In the synagogue, Jewish men from antiquity on recited ritually prescribed prayers, read from the Torah during worship, and studied rabbinic literature. The community of worshippers consisted exclusively of men, as women could not participate in communal study nor in the public Torah reading, and could not be counted in a *minyan*. Regular synagogue attendance constituted a form of female piety, too, but it took place at the margins of male worship. In the nineteenth century, German Jewry recast the gender order of the culture of public worship. Jews embraced the lifestyle and value system of the rising middle classes into which they sought to integrate and adopted bourgeois cultural sensibilities. As a part of this project of social and cultural embourgeoisement, they transformed synagogue services into orderly, dignified, and carefully orchestrated spectacles, in which worshippers expected to be emotionally stimulated and spiritually uplifted by the well-trained voices of a choir and by the rabbis’ sermons in beautifully phrased German. In the emerging culture of Jewish middle-class worship, men played an increasingly passive role, women reached an unprecedented degree of inclusion, and women’s and men’s positions become more similar to each other.

This process began in the second decade of the nineteenth century, when reformers in Seesen, Cassel, Berlin, Hamburg, and Frankfurt created abbreviated services with German-language prayers, choral and organ music, and most significantly with sermons that aimed to enoble the souls and the intellects of the worshippers. Seated in open galleries or even on the same floor as men, women experienced new forms of integration in these services. Women’s status in Jewish worship rose, as the character of synagogue devotion changed. In German synagogues, where Halakhah and Talmud Torah had defined worship, novel notions of devotion and edification, spiritual experience and moral teachings, and faith and religious sen-
timent moved into the foreground. Honors such as the privilege of reading from the Torah during the service remained male privileges, and technically only men were required to recite the Hebrew liturgy. However, these practices lost their supreme status in Jewish worship.

Rabbis, preachers, and Jewish educators in nineteenth-century Germany insisted that synagogue services ought to provide edification, moral elevation, and an aesthetically appealing experience to women as well as to men. The purpose of the service was expanded beyond primarily offering men the possibility to fulfill the halakhic obligation of active prayer. During large parts of public worship services, both men and women came to form an audience whom rabbis, preachers, cantors, and choirs strove to engage spiritually and emotionally. The equalization of the sexes in this culture of bourgeois religiosity found its most marked expression in mixed choirs and confirmation ceremonies for boys and girls. It remained true that modern Orthodox congregations rejected confirmation ceremonies, barred females from singing in synagogue choirs, continued to confirm their commitment to halakhic concepts of ritually prescribed prayer, and expected worshippers to raise their voices in prayer and song—though in a highly circumscribed manner. Yet, like their Reform-minded contemporaries, Orthodox Jews emphasized decorum and desired carefully orchestrated services to be spiritually uplifting, emotionally enriching, and morally ennobling. Bourgeois ideas and practices of edification moved away from what had formed the core, purpose, and substance of pre-modern synagogue culture: halakhically defined prayer and Talmud Torah. In the novel, bourgeois culture of religiosity, women became part of a redefined community of worshippers.

FROM PRE-MODERN WORSHIP TO THE EARLY REFORM SERVICES

Halakah held only Jewish men responsible for assembling regularly for public worship. However, in medieval and early modern Ashkenaz, women had also attended synagogues and some communities maintained separate women’s prayer rooms. These “women’s synagogues” (Weberschulen or Frauen synagogent), as they were called, could be found along a wall of the main hall of the sanctuary where the men worshiped. They were usually connected to the men’s prayer hall by small openings in the wall, were sometimes elevated above the level of the main sanctuary, or at times were located in the basement. Occasionally, the “women’s synagogue” even seems to have been housed in an entirely separate building in proximity to the male place of worship. In some synagogues that lacked women’s prayer rooms, pre-modern Jews appear to have created a women’s area by hanging
a curtain or installing a screen, in particular when a sermon or a lecture was given. Such a partition, known as *mehizah*, was necessary because contemporaries believed and Orthodox halakhic opinion insisted (as it still does today) that the sight or the voice of a woman threatens to arouse and to distract a man during worship and thereby impairs the value of his prayer.² Halakhically, the single most important function of a synagogue is to provide a space for Jewish men to recite the Hebrew liturgy and to communally read from the Torah scroll, as Jewish law commands males to do. Yet for centuries communities have valued women’s participation in public worship highly enough to establish special quarters for them. Still, the location and the character of women’s annexes leave no doubt that pre-modern Jewish society considered women’s devotion secondary and inferior.

Communities allotted less space to women and decorated and furnished women’s sections more sparingly than the men’s prayer room. Only the main hall housed the Torah, the Ark, and the *bimah* (platform with the desk from which the Torah is read). Women remained at a distance from the objects and areas that were invested with sanctity. Solely the hall in which men conducted the service was a sanctuary in the full sense of the word. In early modern Europe, this hierarchical division between the sexes began to assume more moderate forms, when women’s galleries became a common feature. New synagogues were sometimes built with balconies for women, or galleries were added to existing sanctuaries. In the same vein, some communities created openings in the wall between the men’s prayer hall and an elevated women’s synagogue so that the women’s annex would look like a balcony. In other cases, contemporaries removed grilles from elevated, separate women’s prayer rooms.³ Many of these galleries still had high balustrades that barred the view to the main floor, but women appear to have frequented them diligently. The widow Glikl bas Judah Leib, better known as Glikl of Hameln, reported in her memoirs that on the morning of a Jewish holiday in 1715, more than fifty women had sat on the upper gallery of the synagogue in Metz, while she and other female worshippers found places on a lower gallery. Glikl indeed seems to have recited morning prayers in the synagogue on a regular basis.⁴

Gravestones and *memorbooks* (memorial lists) praised women for attending public services daily, and the Yiddish-language Bible companion and commentary *Tsenerene* highly valued female synagogue attendance.⁵ Thus in early modern Ashkenaz, women were encouraged to worship in the synagogue. Yet their participation in public prayer remained severely restricted. Being seated in a side room or on a gallery maintained a woman’s marginal position, and in the spiritual economy of rabbinic Judaism, a woman’s devotion carried less value than that of a man, no matter how piously and consistently she attended the synagogue. However, changes in the
culture of Jewish worship in nineteenth-century Germany began to undermine this age-old hierarchy between men and women in Jewish worship.

The first reformed services in Germany that took place in Seesen and Cassel in the Napoleonic Kingdom of Westphalia seem to have catered primarily to male worshippers. The synagogues in which Jewish leaders began to introduce significant innovations were attached to modern boys’ schools. In the services at the Cassel school, students recited an abbreviated liturgy in Hebrew and German rather than the traditional Hebrew one, and they sang newly introduced hymns. After the customary Torah reading, a student recited the equivalent passages from Moses Mendelssohn’s German Bible translation. Most importantly, the teachers who led the services took great care that the prayers were recited slowly and clearly, that students understood what they said, and that respectful silence and pious devotion reigned during worship. These services came to an end when, in 1813, the Kingdom of Westphalia fell and the Jewish consistory disbanded. Yet the reform of Jewish worship was continued in the private synagogue opened by Israel Jacobson in 1815 in his home, after he had left Westphalia and established himself in Berlin. The worship in Jacobson’s house was distinguished from other private Jewish prayer meetings in the city by organ music, regular German-language sermons, German hymns, the inclusion of German prayers, shorter services, and an emphasis on orderly and dignified proceedings. Though there is no evidence of women’s attendance in the modernized services in the Kingdom of Westphalia, the reformed worship in Berlin clearly attracted women.

It stands to reason that Amalia Beer took an interest in the services that soon were moved from Jacobson’s home to the more spacious residence of her own family. Dedicated to Judaism and to the nascent reform of Judaism, highly cultured and self-confident, Beer may very well have had a hand in arranging the relocation. In fact, Eduard Kley, who was one of the preachers at the Beer temple and an emerging protagonist of early synagogue reform, had been the tutor of Beer’s son Michael and had lived with the family from 1809 to 1815. Conceivably, the cultivated and sophisticated Beer, who was in her forties, shaped the views of the young Kley as much as he influenced her. Indeed, Kley came to regard female religiosity highly, and in 1817, it was he who conducted the first recorded confirmation ceremony for Jewish girls in a sanctuary. It took place in the Beer temple. With this ceremony, Berlin reformers challenged the century-old marginalization of women in Jewish worship. At no time before in Jewish history, had girls or women stood in front of the Ark in an act that validated their place in the Jewish community in a comparable fashion. Indeed, women had rarely been able to approach the Ark and the Torah scrolls at all. In the services at the Beer temple, the seating arrangement in-
dicated that women no longer occupied a marginal or secondary position in worship. In the prayer hall that the Beer family had created in their large home, no partition appears to have separated the sexes. Men and women sat on the same level on different sides of the central section of the room that held the altar and the Torah shrine.  

Accordingly, when the members of the Beer temple appealed to the government not to outlaw the reformed Jewish services, they stressed the importance of the modernized worship for women. In fact, conservative members of the Jewish community opposed changes in synagogue worship, and Frederick William III of Prussia regarded the services in the Beer household with apprehension. While governments of other German states came to support synagogue reform and often imposed innovations on Jewish communities, the Prussian king feared that factionalization and dissent might result in political instability and subversion. He also aimed to Christianize and convert his Jewish subjects rather than to modernize Judaism. Consequently, Frederick William closed the Beer temple in December 1815. In the summer of 1817, the temple reopened but the situation remained precarious. The reformers who worshipped in the Beer temple were enmeshed in a battle with the king, ministers, and the traditionalist leadership of the Jewish community. A government official reported that the new community comprised 245 families, 162 unmarried men, 16 widows, and 12 unmarried women, and the reformers claimed that women and children in particular profited from the new-style services. According to the members of the Beer temple, the hitherto common form of worship failed to address the needs of the female population and of the young. None of these arguments nor a petition from the summer of 1823 prevented the Prussian government from permanently closing the Beer temple in the fall of the same year.  

In the meantime, Jewish reformers in Hamburg had created the Hamburg Temple, a synagogue in which modernized services made new room for women. Eduard Kley played a key role in the establishment of reformed worship in Hamburg and of the congregation that was to become the symbol of Reform Judaism in Germany. In 1817, Kley had come from Berlin to the Hanseatic city to accept a position as director of the local Jewish Free School.  

Immediately upon his arrival, he instituted devotional exercises at the school, scheduled them for Sunday mornings, and invited the parents of students as well as other interested men and women to attend. At the center of this weekly hour of devotion was an educational and edifying talk, given by Kley himself. Thereafter, a school choir, also founded by Kley on the day he assumed office, sang German and Hebrew hymns, the words and music of which the new director had brought with him from Berlin.
The devotional exercises in the Jewish Free School found enthusiastic resonance among Hamburg's Jewry and prompted the founding of the *Neue Israelitische Tempel-Verein* (New Israelite Temple Association). In 1818, the association inaugurated the Hamburg Temple, where the reformers held abbreviated services with an organ and choir music, German prayers, and German-language sermons after the model of the Beer temple.9

The *Neue Israelitische Tempel-Verein* refrained from seating men and women on the same floor, yet the seating order in the Hamburg Temple still indicated a greater integration of women than had been common in European synagogues. The new house of worship offered women 107 seats in a gallery, while 142 men could sit on the ground floor of the sanctuary. As a unique feature of the Temple, the balustrade of the women's gallery lacked any additional partition. Women appear to have welcomed this open balcony as well as the German-language sermon and the new style of prayer service. In fact, Kley reported proudly that during the winter of 1818/1819, "the oldest and the youngest ladies, not only from Hamburg but even from Altona streamed to the temple" in all kinds of weather.10

Frankfurt Jewry, at the time, had also taken interest in the emerging mode of devotion that appealed to women in new ways. As in Cassel, Seesen, and Hamburg, the novel devotional practices had their beginning in a modern Jewish school. In the Free School of Frankfurt, the Philanthropin, which was founded in 1804, the students assembled each Sunday morning in the main hall of the building. There they sang religious hymns, accompanied by an organ, and a teacher delivered an educational and edifying talk. In 1813, Joseph Johlson, a thirty-seven-year-old reformer and educator whose father had served the Jewish community of nearby Fulda as acting rabbi, became the religion teacher at the school. He invited the public to join the hour of devotion at the Philanthropin, called *Andachtstunde*, which now took place on Saturday mornings instead of on Sunday. The *Andachtstunde* gained considerable popularity among Frankfurt Jews. By 1815, adults outnumbered the children in the service, and women attended more numerous than men. The *Andachtstunde*, however, was not a synagogue service. Held after regular worship services in the communal synagogues, the *Andachtstunde* continued to consist primarily of a German-language sermon, hymns, and organ music. It offered no Hebrew prayers and Torah readings and—as the Frankfurt scholar, reformer, and teacher at the Philanthropin Isaac Marcus Jost reported—"many Christians visit[ed] it regularly."11 Yet for a significant segment of Frankfurt's Jewish population, the *Andachtstunde* replaced synagogue worship. In particular after 1828, when the Philanthropin had erected a hall with a balcony specifically for the weekly gatherings, many Jewish men and women attended the *Andachtstunde* rather than synagogue services. On the main floor of the new *An-
dachssaal (Hall of Devotion), male and female students, teachers, dignitaries, and paying community members with assigned seats mingled without distinction of sex. On the balcony, women and men, who were admitted without charge, sat separately.12

Thus, in Berlin, Hamburg, and Frankfurt, Jewish pedagogues, ideologues, rabbis, preachers, and lay leaders not only agitated for female synagogue attendance, but also created services that addressed and appealed to women. Statements, however, that these services attracted more women than unreformed worship did, deserve caution.13 Appraisals of the numbers of women who attended synagogues before the rise of the new style of worship constitute no more than guesses and, in the eighteenth century, female synagogue attendance may have been more common than is often assumed. In a significant departure from established customs, however, Jewish leaders invited unmarried women to attend services and emphasized the beneficial influence of synagogue devotion for young girls. Previously, mostly married women had taken up regular prayer practices. Yet nineteenth-century Jewish pedagogues considered religious devotion an indispensable part of an education that promoted spiritual growth and cultural refinement and that led to true Bildung. Jewish educators concurred with their non-Jewish colleagues that girls needed to be carefully prepared for their future roles as mothers. Girls were therefore included in modern programs of education and were encouraged to attend edifying worship services. The new emphasis on girls’ and women’s presence at synagogue services was thus closely tied to pedagogical reform.

Jewish reformers and educators had a particularly high opinion of exposing men and women to edifying talks in High German, and they stressed that above all, women and girls profited from well-phrased sermons and from uplifting educational speeches. Already in pre-modern Ashkenaz, women had been welcome in the synagogue when the rabbi would give one of his few derashot (traditional, hermeneutic sermons in Yiddish) or when itinerant preachers would visit. In fact, the custom of erecting a partition in the main hall of the sanctuary at the time of the sermon suggests that, for centuries, Jewish communities had regarded the presence of women during ethical or educational speeches as appropriate, or even desirable. Thus, directing didactic and moralizing talks toward a female as well as a male audience did not represent a novelty in the nineteenth century. What changed, however, was the status that sermons came to possess in modern worship. Derashot or ethical talks had previously not formed an integral part of regular worship, but had been an occasional though welcome addition services. Halakhically prescribed prayer and the reading and study of the Torah instead had defined the religious life in the synagogue, and women had played a marginal role in pre-modern communal worship.
In the nineteenth century, German Jews began to consider a weekly sermon an indispensable element of dignified, uplifting, and culturally refined worship. Reformers organized devotional meetings around edifying speeches. Sermons, along with choral singing, played a crucial role in the first modernized services. Soon, sermons and other religious practices aiming at edification, moral elevation, and emotional stimulation gained unprecedented importance in the German synagogue, and addressed women as much as men. In nineteenth-century synagogues, the gender order within the culture of Jewish devotion changed as the aesthetic, moral, and spiritual experience of the worshipper came to stand in the center of services, competing with halakhic notions of public prayer. The new character of Jewish worship brought women to the fore in the synagogue.

THE NEW CHARACTER OF SYNAGOGUE DEVOTION

When, in the second decade of the nineteenth century, German Jews began to transform their synagogue services in order to express bourgeois tastes and sensibilities, they often laid down guidelines for an improved worship in the form of synagogue ordinances. In 1810, the Jewish consistory of Westphalia, as a pioneer in issues of Jewish reform, appears to have issued the first Synagogenordnung (synagogue ordinance). In the ensuing decades, Jewish communities as well as state authorities published synagogue ordinances that introduced new priorities in Jewish worship. The synagogue ordinance of the Dukedom Anhalt-Bernburg from 1821 stated that a synagogue service had to consist in worshippers “expressing in communal devotion the pure sentiments of love, veneration, and gratitude toward the highest being in the most solemn manner and, while behaving quietly and calmly, not only showing feelings of reverence, but also awakening pious thoughts and sentiments through undisturbed attentiveness.”

The ordinance thus stipulated that, dressed appropriately, the worshipers had to enter and leave the sanctuary quietly and to refrain from chatter and noise during the service. Synagogue ordinances such as the example from Anhalt-Bernburg regulated the behavior and the appearance of the worshippers; prescribed the garb and the functions of rabbis, cantors, and communal officials; and laid down the particulars of the service.

Reform-minded Jewish leaders instituted changes into the liturgy, broke previously unquestioned halakhic norms, or otherwise violated time-honored principles of Jewish worship in the synagogue ordinances they devised. Yet the ordinances were not restricted to the Reform movement. Traditionalist communities and modern Orthodox congregations also adopted guidelines addressing the style and form of public Jewish worship.
demand for greater decorum and for a dignified, aesthetically appealing service that conformed to the cultural sensibilities of cultivated and self-respecting members of the German middle class formed a universal feature of all newly introduced ordinances. Whether or not German Jews had already achieved economic upward mobility and regardless of their approach to ideological synagogue reform, worshippers began to express their allegiance to the values of German middle-class culture in orderly and spiritually uplifting synagogue services.

In 1838, the synagogue ordinance of the Kingdom of Württemberg, issued by the Royal Israelite Supreme Ecclesiastical Authority under the leadership of Kirchenrat (ecclesiastical councilor) Rabbi Joseph Maier, ordered the mostly rural Jewish communities of the state to deliver German-language sermons on Sabbath and holidays and to sing German hymns during services. The synagogue ordinance also made religious instruction for boys and girls obligatory. In an edict issued four years earlier, the state of Württemberg had decreed that Jews erect permanent pulpits in their synagogues, from which the rabbi or preacher could deliver his sermons, and that cantors and rabbis wear black robes during worship. Moreover, an academic degree henceforth formed the prerequisite for a rabbinical position in the state. A similar development took place in more urban Jewish communities, too. In Hamburg in 1821, four years after the most reform-oriented families in the city had founded the New Israelite Temple Association, the traditionalist but highly acculturated and university-trained young rabbi Isaac Bernays assumed the pulpit as rabbi of the Hamburg Jewish community. Like the preachers of the Hamburg Temple, Bernays donned the black garb of Christian clergy during services and gave regular German-language sermons in the communal synagogue. Similarly, the model modern Orthodox congregation in Frankfurt, the Israelitische Religionsgesellschaft, introduced sermons and choral music into its services and embraced ideas of dignified and solemn proceedings. The synagogue ordinances that the Israelitische Religionsgesellschaft adopted in 1853 insisted on decorous behavior and barred worshippers from chanting along with the cantor or of correcting the errors of a Torah reader aloud. Subsequently, other Orthodox communities introduced highly formalized services with weekly or at least monthly sermons in High German and choir music. Congregants were expected to pray silently and to join the choir only at specifically designated parts of the liturgy.18

Synagogue worship in nineteenth-century Germany increasingly became a carefully orchestrated spectacle, which a well-dressed and well-behaved audience attended in awe and in silence. The reading of the Torah and other synagogue honors remained male prerogatives, and technically still men only had the halakhic obligation to recite standardized prayers in
Hebrew. The new character of public worship, however, diminished the importance of the established practices of synagogue devotion, in which women had held a marginal position. During much of the worship, now, both men and women played an equally passive role, while the rabbi or preacher, the cantor, and the choir performed the service. Worshippers sought edification, spiritual stimulation, and moral elevation by listening quietly to uplifting sermons and by enjoying the beautiful voices of a carefully trained chorus. In fact, in addition to changes in style, decorum, and aesthetics, the most common innovations in German synagogues in the first half of the nineteenth century consisted in the introduction of sermons and choirs as well as confirmation ceremonies. Every Jewish community that adopted contemporary ideas of religiosity attempted to improve its worship by offering regular modern-style sermons. Thus, even in the province of Posen, where Jewish life in many respects still bore the traits of its Polish past and of an East European setting, a significant number of Jewish communities had introduced sermons in the German language by 1848.

Rabbis and preachers directed their sermons to the entire community, and men as well as women appreciated well-phrased homiletics. Rabbi Ludwig Philippson, founder and editor of the Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums, reported that already in the early days of German preaching in Dessau, Joseph Wolf's sermons had enjoyed wide popularity and that young female worshippers in particular had crowded the galleries. Contemporary and scholars have often mentioned German-language sermons and female audiences in one breath. Yet some Jewish men too began to consider the sermon the main attraction of a synagogue service. A report in the Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums, for example, claimed that in the Hamburg Temple, many worshippers only came to hear the sermon and left soon after the preacher had finished. In a similar vein, Louis Lesser, a young man from a respectable though not wealthy Jewish family in Dresden, recorded his occasional synagogue visits in his diary. He attended services primarily on high holidays and, as many women may have done, when the rabbi delivered a sermon. While some men still took the responsibility to engage in halakhically prescribed prayer seriously, others mostly expected services to provide edification and moral inspiration through sermons and choir music. The latter had relinquished privileges that had distinguished them from women.

It was men only who played the active roles of rabbis, preachers, and cantors, delivering sermons and leading the congregation in prayer. Yet in some communities, synagogue choirs admitted girls or women, thereby offering women an unprecedented public role in Jewish worship. By mid-nineteenth century, women sang in the choirs of the Reform congregations in Berlin and Budapest. In Pfullnich in rural Württemberg, girls per-
formed in the choir when the Jewish community inaugurated its synagogue. In Neuwied, Rhineland, the director of the synagogue choir petitioned the community board in 1850 for permission to train girls to sing during services. The choir continuously lost voices, he lamented, when boys could no longer perform as sopranos. The Jewish community of Neuwied granted his request and soon girls as well as women participated in the synagogue choir. Particularly in smaller communities, the desire to have a large, multi-voiced choir despite the scarcity of available singers may have contributed to the integration of girls and women into choirs, overruling halakhic concerns.

The new cantor of Neuwied, A. Rosenfeld, agreed with his predecessor that training children for the synagogue choir served to enhance the aesthetic quality of the service. Yet in a letter to the community board from 1868, he added that in a time in which religious apathy grew and many children failed to attend public worship services, participation in a synagogue choir also offered a formidable means of inspiring love for religion in the young and of drawing them into the synagogue. In fact, Rosenfeld claimed, the boys and girls in his choir “joyously rushed with their prayer books” to services and also showed greater interest for religious matters in school than before they joined the chorus. For a pedagogue like Rosenfeld, a children’s synagogue choir fulfilled an important educational purpose, binding the young generation to Judaism by assigning them an active role in a dignified and appealing synagogue service. In the eyes of contemporaries, awakening and promoting the religious sentiments of girls was as urgent an issue as was leading boys toward the synagogue. In Neuwied, practical considerations as well as the wish to strengthen the commitment of the next generation to the Jewish religion and to public worship led to the participation of girls in the choir, and the decision seems to have aroused no controversy.

It is still difficult to assess how widespread mixed synagogue choirs were by the second half of the nineteenth century. Different from their contemporaries in North America, German Jews did not engage in lively debate on women’s voices in public worship. In America as well as in Germany, however, aesthetic considerations and the desire to create decorous and solemn worship services played a key role in introducing choirs into the synagogue. Yet one of the European synagogues that enjoyed great fame and repute for the high standards of its choral music possessed an all-male choir: the Vienna temple, where Salomon Sulzer created his own, widely celebrated style of liturgical music. Likewise, the Berlin choir master and composer of synagogue music Louis Lewandowski apparently did not include women and girls in the chorus that performed in the imposing New Synagogue in Berlin, inaugurated in 1866.
Large Reform synagogues had no lack of male voices. They also may have considered an exclusively male choir more prestigious, and furthermore offered the girls of their communities other forms of inclusion such as courses of religious instruction and confirmation ceremonies.

Modern Orthodox congregations, too, abstained from including women’s voices in synagogue choirs. Moreover, Orthodox synagogue music remained simpler than Lewandowski’s or Sulzer’s compositions. Insisting that choral singing should not entirely displace active prayer, Orthodox leaders expected congregants to join the choir at designated passages. Even though Orthodox Jews aspired to adapt public worship to the tastes and norms of German middle-class culture as their Reform contemporaries did, in modern Orthodox synagogues, choral music played a less prominent role than was the case in other modernized services. Comparatively, therefore, modern Orthodox worship retained more of a distinction between male and female worshippers. In adherence to the principles of rabbinic Judaism, modern Orthodoxy continued to emphasize the halakhic obligation of Jewish men to recite the established canon of Hebrew prayers, while women’s devotion did not possess the same status. Even so, in modern Orthodox synagogues, nineteenth-century ideas of religiosity and decorous proceedings challenged the previously supreme role of men’s active prayer. At least during some of the service, male and female worshippers either listened quietly, prayed in silence, or engaged in private meditation. The proliferation of choral music contributed to this development, in which the gap between men’s and women’s roles in the synagogue narrowed. The erosion of the gender hierarchy in Jewish worship was even more distinct when girls or women joined the choirs or when Jewish communities introduced confirmation ceremonies for boys and girls in addition to or instead of Bar Mitzvah celebrations.

BAR MITZVAH AND CONFIRMATION CEREMONIES

Bar mitzvah means literally son of commandment, and the term refers to the coming of age of the thirteen-year-old Jewish male. A bar mitzvah assumes full responsibility for all the ritual obligations to which Halakhah binds a Jewish man. As a bar mitzvah, he can be called to publicly read from the Torah scroll during the synagogue service. In many Jewish communities in nineteenth-century Germany, when a Jewish boy received this honor for the first time in his life, the event was accompanied by a celebration, marking the access of the Jewish male to the Torah. From then on, as a formally adult and observant Jew, he had the right and the duty to pursue the study of rabbinic literature.
For Jewish men at the time, however, the privilege and the responsibility of studying the Talmud ceased to be the ultimate object of their pride and their desire. In pre-modern times, religious study had certainly not constituted the single most important focus in the life of every Jewish man, but until the nineteenth century, all Jews everywhere had shared the high esteem for rabbinic learning and had taken the observance of ritual laws for granted. Yet among nineteenth-century German Jews halakhic observance declined and, since the Haskalah, Torah study and rabbinic learning had begun to lose its pre-eminent status. In the course of the first half of the nineteenth century, the yeshivot or Talmud academies (the traditional institutions of higher Jewish learning), closed down and Jewish elementary schooling underwent a dramatic transformation. Unprecedented in Jewish history, students received a secular education in Jewish schools. The curricula of the schools featured new subjects such as biblical history and *Religionsunterricht* (religious instruction), while established modes of Jewish learning were neglected. In fact, in many modernized Jewish schools, Talmud study ceased altogether. Reformers aimed to integrate German Jewry into civil society and transformed Judaism into a religion that would allow Jews to be Germans of the Jewish faith among other Germans of Christian creed. Thus, they reconceptualized Jewish education according to the Christian model. The Bible rather than the Talmud, in their view, provided the moral and religious teachings that Jewish children needed in order to become useful and culturally refined members of German society. Jewish educators created an entire body of new, German-language textbooks and catechisms, and attempted to teach Jewish religion in a systematic and enlightened manner.  

Jewish communities also began to embrace the Protestant institution of the confirmation ceremony. Though confirmations never completely replaced Bar Mitzvah celebrations, German Jews came to widely accept the confirmation as a Jewish custom. In addition to or instead of the more time-honored Bar Mitzvah rite, by mid-nineteenth century, confirmation ceremonies formed an important feature in the religious lives of German-Jewish communities.

The first Jewish confirmation ceremony appears to have taken place in 1803, in Dessau, when the rabbi and teacher at the Jewish Free School confirmed a boy in a private home as the adolescent reached his thirteenth birthday. Subsequently, the Jewish Free School in Wolfenbüttel introduced the rite and in 1807, Leopold Zunz, who was to become one of the founders of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, recited a confession of faith at his confirmation at the Wolfenbüttel school. Two years later, when the Jewish consistory of Westphalia constituted itself, one of its first orders stated that the Jewish youth of the Kingdom be prepared for confirmation ceremonies.
Jewish leaders in Westphalia planned to include girls in the new programs of religious instruction as well as in the confirmation celebrations. Yet in the Kingdom of Westphalia, only boys seem to have been confirmed, since the practice of the ceremonies did not spread beyond modern Jewish boys’ schools. In fact, reports from the Cassel school in Westphalia provide the first full account of a Jewish confirmation ceremony. The ceremony took place in 1810 in the school’s synagogue during Sabbath services. It began after the Torah reading with a talk by Jeremiah Heinemann, in which he expounded on the purpose of a confirmation. Then the boy who was being confirmed “solemnly reported on the principal truths of religion,” pledging to faithfully observe his religious and civil obligations. Finally, the boy received a blessing from the rabbi.29

In the ensuing decades, Jewish communities throughout Germany and Central Europe introduced confirmations. The ceremonies became more elaborate but continued to follow the structure of the celebration in Cassel. In 1844, according to Leopold Zunz, a confirmation ceremony typically remained the same general order. The ceremony included singing, communal prayer, a talk by the teacher, the examination of the youth, the teacher’s address reminding students and parents of their religious and ethical duties, the prayer and profession of faith of the students, the blessing of the young by the rabbi, another communal prayer, and singing as conclusion.30 By the mid-nineteenth century, it was no longer individual boys who were confirmed when they reached the age of thirteen. Rather, confirmation ceremonies had become graduation exercises from modern courses of religious instruction, roughly corresponding to the time of the children’s thirteenth birthday.31 Moreover, confirmations now included well-rehearsed public examinations of students. In the style of Christian catechisms, pupils demonstrated their familiarity with the moral principles and religious tenets of Judaism.

The Protestant model, however, according to which the adult Christian became a full member of the Church in the confirmation ceremony, proved problematic for German Jews. Critics argued that Jews were born into Judaism, with even circumcision marking rather than establishing a Jew’s religious affiliation. In the same vein, a confession of faith did not possess the status it held in Christianity. Thus, contemporaries tended to consider the confirmation ceremony a solemn celebration confirming the boys’ and girls’ inclusion in the Jewish community, in which the young pledged their loyalty to the Jewish religion. In the mid-nineteenth century, when Jewish leaders detected a decline of religious commitment among German Jewry, a ceremony impressing the love for Judaism on the young generation appeared essential to many. The reformer Salomon Herxheimer, chief rabbi of the Duchy of Anhalt-Bernburg, deplored, for instance, the fact...
that many communities did not observe Bar Mitzvah ceremonies appropriately, and that the Bar Mitzvah failed to address girls. Jewish ideologues, pedagogues, preachers, and rabbis propagating religious instruction for girls also insisted on confirming girls.  

The first confirmation of Jewish girls seems to have been celebrated in 1814 in Berlin, in the private Jewish girls' school of Moses Hirsch Bock, a teacher and radical reformer from Posen. Likewise in Berlin, Eduard Kley conducted a confirmation of two girls in the Beer temple in 1817, in a moving ceremony that Sulamith hailed as an event of outstanding historical importance. By March 1818, Kley had confirmed another five girls and five boys in the Hamburg Temple, after he became the director of the Jewish Free School in Hamburg as well as preacher at the temple. In Berlin and Hamburg, confirmation ceremonies had thus not only begun to include girls, but also had moved from schools into synagogues. Other Jewish communities soon followed this trend, as the institution of the confirmation ceremony took hold among German Jewry. Around 1818, only boys appear to have been confirmed in small communities such as Strelitz, north of Berlin, and in Uehlfeld near Ansbach in Bavaria. However, confirmations that took place from 1828 on at the Frankfurt Philanthropin from their inception involved both sexes, and the Jews of Neukirchen in Westphalia and of Landsberg in East Prussia already were confirming girls in the synagogue in the 1820s. In Dessau, boys celebrated their confirmations from 1821 on in the synagogue, and in the 1830s, David Fränkel confirmed boys and girls together in the main synagogue. Subsequently, Jewish communities such as Bamberg, Brunswick, Bernburg, Heidelberg, Offenbach, and Munich began to hold confirmation ceremonies for boys and girls, some of which took place in the synagogue.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Jewish confirmation ceremonies for both sexes were a common feature in many Jewish communities throughout Germany. The Berlin Reform congregation alone confirmed three hundred boys and girls in the decade between 1847 and 1857. While this congregation stood at the forefront of the German Reform movement, even traditionalist rabbis at times conducted such ceremonies for boys and girls as well. Rabbi Samuel Levi Eger, chief rabbi of Brunswick was an accomplished Talmudist. Contemporaries knew him to be critical of tampering with established customs, but from 1831 on, he confirmed boys and girls in the synagogue. Modern Orthodoxy, as it emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century, rejected the institution of confirmations. Yet beyond this small segment of German Jewry, confirmation ceremonies appear to have won broad acceptance. When in 1868 the Jewish community of Kattowitz in Silesia wrote to rabbis throughout Germany and inquired whether confirmations of girls in the synagogue were permissible, Kat-
towitz Jewry received overwhelmingly positive answers. Some of the almost twenty rabbis from nearby Beuthen, Bielitz, Ratibor, and Rybnik and from Jewish communities further west such as Berlin, Bonn, Dresden, Frankfurt, Hanover, Prague, and Stockholm, expressed concern about the originally Christian character of the ceremony and hesitated to hold girls’ confirmation in the synagogue. Most, however, declared that confirming for girls was not only permissible, but also highly advisable.

Like many of his colleagues, Rabbi Daniel Fraenkel of Rybnik, for instance, argued that materialism and nihilism were threatening to destroy the Jewish home. According to Fraenkel, who seems to have studied in Berlin, modern religious instruction for boys and girls and confirmation ceremonies formed important means to strengthen the faith of the youth and to save Judaism. In his letter to the Jews of Kattowitz, Fraenkel stated that

religious instruction has become a necessity for girls as much as for boys. Indeed, in regard to their future profession as mothers and educators, I consider it [the religious education of girls] as even more urgent, since it depends on them [the women] whether the house of the Israelite can be regarded as truly Jewish.36

Modern Jewry, according to Fraenkel, could not afford to celebrate only Bar Mitzvah rituals for boys. Nevertheless, Fraenkel conceded, some of his contemporaries might object to a celebration in the synagogue in which women entered the part of the sanctuary reserved for men, and in which girls sang publicly. Fraenkel himself opposed females singing in the synagogue, but endorsed girls standing in front of the Ark during the confirmation ceremony, as long as the sexes remained apart and observed the rules “of morality and propriety.”37

The religious sensibilities of German Jews and the halakhic decisions of their rabbis thus varied. Some communities eschewed girls’ singing in the sanctuary or continued to hold girls’ confirmation ceremonies in the school rather than in the synagogue. Evidently however, other communities had mixed choirs and held confirmation ceremonies for girls in the synagogue. Radical Reformers, such as Abraham Geiger, even believed that confirmations should ultimately replace the “Bar Mitzvah foolishness [Alfsanzerei].”38

On the opposite side of the spectrum, however, modern Orthodox congregations refused to introduce confirmations and held only Bar Mitzvah celebrations, and in many Jewish communities, boys celebrated a Bar Mitzvah as well as a confirmation.39 Overall, confirmation ceremonies had gained substantial popularity by the second half of the nineteenth century, and had become common, though not universal in German synagogues.
Girls participated in confirmation ceremonies because as future mothers and the alleged mainstay of Jewish religiosity, they were included in the programs of modern religious education, from which students of both sexes generally graduated in such ceremonies. These courses of modern religious education focused on the moral teachings of Judaism, on the principles of the Jewish religion, and on biblical history rather than consisting of Talmud study. Accordingly, the examination during the confirmation ceremony, the addresses of the teachers and rabbis, and the confession of faith of the students stressed the moral and religious values and the tenets of Judaism.

The reading of the Torah and the relationship of the Jewish man to halakhic observance, conversely, defined the Bar Mitzvah ceremony. The Bar Mitzvah stood for the culture of rabbinic Judaism from which women remained excluded. Yet the shift from the Bar Mitzvah to the confirmation ceremony exemplifies the transformation from this age-old exclusivist male Judaism to a new culture of Jewish religiosity that addressed both sexes and included women. The transition from Bar Mitzvah rituals to confirmation ceremonies challenged the established gender hierarchy in the Jewish culture of worship. Previously only boys and men had been able to receive honors in the synagogue, and only they could approach the Ark with the Torah scroll. Now girls along with boys stood in front of a congregation, declared their allegiance to Judaism, received a blessing from the rabbi, and were publicly acknowledged as members of the Jewish community. In confirmation ceremonies, young women experienced a previously unknown degree of public validation, respect, and inclusion in the synagogue.

**WOMEN'S SPACE IN THE SYNAGOGUE**

The greater integration that women enjoyed in Jewish worship in nineteenth-century Germany also expressed itself in the architectural design of synagogues. In the early decades of the nineteenth century in the historical synagogue of Worms, Jewish women still occupied a separate women's prayer room, a *Weiberschule* dating from the thirteenth century. In Worms, the women's annex consisted of a room on the same floor as the main hall, connected to it by small windows. In 1841, the Jewish community petitioned the government to allow structural changes in the main sanctuary in order to improve the decorum during worship and to create a more appropriate setting for the preacher to deliver his sermon. The authorities granted the permission but decreed that the community also was to open one or two of the arches in the wall between the main hall and the women's prayer room. Government officials wished that "the voice of the preacher
ought to be heard comfortably there [in the women's section], too.”40 The community did as the government ordered and decided to put doors with grates into the arches. However, the rabbi of Worms, fifty-six-year-old Jakob Bamberger, complained that the grating was too wide and was offensive to the religious sensibilities of pious Jews. In fact, still devoted to studying the Talmud rather than committed to modern forms of education and of religiosity, Bamberger mistrusted many of the innovations that his contemporaries introduced. He had previously attempted to prevent preachers from giving weekly edifying talks in the Worms synagogue, and now Bamberger claimed that curtains were needed to cover the new doors to the women's section. The community board replied that its budget did not allow for curtains, but that any community member was free to contribute fitting blinds of green silk. Nobody provided curtains and the issue was dropped. Finally, in 1847, the Jewish community of Worms removed the doors between the main floor and the women's section, and through the open arches, the women could freely observe the service in the main sanctuary.41

In Worms, the government of Hesse and the leaders of the Jewish community seem to have concurred that women should be more integrated in the service, while a traditionalist rabbi disapproved.42 Apparently, more serious conflicts were the exceptions; in general, Jewish communities lowered the balustrades of women's balconies and removed the lattice in front of them in a process that generated little controversy. Yet the pace of these changes varied, and even within the same community individual synagogues would take different approaches to the issue of women's seating. In Hamburg, the Reform Temple pioneered early in the century in offering women a free view of the men's section. The communal synagogue in the Hamburg district of Wandsbek, on the other hand, installed an open, wooden railing at its women's gallery only in 1874, when it also enlarged the balcony. After the expansion, this gallery had more room for women to sit than for men on the main floor. Another synagogue in Hamburg catered only to men and did not have any balcony or women's section at all, and a fourth one retained a women's gallery with close-meshed latticework into the twentieth century.43

In Christian churches in nineteenth-century Germany, seating arrangements were uncontested, as men and women consistently occupied separate sections of the same floor. Yet in a development that brought women to the fore particularly in Protestant churches, the number of female worshippers came to exceed that of their male contemporaries. Already in the late eighteenth century, women had attended Protestant church services more regularly than men. From the early nineteenth century on, in some urban centers and industrial areas, 70 percent or more of the churchgoers were
female. In the 1870s in Leipzig, for instance, a Church official reported that men represented only one out of three or four worshippers. Catholic men withdrew from the public rites of the Church to a lesser extent than their Protestant counterparts. However, scholars agree that the patterns of male and female church attendance attested to a feminization of religion in the nineteenth century. The formal and dogmatic Christianity of earlier centuries had been transformed into a religiosity in which contemporaries believed women to excel, and which many women embraced. As part of their particular commitment to religious and moral values, Christian women showed a greater commitment to the Church and distinguished themselves by attending church services more frequently than men.

A related development took place in German Jewish communities. Yet in the synagogue, female worshippers appeared generally not to have outnumbered their male counterparts. In the course of the nineteenth century, communities lowered the balustrades of women's balconies in their synagogues and removed partitions from women's annexes, but the ratio of men's and women's seats in synagogues around the turn of the twentieth century does not significantly differ from, for example, that of the Hamburg Reform Temple. In fact, as late as in the 1920s, 48 percent of the male and 26 percent of the female community members in Hamburg were said to have attended High Holiday services. These numbers indicate that synagogue attendance as such had fallen to a relatively low level. Many Jewish men had indeed abandoned practices of daily prayer decades earlier. In northern German Friedrichstadt in 1820, the community board bemoaned that on weekday mornings and evenings fewer than the required ten men appeared for public worship, even though sixty families lived near the synagogue. In Cologne, a contemporary noted in 1849 that only one-third of the Jewish population of two hundred families attended synagogues at all, and that most Jews kept their shops and offices open on Sabbath. Occasionally we also hear that women attended Sabbath services, in particular attracted by sermons, while men pursued business. A lawyer from Berlin, for instance, recalled that in his childhood in the 1860s, “my grandmother went regularly [to services], my mother as often as taking care of the little ones permitted, and the men of the family on the main holy days.”

Though it remains difficult to gauge the overall ratio of male and female synagogue attendance throughout the nineteenth century, women undoubtedly maintained a consistent presence in public worship. In a letter to her husband, Vogel Weil in Otterstadt near Speyer reported in the 1810s to have been at holiday services. In 1844, when rabbis, preachers, and educators had begun to laud the beneficial influences of synagogue devotion for women and girls, a discontented husband listed synagogue attendance every Saturday or at least once a month among the duties of his
wife.\textsuperscript{49} In a similar vein, an obituary from 1867 praised the deceased for frequently attending services, and memoirs from the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries often described mothers and grandmothers as devoted synagogue-goers. The elderly Pauline Wengeroff, from a German-speaking and highly acculturated household in Lithuania, nostalgically remembered her mother getting up early for public worship on the Jewish New Year, and for attending services Friday evenings. Likewise, Adolf Kurrein, who had been born in Moravia in 1848 and later served as a liberal rabbi in St. Pölten, Linz, and other communities of the Austrian monarchy, exalted his mother as a model of female piety. In his childhood, Kurrein recalled, his widowed and hardworking mother observed the Sabbath as a “true, veritable, old-Jewish day of rest,” which included attending synagogue services.\textsuperscript{50}

We owe depictions of female synagogue devotion in the middle of the nineteenth century to journalists and writers such as Dora Lehmann, member of a well-respected Jewish family in Hamburg, and Rosalie Perles, who lived in Munich and was married to Joseph Perles, the rabbi, graduate of the Jüdisch-theologisches Seminar in Breslau, and scholar. In her memoirs, Lehmann recounted that women appeared every morning in the Orthodox synagogue of Altona earlier than the men did, and that many still attended Sabbath and holiday services at an advanced age. When she had been a young girl, Lehmann claimed, the women’s section of the synagogue buzzed with playing children and with women who chatted while Jacob Ettlinger preached in the main sanctuary. Likewise describing old-fashioned patterns of female synagogue attendance, Perles recalled that her grandmother used to frequent the so-called “old synagogue” in Posen, where she perched in front of one of the few holes in the wall that connected the women’s section with the men’s prayer room. There, she piously recited her prayers and listened with rapt attention to the cantor and to the men chanting the Torah portion. Only when a newly wed woman attended services for the first time did grandmother Perles give up her accustomed seat for the day.\textsuperscript{51}

Authors such as Perles, Kurrein, Lehmann, and Wengeroff describe Jewish women who attended public worship in the beginning and the middle of the nineteenth century as paradigms of traditional piety. Their accounts attest to the desire of German Jews in the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries for a religious faithfulness and a heartfelt religiosity that they diagnosed as being in danger if not lost in their days. The authors of memoirs often locate a pure and sincere devotion in an idealized past and identified their mothers and grandmothers as its carriers. The reports thus express contemporary ideas on women’s privileged access to religious sensivity and joint women’s role as preservers of Jewish tradition, and we have to
be cautious to conclude from them that Jewish women in mid-nineteenth-century Germany unambiguously embraced pre-modern forms of religiosity. Yet the recollections confirm that women attended services, and despite their ideological preconceptions, the narratives describe patterns of female piety with some complexity. Rosalie Perles, for instance, depicts her grandmother in a synagogue with a pre-modern seating arrangement, while she stresses that the old woman had a particular liking for the German-language sermons that preacher Salomon Pleßner occasionally gave. In a similar vein, though in a less romanticizing tone, Jenny Weinberg, who had been born into a well-to-do Berlin family in 1822, remembered in her memoirs that in the mid-nineteenth century, fashionably dressed Jewish women flocked to hear the German sermons “of the famous preacher Dr. Sachs” in the Heidereutergasse Synagogue, where female worshippers sat behind a golden lattice.52

Memoirs also indicate that in the mid-nineteenth century in at least some families, girls remained at home when their parents attended services. Clara Geissmar, born in 1844 into an observant family in the small community of Eppingen in Baden, thus reported that in her childhood, unmarried women prayed exclusively at home. Geissmar only went to synagogue in order to pick up her mother from services. Lena Kahn, likewise having grown up in a small German town in the same period, recalled being allowed into the synagogue for the blowing of the shofar (ram’s horn) on the High Holidays as an exceptional and moving event. An article in the periodical Der Israelitische Volkslehrer from 1853 described the same state of affairs in Kurhessen at the time, deploring that unmarried women were still excluded from the benefits of synagogue devotion.53

Jewish leaders had begun to advocate synagogue attendance for women decades earlier, and the inclusion of female youth in the synagogue was often associated with progress and with modern-style worship. Accordingly, Esther Calvary, the daughter of the university-trained Esriel Hildesheimer (he later served as rabbi of the modern Orthodox congregation Adass Israel in Berlin), accompanied her mother to the synagogue in the middle of the nineteenth century. In fact, by the second half of the century, unmarried women and girls may have been more likely to attend synagogue services than their peers in previous decades, provided that their families took interest in religious worship at all. Scholars, however, have suggested that women’s synagogue attendance increased overall, that German-language sermons in modern Orthodox services attracted more women, and that women preferred modernized services in synagogues such as the Hamburg Temple, while they spurned established synagogues.54 Yet any increase in the numbers of female synagogue worshippers or in the frequency of their attendance remains difficult to verify.
Modernizers claimed that order and decorum, choirs and sermons, and an aesthetically appealing and edifying character of worship services drew women into synagogues, and some Jewish women indeed expressed interest in services that conformed to bourgeois notions of enlightened worship. Minna Diamant, a young woman who commonly attended the synagogue in Pressburg, described her enchantment when she visited the reformed temple of Vienna in 1833. Diamant, whose parents were committed to a bourgeois lifestyle though they lived in modest circumstances, was thoroughly moved by the beautiful building and the “festive ceremonies” in the Viennese synagogue. She praised the “instructive and edifying” sermon, and admired the choral music whose tunes, according to her, uplifted the heart and inspired genuine piety. “Only in such a place one could engage in true devotion,” Diamant declared.\textsuperscript{55}

In Frankfurt, Rabbi Leopold Stein claimed, Jewish women also loved decorous, dignified, and spiritually stimulating worship, and had successfully agitated for a reconstruction of the communal synagogue to house more tasteful services. Likewise, Therese Gumpel, born in Brunswick in 1817 into a large Jewish family, prized modernized services. “In the House of the Lord” she prayed with great devotion, and reported in letters to her fiancé enthusiastically and in great detail on the sermons delivered by preachers such as Gotthold Salomon.\textsuperscript{56} Moreover, as a spectator with her mother, she attended the first rabbinical conference, which took place in her hometown in 1844. Gumpel found the concluding speech of Kirchenrat (ecclesiastical councilor) Joseph Maier very much to her liking.

When Emma Isler, activist in the kindergarten movement and wife of the director of the public library in Hamburg, visited Berlin in the winter of 1845/1846, she too took interest in the Reform initiatives in the city. Isler discussed the future of Judaism and of the Reform movement with the scholar Leopold Zunz, attended the lectures of reformers Michael Sachs and Sigismund Stern, and questioned Stern on his campaign for Sunday rather than Sabbath worship services in the newly founded Association for Reform in Judaism. Emma Isler wrote her husband, Meyer Isler, about these conversations, and toward him expressed skepticism about the Reform movement in Berlin. Stern’s vision of a reformed Jewish religion appeared to her to be neither Judaism nor Christianity. “I am sorry,” Isler admitted, “that I can’t refrain from having my doubts about these efforts, whose success is so infinitely desirable to me.”\textsuperscript{57} Emma Isler and Therese Gumpel thus showed concern and excitement for synagogue reform, for German-language sermons, and for modern, edifying worship services.

Women occasionally also actively advocated and defended innovations, as they did in Mannheim in 1855 and Vienna in 1876. In the 1850s, the Jewish community of Mannheim and its rabbi Moses Präger came into
conflict with the Jewish Oberrat (Supreme Council) of Baden about the reforms that Mannheim Jewry had carried out in public worship. In particular, the Oberrat objected to the prayer book that the rabbi had published for use in the communal synagogue. In the text, Präger had removed Hebrew prayers and replaced some of them with German-language devotions. When the Oberrat threatened to dismiss Präger from his position, the Jews of Mannheim came to his defense. A group of men and a group of women each submitted a petition on behalf of their rabbi. In their petition, the women expressed gratitude for living in an era in which they could worship God with dignity and were no longer excluded, rejected, and silenced. A regression to previous conditions, they claimed, would deprive them of “the just gained and already so much cherished good of religious edification.”

They stressed that, in particular, reinstating the blessing in which men thanked the Creator for not being a woman would hurt them deeply. In Mannheim, Jewish women supported and defended the synagogue reforms that the male leaders of their community had introduced.

More than twenty years later, a group of women in Vienna likewise spoke out for reformed worship. This time, women, apparently on their own initiative, agitated for having previously instituted reforms carried further. Thirty-three women, most of them unmarried, petitioned the community board to introduce more German prayers into a service already largely conducted in German. Additional prayers in that language, they argued, would lead to “a much more numerous and fervent participation of the women” in public worship. However, when communal rabbi Moritz Güdemann was consulted about the issue, he objected that women already attended the Vienna Reform temple in great numbers. It was rather men, Güdemann stated, who did not appear at services, including “those [men] who admittedly . . . know Hebrew.” Thus in Vienna at the time, women frequented the temple regularly, while men’s synagogue attendance appeared precarious.

In public statements and private letters, Jewish women in the middle of the nineteenth century expressed their liking of modernized synagogue services. Conversely, the authors of memoirs tended to describe their mothers and grandmothers, also living in the middle of the nineteenth century, as deeply attached to unreformed modes of worship. Nostalgia undoubtedly colored these accounts. Yet it is not unlikely that up to the second half of the nineteenth century, the synagogue attendance of elderly women in particular followed established patterns of female piety rather than reform impulses. After all, women had attended synagogues in highly segregated settings throughout the early modern period in numbers that may have been as significant as those of the female worshippers of the nineteenth century.

On the other hand, at least a segment of the female Jewish population in
nineteenth-century Germany clearly appreciated or even treasured sermons, choral music, and beautiful, uplifting services, and at times demanded and defended synagogue reforms. Women who desired inclusion into a modernized Jewish worship profited from lower balustrades on women’s galleries, from the removal of partitions between men’s and women’s sections, and from institutions such as mixed choirs and confirmation ceremonies. Women approved of these innovations and occasionally supported them. However, their activities do not appear to have formed the driving force behind the development that led to more equality between the sexes in Jewish worship. The greater integration of women in German synagogues was most of all an expression and a consequence of the transformation of the character of Jewish worship and of the reconfiguration of the gender order in synagogue culture that went hand in hand with this transformation.

In nineteenth-century synagogue worship, the uncontested core and essence of a synagogue service no longer consisted in men performing the ritual obligation of reciting halakhically ordained Hebrew prayers and publicly reading from the Torah. Other religious practices from which women were not excluded had come to the fore. In his article, “The Principles of Rabbinic Worship and its Relationship to the Religious Consciousness of the Present,” Reform rabbi Samuel Holdheim referred in 1846 to this shift in the culture of Jewish worship when he declared that the obligation of devotion (Andacht) had replaced the halakhic obligation of prayer. As he argued in his essay on women’s position in rabbinic Judaism (published in the same year), Holdheim claimed that the modern “religious consciousness,” which went hand in hand with a high regard for female religiosity, had made Halakhah obsolete. According to Holdheim, women had been excluded from public worship in ancient Israel because the Israelite religion had had a political character. The male gender, the independent status of an individual, and majority in age had formed the prerequisites for Cultusfähigkeit (eligibility to worship) in the Jerusalem Temple, and women could not fulfill sacrificial, priestly, and political functions. After the destruction of the Temple, prayer worship took the place of Temple worship, but, Holdheim explained, women’s status remained marginal, as a minyan continued to represented the Jewish nation. In the nineteenth century, however, religion no longer had political implications. Moreover, according to Holdheim the character of worship had changed. Animal sacrifice in the Temple and prayer in rabbinic Judaism had been symbolic, external acts “accompanied by devotion.” Their value and power lay in the meaning of the acts themselves and in what they represented, not in the intent and in the state of mind of the worshipper. This understanding of religious acts
that had originated in national and political Temple worship, Holdheim declared, stood in glaring contradiction to the “modern religious consciousness.” In the nineteenth century, the desire for “pious sentiments” brought worshippers together. They congregated as equals, without consideration of their position and rank in modern, civil society. Devotion formed the substance and the purpose of contemporary synagogue worship, and women had become full-fledged members of a redefined community of worshippers.

In his article, as well as in his essay on women’s status in Judaism, Holdheim refused to amend Jewish law and instead categorically rejected Halakkah. With his radical position, he isolated himself even within the Reform movement. Yet by claiming that modern Judaism constituted a cultural reference system of its own that took precedence over halakhic Judaism without necessitating a reform of Jewish law, Holdheim described the character of the modernization of Jewish culture in nineteenth-century Germany succinctly. German Jews did not revise the structure of what had constituted communal worship since antiquity. Men remained bound to recite standardized, Hebrew prayer in a minyan, and the public reading of the Torah invariably stood at the center of a synagogue service. Nevertheless, the modern “religious consciousness,” as Holdheim phrased it, gave rise to a culture of devotion that overshadowed halakhically defined worship. The subjective experience of the worshipper gained extraordinary importance. Even a scholar such as Heinrich Graetz, fully committed to the observance of ritual law and a member of the faculty at the Jüdisch-theologisches Seminar in Breslau, described in his diary the emotional release and spiritual experience that he sought and found in communal prayer. In nineteenth-century bourgeois culture in Germany, the worshipper expected to be moved, edified, and morally uplifted in solemn and dignified synagogue services that included German-language sermons and choral music.

Women’s position in this new form of worship, which came to exist parallel to the established culture of Hebrew prayer, significantly differed from the status that women continued to hold within Halakkah. Physically and conceptually, women were more integrated in public Jewish worship than they had been before. As sites of bourgeois religiosity, synagogues constituted more of a women’s space than they had in preceding centuries. German-Jewish men, however, appear not to have abandoned synagogue attendance to the same extent as their North American counterparts did. Moreover, the feminization of the synagogue found its limits where German Jewry upheld halakhically defined male privileges. Modern Orthodox Jews, in particular, but also adherents of the Breslau school, were determined to prevent nineteenth-century cultural sensibilities from compro-

mising Jewish law and Jewish tradition. Modern Orthodoxy thus rejected some of the institutions in which women gained greater inclusion in the synagogue, such as mixed choirs and confirmation ceremonies. However, despite this conservatism, even modern Orthodoxy diverged only in emphasis from the manner in which German Jews reconciled established modes of worship with middle-class notions of devotion. The temples at the Reform movement’s radical fringe in Hamburg and Berlin, the minority of Neo-Orthodox synagogues, and all other German synagogues followed the same pattern as they modernized their services. They introduced a variety of innovations into public worship and universally accommodated old and new in the same fashion: On the one hand, they retained at least a core of Hebrew prayers that only men were halakhically bound to recite, and they did not question other established male privileges; on the other hand, they created services in which all worshippers, without distinction of gender, could be inspired by beautiful music and enlightened sermons, could find emotional relief in prayer, and could be uplifted by experiencing spiritually satisfying and aesthetically appealing proceedings. Women thus could take advantage of the modernized elements and aspects of the service as men did. In the modern, edifying dimensions of public worship that were geared toward the emotional and spiritual experience of the worshipper, women did not occupy a marginal or inferior position. To the new forms of bourgeois religiosity that German Jews introduced in nineteenth-century Germany in the home, in the family, and in the synagogue, men and women possessed significantly more equal access than they did to the religious practices of rabbinic and halakhic Judaism.