The Future of the German-Jewish Past

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DOES THE GERMAN-JEWISH PAST HAVE A FUTURE IN ISRAEL?

MOSHE ZIMMERMANN

LET’S START WITH THREE “ESTABLISHING SHOTS”:

1. The roots of the Israeli historical profession are German. Like so many academics belonging to the first generation of the first Zionist university, the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (founded in 1925), most of the founding fathers of Israel's historical profession were either Germans or intellectual “products” of German universities. Both the departments of Jewish history and of so-called general history were headed in the early days of the Hebrew University by historians who were brought up in Germany. Itzhak Fritz Baer and Richard Michael Koebner, both experts on medieval history, were already faculty members of German academic institutions before emigrating to Palestine. Baer, who had been teaching in the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums in Berlin, moved to Jerusalem in 1928 and Richard Koebner, who had been an associate (außerordentlicher) professor at the University of Breslau from 1924, accepted the invitation to Jerusalem after he was thrown out of his university by the Nazis in 1933. The third most prominent historian of the first generation, Benzion Dinur (Dinaburg), though born in czarist Russia, studied at Berlin University before emigrating in the year 1921. Many of their colleagues and students felt at home working in the German language.¹

2. Between Hitler’s rise to power in 1933 and the founding of the Zionist state in 1948 around 80,000 Central European Jews, nicknamed “Yekkes,” were able to make Aliyah (emigration) to Palestine. Central European Jews at this time made
up around a fifth of the Jewish-Palestinian population and played a decisive role not only in academic life, but also in Palestine’s economic and cultural life. They introduced their imported heritage to the Eastern European Jewish community in Palestine, leaving deep imprints on theater, literature, music, sport, and so on.3

When the State of Israel was founded, the declaration of independence named the Shoah to be the single greatest catastrophe in Jewish history, and this was among the strongest arguments in support of the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. The German-Jewish and the German past thus became an important element of Israel’s raison d’être.3

Thanks to the so-called fifth Aliyah, German history and German culture were decisive to a great extent not only in the historical profession in Israel, but also in shaping Israeli society and its self-perception pre-1948. This was destined to gradually change because of the changing demographic structure of Israeli society. At the beginning, the effect of the German tradition on Israeli historiography and especially on historical education in Israel remained strong despite the demographic changes, but very soon it lost its quasi-monopolist status.

A glimpse into the future of the German-Jewish past raises a twofold question—one concerning historiography and the other concerning Israeli society in general. The two questions are closely intertwined: professional history puts the results of its newest research at the disposal of society and in turn society is expected to use these results in its process of socialization. Indeed, the intensive exchange of knowledge between Israeli and German historians has enabled a continuous presence of this tradition and of the German-Jewish past in both countries’ curricula.4 But this is not the decisive element in the equation. The future of the German-Jewish past in Israel is not going to be decided by professional historians but by the “consumers” of historical knowledge, by the agencies of socialization, and by politics.

We are talking about a society socialized by a leadership interested in a history that may serve its hegemonic political and ideological aims—aims deriving from post-modern Zionism. For official Israel history is an applied science and the past Israel is interested in is the past that could be used for very specific politics—both internal and external. Politics and ideology guide the educational system, and the system, including higher education, adapts and attempts to function in a “politically correct” manner. The search for a usable past is particularly conspicuous when we look at the place of the “German-Jewish past” in present-day Israel, casting a gloomy shadow over the prospects of this history’s independent survival.

From the point of view of historical research, practiced by “the guild” (Zunft), the future we are discussing concerns the fourth generation of historians of German-Jewish history in Israel and the generations to come. The first generation, to which we referred
earlier in this article, mainly imported German methodology—not so much German history as its field of research. Itzhak Baer was an expert on the history of the Jews in medieval Spain before and after he made Aliyah and Richard Koebner, upon arriving in Palestine, shifted his primary focus from medieval German to modern British history.

Among the second generation of historians with a German background (and with German as their mother tongue), some very important figures found their way back to German and German-Jewish history as their main area of research and teaching. Examples are Jacob Katz, Jacob Toury, Uriel Tal, Shaul Esh, Avraham Margaliot, Avraham Barkai, Dov Kulka, Shlomo Neeman, and Walter Grab. We may say that a critical mass of historians studying German history has been reached in this period. Saul Friedlander, a younger representative of this generation, became one of the most influential contributors to the German-Israeli historical dialogue.

Born in the 1940s, the “German-ness” of the third generation of historians specializing in German history was very different from that of previous generations. Either born in Israel or as very young immigrants, this generation grew up as “post-Holocaust Israelis” in an academic atmosphere that encouraged research and teaching of German and German-Jewish history that was hitherto avoided or marginalized before the late 1970s. This generation also enjoyed the privilege of having intensive contacts with the German historical community (the “Historikerzunft”). This contact helped institutionalize German history in Israel by establishing specialized centers for German and German-Jewish studies. There is truth in the argument that financial support provided by the Federal Republic of Germany for Israeli universities from the 1970s boosted German history in Israel. However, this argument is somewhat misleading as German investment in Israeli universities (via DFG, the Max Planck Society, etc.) was, and still is, predominantly in the natural sciences.

This third generation, to which Shulamit Volkov, Steven Aschheim, Michael Toch, Dan Diner, Henry Wassermann, and I belong, has been given the opportunity to take a lively role in public discourse in Israel, beyond the ivory towers of academia. This group of historians has made German and German-Jewish history accessible to broader audiences. Moreover, these historians, because of their expertise, have become an integral part of the liberal/left-wing part of the political scene. Israeli society has been aware that the messages these historians were sending concerned not only the German past but the Israeli present and future too. This also applies to Moshe Zuckermann and Jose Brunner (Tel Aviv University), who are examples of younger members of this generation. As the number of Israeli students of this generation who have written their dissertations outside Israel has risen, it is not surprising that some of them who have specialized in German and German-Jewish history have become professors at prominent American universities (e.g., Omer Bartov, Alon Confino) while remaining in close contact with the Israeli academic scene.
The fourth generation consists of historians such as Yfaat Weiss, Shmuel Feiner, Guy Miron, and others who concentrate on Jewish history alongside historians of “general” German history, such as Boaz Neumann, Gilead Margalit, Ofer Ashkenazi, Sagi Schaefer, and Oded Heilbronner. This is the first generation to “export” historians of German and German-Jewish history following studying for their PhD dissertations in Israeli universities (Adi Gordon, Gideon Reuveni, Udi Greenberg, and others).

The point of departure for this fourth generation could have been optimal in most respects if not for the ever-growing tendency in Israeli society toward a more nationalist, less universalist self-understanding. Not only are the faculties of humanities on the retreat; history as a discipline is expected to function on all levels primarily as an auxiliary for a one-dimensional state ideology, not as an instrument of analytical approach to humankind and its development over the centuries. Based on a rather reactionary understanding of Judaism and Jewishness, Jewish history has become the focal point of studying and learning of history, while at the same time so-called “general history,” that is, history beyond the Jews, is being marginalized. The German-Jewish past is a typical chapter of Jewish history used (or misused) in order to achieve the aims set out by the Israeli establishment. The needs and wishes of the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture, and Ministry of Science also guide and influence noles-volens, in the long run, the universities. In short: Given the situation at present, the future of the German and German-Jewish past appears to be rather bleak.

According to the hegemonic approach to Jewish history in Israel, the German past serves the purpose of learning and internalizing the following “lessons”:

1. The Shoah is the most important event in Jewish history and the ultimate justification not only for the existence of a Jewish state but also for its policies. According to Israeli-Zionist historical interpretation, life in the diaspora leads to antisemitism and catastrophe, whereas life in the Jewish nation-state guarantees security for its Jewish inhabitants.
2. For the so-called Jewish problem two main solutions were offered in the past: emancipation and integration for Jews in their place of residence in the diaspora; or a demographic concentration in a Jewish national home in which Jewish sovereignty is guaranteed. Until 1933, Germany provides an example of the first solution, a solution that totally failed. Israel, on the other hand, provides the only successful solution.6
3. Since 1948, the hegemonic narrative of Jewish history remained an Ashkenazi one for too long, even in Zionist historiography and despite the Oriental (mizrahchi) influx into Israel and the ensuing change in Israel’s demographic structure. Challenging this narrative is called for. The German Jews (Yekkes) are the most radical advocates of the old narrative and must therefore be marginalized.
4. The history of the Jews is unequivocally unique. Antisemitism cannot be perceived as part of the general phenomenon of racism and prejudice. Zionism is far from being just an example of modern nationalism, and the Shoah, even if understood as genocide, cannot be compared to other genocides. Jewish history as such is sui generis, that is, incomparable. The German-Jewish past serves as the ultimate proof for the exceptionality of the Jewish fate in history.  

Before moving on from this interpretation of the past to expectations for the future, I would like to add a few words about the implications of these “lessons” in the recent past. According to research that was conducted in schools and history departments since 1977, when a nationalist coalition took over Israel’s government, there has been a change in historical perception and no alteration is to be expected in the near future. Israel’s historiography and Jewish historiography outside Israel is drifting apart and the gap between them, as well as the gap between historical consciousness inside and outside Israel, is deepening.

An example of this is provided by the attitude toward the history of the Jewish religion. Since the end of the eighteenth century the historical debate about Jewish modernity focused primarily on the rise of the reform and liberal movement, which opened the gates for a new definition of Judaism. The German-Jewish past (i.e., between the middle of the eighteenth century and the year 1933) provided the framework for this historical breakthrough. As Reform Judaism became a successful export to the United States during the nineteenth century, the issue of Jewish religious reform attracted further historical attention. As paradoxical as it may seem, this focus on reform in Judaism also contributed to research about Jewish Orthodoxy, which was interpreted as a modern response to Reform Judaism—a response explained by the same sociopolitical circumstances in which both Reform and Orthodoxy evolved.

Theoretically Aliyah from both Germany and the United States should have created an optimal opportunity for taking up the discussion concerning modernization of the Jewish religion in Israel, if not for an inbuilt structural flaw that characterizes the Zionist movement. Secular Zionism positioned itself against the religious elements of Judaism, and especially against the section within Judaism that seemed unreachable—Reform Jews and liberal Jews. Indeed, Jewish Orthodoxy was as opposed to Zionism as the Jewish Reform movement in principle, but the religious segment that joined Zionism (for tactical reasons)—the Mizrachi (acronym for “Spiritual Center”)—was Orthodox. This is how Zionism started its modus vivendi with Jewish Orthodoxy. Since 1967, this marginal segment of Israeli society has emerged as a surprisingly influential one.

This is the background for the suppression of the history of the Reform movement, which in the nineteenth century was a central component of the history of the German Jews, and also for the rise (since 1967) of a religious-Orthodox interpretation of the
history of Zionism. The process of *religionization*, which has characterized Israeli society since the 1980s, has not only led to rewriting the role of Orthodoxy in the history of Zionism and to accentuating the negative effect of secularization on Jews in Central Europe, but has also made the history of German-Jewish Neo-Orthodoxy (so different from Eastern European Orthodoxy) disappear.8

From the present (and perhaps also the future) Israeli perspective, not only liberal Judaism and the secularization of Jewish life, but also the concept of Enlightenment itself are perceived as negative messages deriving from the German-Jewish past: Enlightenment (*Aufklärung, Hebrew: Neorut*)—a key concept in the history of Central Europe and of the German Jews—became a dirty word in Israel. The tradition of Enlightenment is therefore suppressed, together with two other closely related concepts that played a decisive role in the history of the German Jews—assimilation and emancipation. The fact that Zionism considered itself a “self-emancipationist” movement was forgotten and the efforts of German Jews at emancipation, assimilation, and inclusion became textbook examples for practicing the wrong “solution” for the “Jewish question,” in contrast to the exclusively nationalist, ethnocentric “solution” for which Israel stands. In short: the stronger the nationalist interpretation of Jewish history in Israel became, the less benevolent was the reference to the German-Jewish past.9 This specific past became the absolute opposite to what present and future Israel stands for.

This is not merely a theoretical matter; it explains why, in the year 2010, German and Israeli members of the joint German-Israeli schoolbook commission (unlike the situation with the previous commission during the 1980s) could not find common ground for curricula and syllabi in which modern German-Jewish history could play a positive educational role.10 We are talking here about an ongoing process that deepens the gap not only between professional historians in Israel and Germany, or between the main concerns of Jewish historians inside and outside Israel, but also between the relevant Israeli historians and the official educational system. Shulamit Volkov wrote about the German-Jewish “Project of Modernity” and Shmuel Feiner about the Jewish Enlightenment, but their important contributions to historical research have become secondary to the Israeli public.11 This includes the emphasis in schools. This important aspect of German-Jewish history is now irrelevant. It may even become a red rag for postenlightened Israelis.

Israeli society, by and large, is convinced that living in the diaspora is itself the real Jewish problem and that Zionism will remain forever the unassailable “solution.” Within this narrative, the demise of German-Jewish history under Nazi persecution is also considered to be the ultimate argument for the validity of the official Israeli line. Once you assume this perspective, the only merit or “value” of learning about the history of the struggle for Jewish emancipation in Germany—a central topic in historical research over a long period—is proving its utter futility. What is more, the
interrelation between emancipation on the one hand and inclusion or integration into German society on the other hand focuses in Zionist historiography, and particularly in the Israeli collective memory, on the phenomenon of assimilation. The very process of religionization of Israeli society turns assimilation into the number one enemy (becoming even more important than antisemitism) of collective Jewish endurance, and Jewish assimilation in Germany is reduced to nothing more than a logical precursor of the Holocaust. The German-Jewish past thus presents itself as the perfect opposite of the “correct solution” for the Jewish “problem.” Against the background of an extremely aggressive campaign against assimilation that is currently taking place in Israel,¹¹ the German-Jewish past will either be misused for the purpose of this campaign or simply ignored.

There is no period in the German-Jewish past that demonstrates this attitude better than the history of the German Jews between the two world wars—or more precisely during the Weimar period. The Weimar era was perceived by those who lived through it, as well as by later historiography, as a kind of “golden age” that could be compared to the medieval golden age of the Jews in Spain. The role of the Jews in politics, in the sciences, in culture—including its modern facets like cinema and sports—the so-called Jewish renaissance,¹³ all added up to a story of seemingly unprecedented success of Jewish emancipation and inclusion. The catastrophe that followed after the year 1933 made a benevolent appraisal of this period so problematic. But from the contemporary Israeli perspective it was not simply the allegedly predestined catastrophic end that cast its shadow over the history of Weimar Jews, but the very nature of its alleged success—its liberal, assimilationist, modern character.

It seems to me that if there is any future for the German-Jewish past in the context of the modern Israeli narrative, it will only survive as part of questionable arguments that Nazi anti-Jewish policies were a form of nemesis for radical Jewish attempts at assimilation and integration. The Israeli journalist and historian Amos Elon published a book that eventually became a best-seller, *The Pity of It All: A Portrait of Jews in Germany 1743–1933*, in Israel.¹⁴ When it was published in 2002 (Hebrew title: *A German Requiem*) some readers were under the impression that the history of the German Jews, including the history of their contribution to the Weimar Republic, was redeemed. But Elon’s success has much to do with the fact that he did not go beyond January 1933, that is, Hitler’s rise to power, but practically disconnected the two chapters from each other and left his story as a “Requiem” for something that is dead and gone forever, leaving some room for nostalgia only for elderly Yekkes. This may explain why, despite the commercial success of the book, it did not change the attitudes of either the general public or the Israeli educational system toward the period. The Weimar years remain a discredited chapter of Jewish history. The blame for the catastrophe has shifted from the Nazis to the “assimilationist” Jews. Gershom Scholem, one of
the founding fathers of the Hebrew University, was a Yekke who did not believe the so-called German-Jewish symbiosis ever took place. Perhaps he shoulders the responsibility for much of this negativity.16

The chapter about German Jews between 1933 and 1938 that was omitted by Elon has become, especially in Israel, a mere introduction to the history of the Shoah. The fate of German Jews from 1939 onward was practically left out of the history of the Shoah altogether.16 This introduction explains the mechanisms of Nazi Judenpolitik during the Second World War rather than explaining the fate of the German Jews themselves. The spotlight is focused on the perpetrators during the pre-Second World War years rather than on the persecuted Jews. Since the general historical “framework” for attempting to comprehend Jewish behavior during the war is the Shoah, the main focus of the average Israeli is on the history of the Polish or Eastern European Jews. When it comes to the average Israeli pupil’s learning, the history of the German Jews during the years of the Shoah remains at best marginal or, at worst, nonexistent.

There is an internal competitiveness between the different Landsmannschaften over their status as victims in the history and memory of the Shoah. If there is a chance of any community in modern Israeli society drawing attention away from the Shoah of the Polish Jews, it is not the German Jews but the Oriental Jews who wish to be “upgraded” in the hierarchy of Israel’s society of victims. Thus, the attempt to be considered victims of the Shoah has caused representatives of Iraqi, Moroccan, and Libyan Jews to bring their cases before court. The history of the Polish Jews also “profits” from an inherent advantage, compared to that of German Jews, as it has become paradigmatic for multifaceted antisemitism. Israeli youth participate in the “March of the Living” trips to Poland—a centerpiece of the Israeli educational system, where they (the future citizens) learn not only about the antisemitism of the chief perpetrators, the Germans, but also about the behavior of the other victims, the non-Jewish Poles, who are usually presented as the henchmen of the Nazis.

The German-Jewish past is also less effective when it comes to proving the notion that “all the world is against us,” especially since Israeli politicians attempt to put the blame for antisemitism on “the Arabs” or “the Palestinians,” en passant shifting the blame for the idea of the Final Solution from Hitler to the Mufti of Jerusalem, as recently suggested by Israel’s Prime Minister Netanyahu.17 The German-Jewish chapter of Holocaust history poses yet a further challenge: Holocaust historians are looking for a generic category to which the Holocaust may belong. Historians such as Yehuda Bauer or Daniel Blatman refer the Holocaust to the category of genocide.18 This has proved highly contentious: The critics insist that the Holocaust as sui generis even among genocides, not only posteriori but also a posteriori, must remain unquestioned. They fear competition and dilution when the word Holocaust is used to describe other catastrophes (the Armenian, the Polish, the Nanjing, but especially the Palestinian Naqba).19
A generic notion of genocide, or even of racism, when dealing with the Holocaust is regarded with suspicion. They fear that the use of the larger “frames,” such as Nazi racism and genocidal policy, could theoretically undermine the idea of the uniqueness of the Jewish Holocaust.

The only generic framework for the Holocaust that does not meet real opposition in the public discourse in Israel (and in some cases also in academia) is antisemitism. The causal explanation for the most radical “solution” of the “Jewish problem” seems to be eternal and ubiquitous antisemitism, as mentioned previously, and not racism or prejudice in general. This is precisely why the German-Jewish past does not fit into the official narrative: Compared to antisemitism in other parts of the world, in Russia, France, or even the United States, German antisemitism was not especially virulent until the National Socialist government took over. On the contrary, as George Mosse wrote: if someone had pondered, back in 1913, about the question of whether the extermination of the Jews might happen in the years to come, the answer would have been: Yes, it might happen, because one never knows what the French are up to. The German-Jewish past is not a helpful example when it comes to supporting a mono-causal explanation of the Holocaust, unless of course one unreservedly accepts Daniel Goldhagen’s far-fetched thesis concerning the eliminatory character of German antisemitism. The overwhelming majority of historians don’t. Here again, there is a rift between the mainstream of professional historians in Israel and the spirit of the official historical interpretation, which casts antisemitism in the leading role both in the past and in the future.

A fourth-generation representative, Guy Miron, dedicated a detailed article to the attitude of Israeli historiography to the history of the German Jews in the Third Reich. He came to the conclusion that future generations of historians will continue to ponder the same old questions: Could the German Jews and their leaders have been more aware of the looming dangers? Did they miss chances to save more German Jews? And the crucial question: What could the Zionist movement and the Yishuv have done to prevent the catastrophe? With this last question, the cat is out of the bag. The real motive behind the preoccupation with this topic is the quarrel over a political issue: Who was more farsighted, who was right, and who was wrong in the 1930s—the socialist Zionists or the Revisionists? Again, this instrumentalization of the Nazi era focuses more on Eastern European Jews and offers little empathy for Central European Jews.

Premodern German-Jewish history, on the other hand, attracts much historiographic attention and is also utilized in the service of the hegemonic approach to Jewish history in Israel. Medieval German history, that is, Ashkenazi history, highlights two allegedly typical characteristics of the Jewish past: a people of the Torah living in the shadow of eternal Jew-hatred. The Shum (Speyer, Worms, Mainz) communities and their halachic leaders (such as Rashi or Rabenu Gershom) are representative of the
first characteristic, and the pogroms organized by the crusaders, the Black Pest, and so on, of the other. No doubt, the historical research undertaken by prominent Israeli historians of medieval German-Jewish history of the second and third generations—Avraham Grossmann, Michael Toch, Israel Yuval, and others—was not intended to support a one-dimensional Israeli approach to the German-Jewish past. But the results of that research will only harden attitudes to their subject matter in the future.

Last but not least: the history of German Zionism. Though a central chapter in the history of Zionism (Martin Buber, Max Nordau, David Wolffsohn, Otto Warburg, Arthur Ruppin, and Theodor Herzl are familiar names to the average Israeli), this history looks increasingly like a deviation from the “right” course. David Ben-Gurion was always dissatisfied with the political vision of the German-Jewish Zionists. The story of the Brit-Shalom group still serves as proof of the inability of the German Jews to cope with the challenge of Israel being “a villa in the jungle.” Instead they were looking for dialogue with the Palestinians and the other Arabs in the region. A closer look at the Zionist aspect of the German-Jewish past does not seem to be helpful in strengthening a belligerent Israel, so this chapter, too, will either be forgotten or misused in the future. In the service of the hegemonic interpretation of history, it will be one case among many.

The future of the German-Jewish past in Israel? Not a rose garden.

NOTES

6. In order to follow the arguments of nationalist interpretations of Jewish history one should get acquainted with the attack against the old school: Yoram Hazoni, Michael B. Oren, and Daniel Polisar, *The Quiet Revolution in the Teaching of Zionist History* (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2000).

7. A good example is provided by Yoav Gelber’s comments in *History, Memory and Propaganda: The Historical Discipline at the Beginning of the 21st Century* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2007), 436–443.


12. A group calling itself Lehava (Hebrew acronym: “Against Assimilation in the Holy Land”) is responsible for physically attacking Arabs who had contacts with Jewish women and for setting a mixed Arab-Jewish school on fire.


18. Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: A Genocide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); and its discussion in Israel is one example for the challenge posed by the concept of genocide to the Israeli community of Holocaust researchers.


22. Among the relatively small number of contributions about German-Jewish history published in recent years in the central Israeli historical journal *Zion* (founded by Baer and Dinur, 1936), the largest number deal with the Middle Ages and the early modern period.