping the deep things in religion,” while in fact, the female sex possessed a particular propensity for religiosity. Rather than encouraging their natural talents, contemporary Judaism ignored women and disregarded their needs. The resulting low involvement of Jewish women in the religious life of their communities and women’s alienation from public worship, Geiger argued, harmed the entire Jewish community.

In his article of 1837, Geiger on the one hand focused on the improvement of the position of women in Jewish law. On the other hand, he aimed at a renewal of religious life beyond halakhic reform. Dismissively, Geiger denounced the Formglaube (faith of outward forms) for failing to do justice to the religious needs of the female population and for thereby spiritually impoverishing Jewish society as a whole. Geiger referred to halakhic categories when he discussed the “distinction between the duties for men and women” in the religious realm, and argued that Halakhah had undergone changes in the past and needed to be amended further in the present. Nevertheless, with other German-Jewish Reformers at the time, Geiger also challenged the halakhic framework of rabbinic Judaism as such. Moreover, the emphasis of the Reform movement on the spirit of Judaism rather than on its ritual contributed to the devaluation of Jewish law in a period in which increasing numbers of German Jews were neglecting halakhic observance. Indeed, eventually contemporary forms of religiosity and the bourgeois culture of Bildung eclipsed the performance of ritual commandments in many Jewish families. In a newly defined Judaism in which Halakhah no longer reigned supreme, women gained greater prominence without attaining equality in Jewish law. In the 1840s, however—the decade after Geiger’s call for women’s emancipation in Judaism—a group of German Reform rabbis tried to amend Halakhah and made an earnest effort to revise women’s status in Jewish law. In three rabbinical conferences, the progressive faction of the German rabbinate set out to create common standards for a reformed Judaism and attempted to reconcile the sensibilities and requirements of their times with halakhic principles.

THE WOMEN’S QUESTION AT THE RABBINICAL CONFERENCES OF THE 1840S

In 1844 in Brunswick, in 1845 in Frankfurt, and in 1846 in Breslau, more than two dozen communal rabbis and preachers, most of them young men in their thirties, gathered in order to assert rabbinical authority over a reform-minded laity that had begun to go its own ways. Radical law groups,
in fact, had declared the Talmud obsolete and Halakah no longer binding. With the rabbinical conferences, protagonists of the German Reform movement including Abraham Geiger, Samuel Holdheim, Joseph Maier, Ludwig Philippson, Gotthold Salomon, and Leopold Stein, and with some reservation also the father of the emerging positive-historical Judaism Zacharias Frankel, stepped in to regularize innovations that had already been introduced in individual Jewish communities. Moreover, the conference agendas aimed to establish guidelines for further reforms. The Jewish leaders assembled at the meetings discussed issues such as changes in the Jewish liturgy and in worship, Jewish and interfaith marriages, Jewish education, Sabbath observance, and a variety of other questions concerning ritual. Though holding votes and passing resolutions, the rabbinical assemblies lacked any formal authority to implement their decisions. Yet Jews and non-Jews in Europe and North America took notice, and the meetings played a significant role in consolidating the Jewish Reform movement, in the development of positive-historical Judaism, and in the formation of modern Orthodoxy in Germany. In the petitions prepared for the assemblies, in committee reports, and in the discussions at the conferences themselves, the rabbinical leadership of the German Reform movement examined how change and continuity, tradition and modernity could coexist. The rabbis and preachers followed the methodological approach of nineteenth-century historical and literary scholarship and at the same time considered halakhic arguments. They weighed the needs and wishes of their communities against the integrity of halakhic Judaism. They probed into whether Halakah, in a reformed Judaism, would still be able to provide the framework for contemporary Jewish culture.

The women’s question, raised some years earlier by Geiger, formed one area in which the leaders of the Reform movement strove to achieve consonance between Jewish textual traditions and nineteenth-century sensibilities. For the second rabbinical conference in Frankfurt, the reformer Samuel Adler prepared a petition titled “Concerning the Religious Duties of the Female Sex,” accompanied by a fourteen-page treatise in Hebrew. Adler, born in Worms in 1809 (and later, from 1857 on, rabbi of Temple Emanu-El in New York) indeed combined the credentials of a Talmud scholar with a university degree and a thoroughly modern outlook. His father, Isaak Adler, had been rabbi in Worms, and Samuel Adler had studied with him and at the yeshivot of Worms and Frankfurt, as well as at the universities of Bonn and Gießen. At the time of the rabbinical conference of 1845, he was serving the rural community of Alzey near Worms as rabbi and, already during his earlier engagement as a preacher and assistant rabbi in Worms itself, had promoted greater integration of women into syna-

The document on the women’s question that Adler submitted to the rabbinical conference stands out as the only full-length discussion of rabbinic and biblical sources in Hebrew published in the proceedings of the meetings. In his treatise, Adler argued that rabbinic sources supported a reading according to which women’s religious maturity equaled that of men. In particular, Adler advocated women’s inclusion in religious instruction and in public worship, and he proposed the following resolution to the rabbinical conference:

The rabbinical assembly may declare:

1) that the female sex possesses religious majority, that it is bound by equal duties and eligible to equal rights, and that only out of consideration and respect for its domestic duties it is—with few exceptions—traditionally exempt from ceremonial laws whose fulfillment are bound to a certain time, and

2) that therefore the female sex is obligated to receive instruction in the Israelite religion and to take part in public worship, as the male sex does, and that the exclusion of women from the number of congregants required for conducting a public service, is only a custom and without any religious foundation.

In this petition, Adler followed the lead of Geiger’s proposition and suggested declaring women’s legal majority and formal equality in Jewish law. Further, more explicitly than Geiger, Adler demanded that women be counted in a minyan. Yet while Adler broke with the standard halakhic ruling that a minyan consisted exclusively of men, he proved to be more conservative in regard to women’s relationship to mitzvot. Even though principally endorsing women’s equality and demanding their full integration in worship and Jewish education, Adler recommended upholding women’s exemption from time-bound ritual obligations.

The rabbinical conference dealt with Adler’s petition in a relatively brief discussion, focusing on the question of whether the assembly should open a full debate on the issues raised in Adler’s submission or whether the women’s question needed further preliminary deliberation by an appropriate committee. Some of the rabbis present argued that the practical suggestions should be discussed and voted upon immediately, since undoubtedly every Jewish leader had an informed opinion on these issues. Others, however, disagreed, including Bernhard Wechsler from Oldenburg, Rabbi Maier Hirsch Löwengard from Lehrensteinfeld in Wurttemberg, and Joseph von Maier who held the title of Kirchenrat (ecclesiastical councilor) of Wurttemberg and served as rabbinical representative at the Israelite Supreme Ecclesiastical Authority, an institution similar to the Jewish consistory of
Wurttemberg three decades earlier. These Jewish leaders insisted that the questions raised in Adler’s petition were too serious and their implications too far-reaching to make any hasty decisions. Maier cautioned not to bring the assembly into disrepute by treating important questions superficially, and Löwengard warned that Adler’s propositions “involve a reproach against our religious past which we are not entitled to pronounce light-heartedly.” 88 Thus, the assembly decided to defer the debate to the next meeting of the rabbinical conference in Breslau, and it appointed a committee to prepare a detailed report on the women’s question. On the committee served Samuel Adler, his younger and more radical brother Abraham Adler, who had replaced Samuel as preacher in Worms, and David Einhorn, a thirty-six-year-old Bavarian-born radical Reform rabbi who, like Samuel Adler, was to become one of the rabbinical leaders in nineteenth-century North America. 89

A year later, in the summer of 1846, David Einhorn presented the “Report of the Committee on the Religious Status of Women in Judaism” to the third rabbinical conference in Breslau. The report put the women’s question in the following terms:

Whether, to the detriment of the entire Jewish community, a part of our holy congregation which is superbly receptive to spiritual impressions should continue to experience a humiliating exclusion from the participation in several religious duties and rights, or not. 90

As Geiger had done in his article nine years earlier, the committee on the women’s question in Judaism took it as a given that women possessed a highly developed sense for religious matters and that this female capacity needed to be placed in the service of the entire Jewish community. Thereupon, the report proceeded to discuss the exemption of women from time-bound, active mitzvot in rabbinic Judaism, a principle of rabbinic Judaism that Geiger had implicitly rejected but that Samuel Adler, in his petition of the previous year, had still endorsed.

The investigation of biblical sources in the report on women’s status touched on issues such as women’s exclusion from the priestly service, the lack of an equivalent for women of the circumcision rite performed on Jewish males, and the inclusion of women in Sabbath observance and in the celebration of holidays. While, according to the report, the position of women in biblical society left room for a variety of interpretations, the rabbinic authorities of Talmudic times consistently placed women, slaves, and minors into the same legal category. In the report, Samuel Adler, David Einhorn, and Abraham Adler examined the textual basis that established the exclusion of the female sex from a minyan, and they cited the classic
proof text for barring women from religious learning: “He who teaches Torah to his daughter acts as if he taught her obscenity.” Furthermore, the committee on the status of women in Judaism investigated the connection between women’s inferiority in the realm of the sacred and their relationship to negative and positive mitzvot. Samuel Adler insisted that the higher degree of sacredness that Judaism ascribed to men resulted from, rather than brought about men’s more extensive religious responsibilities. And Abraham Adler claimed that women’s suspension from time-bound mitzvot stemmed from the fact that this type of commandment had a national, statist, historical character. According to Adler, Judaism included, on the one hand, such national elements, and on the other hand purely religious elements that addressed the eternal, universally human aspects of an individual. Women could not form part of the ancient Jewish state in a political sense, and thus needed to be exempt from those mitzvot “that represented historical features, which raised religion above the level of the individual and made it the possession of a collective, or which aimed at imprinting religiosity into the collective.” Thus, women stood outside the realm of time-bound, historical, nation-forming religious obligations. Adler, however, held that Judaism invested women with personal dignity and required the female sex to perform all rites that promoted the sanctification of the individual.

The “Report of the Committee on the Religious Status of Women in Judaism” concluded that the rabbinical assembly may consider some of these interpretations valid and others not. However, the needs of the present called for a change in the religious position of the female sex, irrespective of German rabbis’ opinions or preferences. “It is useless to argue why the religious situation of women has become impaired, since one can neither deny its deterioration, nor can one find it compatible with present religious consciousness.” This statement, in which a lengthy examination of biblical and rabbinic texts culminated, poignantly highlights the paradox situation in which the German Reform movement found itself. Many rabbinical leaders of the movement took a thoroughly critical stance toward Halakhah and toward customary interpretations of Jewish law, but were deeply attached to rabbinic tradition. As Jewish scholars had done for centuries, they strove to find solutions to contemporary questions from within rabbinic texts, applying modern scholarly methods and contemporary conceptual frameworks and carefully studying Jewish literature. They aimed to legitimize change from within the Jewish tradition. However, when members of the committee on the women’s question in Judaism were to produce concrete results and recommendations, all of their scholarship, theory, and learnedness, and their loyalty to rabbinic Judaism proved secondary to their insight that time-honored halakhic norms no
longer suited the needs of nineteenth-century Jewry and things had to change.

These leaders headed a movement whose constituency was turning away from ritual observance and halakhic Judaism. Yet, trained at German universities or at least touched by the intellectual debates of the educated middle classes, progressive rabbis felt compelled to provide a theoretical and scholarly basis for Reform. Hence, in the manner of the Wissenschaft des Judentums, Reform rabbis engaged in comprehensive textual investigations and historicized Jewish texts. They entered this “battle of the proof texts” for the sake of their own sense of integrity, in response to conservative Jewish critics as well as to Gentile observers who considered Judaism as a whole outdated and culturally inferior, out of respect of the Jewish textual tradition, and as well-educated and culturally sophisticated Germans.94 The “Report of the Committee on the Religious Status of Women in Judaism,” for the third rabbinical conference in Breslau, thus dealt at length with the position of women in biblical and rabbinic literature, only to claim at the end that the differences Scripture ascribed to the male and the female sex had only relative and temporary character. The committee therefore urged the rabbinical conference to grant Jewish women complete equality in the religious realm.

In more specific terms than Abraham Geiger had proposed in his 1837 article, and reaching further than Samuel Adler’s petition to the second rabbinical conference, the committee report recommended the emancipation of women in the following areas: inclusion of women into the obligation to perform time-bound mizvot, as far as these were still relevant; equal responsibilities of men and women toward their children; abrogation of the right of a father or husband to release a religiously adult woman from her vow; abolition of the prayer she lo asani ishab (who has not created me as a woman); inclusion of girls and women into religious instruction and public worship and their being counted in a minyan; and religious majority of both sexes at the age of thirteen.95

When David Einhorn presented this report to the third rabbinical conference in Breslau, the assembly had already conferred for more than a week and was to be adjourned the following day. Einhorn read out the report so that it could be included in the conference proceedings and brought to discussion as well as voted upon in the next yearly meeting of the assembly.96 However, another rabbinical conference failed to take place. The government of Baden, where the assembly was scheduled to take place in 1847, delayed granting its permission and the meeting could not be convened in time. Then in 1848, revolutionary upheavals prevented the assembly from meeting. Most importantly, however, Jewish lay leaders demanded to be included in decisions made on behalf of German Jewry.
and questioned the legitimacy of rabbinical conferences in their present form.  

At the rabbinical conferences of the 1840s, German rabbis did not come to a conclusion about how the inferior status of women in Jewish law could be reconciled with the important place that women occupied in nineteenth-century religious culture. Jewish leaders had raised the women's question; a committee had devoted much effort to investigating biblical and rabbinic literature; the report of the committee had suggested the emancipation of women within halakhic categories and their inclusion in synagogue worship and programs of religious education; but the Reformers never voted on or even fully discussed this nor any other proposal on the place of women in the religious life of their communities. The German Reform movement did not succeed in adjusting the position of women in Halakhah to contemporary cultural sensibilities.

With the failure of the three rabbinical conferences of the 1840s to improve women's status in Jewish law, the women's question in modern Judaism thus remained technically unresolved. Contemporaries highly valued women's propensity for the moral and the religious; also, Jewish pedagogues and ideologues, and rabbis and preachers increasingly emphasized the importance of women's beneficial influence on family, community, and society. Yet, in nineteenth-century Germany, calls for revising the status of women within Halakhah found remarkably little resonance and, after 1846, Reformers refrained from discussing women's exemption from the duty to perform time-bound, active mitzvot and their exclusion from Jewish prayer quorums. As an exception, Salomon Herxheimer (born in 1801 near Wiesbaden and university-trained, a participant at the rabbinical conferences, and for more than four decades the progressive chief rabbi of the Duchy Anhalt-Bernburg) made a noteworthy suggestion. In a petition to the Reform synod in Leipzig in 1869, he proposed "that in all cases in which public worship would need to be cancelled due to the lack of the customary number of ten adult men, it may be permitted to complement the ten number [10 Zahl] by three women." Rather than qualifying as an attempt to allow women in principle to be counted in a minyan, this proposal, however, appears to have addressed primarily the scarcity of male worshippers in rural communities. Moreover, it proved ineffectual.

Slightly more successful and more consistent, the rabbi Samuel Holdheim insisted that women should form part of a minyan. Holdheim had been born in 1806 in the town of Kempen in Posen into an observant family that had provided him exclusively with a Talmudic education. Only in his late twenties did Holdheim attend the universities of Berlin and Prague; critics later pointed to how he lacked a systematic modern education. Nevertheless, or perhaps due to his background, Holdheim became the voice of radical Jewish reform in nineteenth-century Germany. He actively partici-
pated in the rabbinical conferences and agitated in sermons and articles for the renewal of Judaism. Thus, during his tenure as the chief rabbi in the Grand Duchy of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, the Israelite Council of Schwerin in 1846 issued a mandate declaring the religious equality of women. According to the decree, boys and girls reached religious majority in a public confirmation ceremony. Moreover, Holdheim in the same year published an essay on the dilemmas that the Reform movement faced in regard to women's inferior position in halakhic Judaism. Holdheim's treatise, together with Geiger's article from 1837, Samuel Adler's petition to the second rabbinical conference, and the "Report of the Committee on the Religious Status of Women in Judaism," apparently form the entire body of publications on the religious position of women in the nineteenth-century German Jewish Reform movement. In his essay, Holdheim responded to Adler's petition, criticizing it sharply. While Adler had tried to base women's equality and religious majority on a reading of biblical and rabbinic sources, Holdheim plainly rejected the Talmud.

Instead of emancipating the religious consciousness (Reformbewusstsein) of the present . . . from the Talmud and of declaring the freedom of contemporary religiosity and its right to hold its own ground toward the Talmud, [Adler] imports the Talmud into the modern religious consciousness. Thereby two of the most incompatible, most hostile elements appear to be intimately connected and in harmony with each other.

Thus, Holdheim led a full-fledged attack against the Talmud. According to him, the position of women in rabbinic Judaism lacked any relevance, and attempts to reform Talmudic Judaism needed to remain futile. The categories of Halakhah had lost their normative force in contemporary society; modern Judaism followed a new set of rules; and the emancipation of women in Judaism formed part of the emancipation of Judaism from Halakhah. According to Holdheim, the contemporary understanding of religion—the Reformbewusstsein—valued Jewish worship due to its inner virtues (Innerlichkeit) rather than on the grounds of its "antiquated exterior symbolism," meaning the halakhic framework.

Holdheim's call to declare Talmudic Judaism obsolete and to emancipate women into a newly defined modern religion did not find more formal endorsement than the earlier attempts by Geiger, Adler, and by the committee on the women's question at the rabbinical conferences. Holdheim's analysis, however, came surprisingly close to an accurate—although overstated—description of the process that led to a redefinition of women's place in Judaism, when modern concepts of religiosity eclipsed rabbinic culture and halakhic observance. In the nineteenth century, women were not emancipated within Talmudic Judaism. Reformers did not persist in

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agitating for the formal emancipation of women in Judaism. “Paradoxically,” and to the bewilderment of historians, “women’s rights were included in the earliest program of the Reformers,” but “there were few topics in the Reform program less discussed or formally acted upon.” In fact, German-Jewish leaders believed that women and feminine religiosity were indispensable for modern Judaism, and the position of women in Jewish culture indeed changed significantly as German Jewry became bourgeois. Halakhic reform, however, was not the ground on which the rise of women from a marginal to a more highly valued position within Judaism took place in nineteenth-century Germany.

Jewish women were not emancipated within halakhic Judaism, nor did they achieve equality in modern Jewish—or in German—society. The improvement of women’s status in Jewish culture did not take place in the conceptual framework of a language of rights, of law, or of Halakhah. “Religion,” in fact, “was no longer a matter of law,” or in Holdheim’s words, the Religionsbewusstsein of the present emancipated itself from Halakhah. Judaism and Jewish women’s status in Judaism changed, without these changes being directed and guided, or even contained and controlled by rabbinical leaders’ scholarly debates or halakhic decisions. While Reform rabbis wrestled with changes of Halakhah and discussed whether adjustments to Jewish law should be made and how far such revisions should go, the question of changing or not changing Jewish law ceased to hold supreme importance. Reformers pondered proof texts, historicized rabbinic rulings, or rejected Halakhah on the basis of scholarly arguments. Yet, at least with regard to the women’s question, none of these efforts had much relevance. If changes in Halakhah had been necessary in order to adapt Judaism to nineteenth-century society, German Jews would have instituted them, as generations had done before them. German Jewry would have created a reformed halakhic Judaism in which women’s status befitted contemporary sensibilities. Such a Judaism, however, did not come into existence at the time.

Rather than revising Halakhah in order to accommodate women more fully, German Jews created a new language within Judaism, a language expressing a modern Religionsbewusstsein, in which, as Geiger put it, “the beneficial influence of the feminine heart” figured prominently. Geiger himself had adopted this new language of religious sensitivity in an article in which he proposed raising the position of women within Halakhah. He emphasized women’s receptivity for religiosity, their “true female sentiments,” and the important role the female sex was destined to play in the religious life of German Jewry. And, like other Reformers, he insisted that women’s dignity needed to be restored. The champions of the women’s
question in Reform Judaism refrained from using a language of rights. They deplored women's inferior status in rabbinic Judaism and women's exclusion from many religious practices, but the leaders of the Reform movement did not promote ideas of women's entitlement to equal treatment with men as a human, civic, or religious right. Thereby, Jewish Reformers acted in accordance with the social and political norms of contemporary non-Jewish society.

In nineteenth-century Germany, equal rights feminism did not gain much lasting popularity, and the emancipatory, egalitarian women's politics of a small group of liberals did not succeed. Women encountered significant resistance when they demanded to participate on the same footing as men in a civil society in which men acted in the spirit of brotherhood and free and equal citizenship. In the social and cultural universe of bourgeois society, however, contemporaries highly valued contributions by women that they defined as specifically feminine. They considered women the moral sex, endowed with religious sensitivity, compassionate and caring qualities, and a particular sense for the beautiful and the lofty. Educators, ideologues, and bourgeois feminists claimed that by sustaining a morally and culturally immaculate home life and by raising the young with love and circumspection, women contributed greatly to the welfare and to the improvement of humankind. Thus, German society put little pressure on the Jewish community to give women the same rights as men and to formally emancipate the female sex in Jewish law. All the more, German Jews, as they embraced bourgeois culture, paid great attention to women's functions in the religious life of their families and their communities, and women moved from a marginal to a more central position in Jewish culture. Yet the religion in which women achieved greater recognition and inclusion was no longer defined by the study of rabbinic texts, the recitation of formulaic prayers in Hebrew, and the fulfillment of ritual commandments. The modern Jewish culture that welcomed women was a non-Torah and non-Halakhah centered modern Judaism.