

Paradoxes of Assimilation

"All of us who were still children thirty years ago can testify to the incredible changes that have occurred both within us and outside us. We have traversed, or better still, flown through a thousand-year history."¹ So stated the German Jewish historian Isaak Markus Jost in 1833 in a public letter to a hostile Prussian bureaucrat. Jost took pride in the great strides that his Jewish contemporaries had taken in moving, as it were, from the Jewish "Middle Ages" into the German "Modern Age." Their efforts to assimilate economically, culturally, and psychologically, he asserted, deserved approbation and support.

In presenting Jewish assimilation as a rapid and quasi-miraculous journey of self-transformation, Jost articulated the view of the Jewish intellectual elite, who embraced the possibilities of civic equality and social and cultural integration offered by the Enlightenment and nineteenth-century political liberalism. Assimilation quickly became the central ongoing issue of debate within Jewish communities in the modern period. First promoted by both progressive Jewish leaders and Christian supporters of Jewish emancipation (the conferral of civic rights), it was later decried by Zionist activists and Orthodox spokesmen as a betrayal of the Jewish people and of Jewish tradition. "Assimilationist" became an epithet

1. Isaak Markus Jost, as cited by Ismar Schorsch, "From Wolfenbüttel to Wissenschaft: The Divergent Paths of Isaak Markus Jost and Leopold Zunz," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 22 (1977): 110.

of opprobrium. It has not been easy even for scholars of the Jewish past to explore the varieties and meanings of Jewish assimilation in the last two centuries in a nonpolemical way, although recently a sympathetic understanding of the ideology and identity of assimilated Jews has emerged, particularly among Jewish historians in America but also among some scholars in Israel. A number of historians have suggested that the blunt term "assimilation" obscures the varieties of behavior and the nuances of identity that characterize modern Jewry. The term "assimilation" often does not convey the multiple influences that together forge individual as well as collective identity, the different social contexts in which various aspects of identity are expressed, or the coexistence of the desire for full civic integration with the retention of what we might today call ethnic particularism.² With that caveat in mind, I will use the term "assimilation" in this study because both proponents and opponents of the accommodation of

2. On the mutual compatibility of assimilation and retention of Jewish identity, see Uriel Tal, *Christians and Jews in Germany: Religion, Politics, and Ideology in the Second Reich, 1870-1914*, trans. Noah Jonathan Jacobs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975). On the potential for multiple identities, see Gary Cohen, "Jews in German Society: Prague, 1860-1914," in *Jews and Germans from 1860 to 1933: The Problematic Symbiosis*, ed. David Bronsen (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1979), pp. 306-37. On the ethnic component of nineteenth-century French Jewish identity, see Phyllis Cohen Albert, "Ethnicity and Solidarity in Nineteenth-Century France," in *Mystics, Philosophers, and Politicians: Essays in Jewish Intellectual History in Honor of Alexander Altmann*, ed. Jehuda Reinharz and Daniel Swetschinski (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1982), pp. 249-74, and Phyllis Cohen Albert, "L'intégration et la persistance de l'ethnicité chez les Juifs dans la France moderne," in *Histoire politique des Juifs de France*, ed. Pierre Birnbaum (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1990), pp. 221-43.

Jews to the norms of the non-Jewish societies in which they have lived have accepted it.

Historians have described the processes of assimilation of modern Jews as rapid and disruptive—causing a traumatic break with the past. Yet conclusions about the pace and extent of Jewish assimilation in the century of emancipation derive almost exclusively from scholarly investigation of the public behavior and pronouncements of a select group of urban Jewish men.³ The experiences of Jewish women, and the contradiction between those experiences and the representation of women in expressions of Jewish public opinion, mandate a rethinking of the nature and significance of assimilation in the first generations of emancipation and into the contemporary period. I have chosen to focus on issues of gender because they not only highlight the regularly overlooked experiences of women but also pose new questions about male behavior. Gender is the socially and hierarchically constructed division of the sexes—or, in the words of historian Joan Wallach Scott, “a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes.”⁴ Considerations of

3. A notable exception is the work of Marion Kaplan: “Tradition and Transition: The Acculturation, Assimilation and Integration of Jews in Imperial Germany—A Gender Analysis,” *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 27 (1982): 3–35; “Priestess and Hausfrau: Women and Tradition in the German-Jewish Family,” in *The Jewish Family: Myths and Reality*, ed. Steven M. Cohen and Paula E. Hyman (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986), pp. 62–81; *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class: Women, Family, and Identity in Imperial Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and *The Jewish Feminist Movement in Germany: The Campaigns of the Jüdischer Frauenbund, 1904–1938* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979).

4. For an extended theoretical consideration of gender in historical research as well as historical case studies, see Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

gender can reshape our understanding of both assimilation in modern Jewish history and the meanings that Jews have attached to assimilation.

To assess assimilation and its impact upon modern Jewry in Europe and America, we must distinguish between assimilation as a sociological process and assimilation as a project. As a sociological process, assimilation consists of several different stages. The first steps, often called acculturation, include the acquisition of the basic markers of the larger society, such as language, dress, and the more amorphous category of “values.” The integration of minority-group members into the majority institutions follows, with the attendant weakening of minority institutions. The end point of assimilation is the dissolution of the minority by biological merger with the majority through intermarriage. For assimilation to proceed to its last stages, two mutually reinforcing factors must be present: the desire of the minority to become like and to join the majority and the receptivity of the majority to the participation of minority-group members in its midst. Without openness on the part of the larger society, it is possible for a minority to be fully acculturated and yet remain poorly integrated.⁵

The acculturation of nineteenth-century Jews, especially in western and central Europe and the United States, to the language, dress, and mores of the Gentile middle classes of

5. For an elaboration of a sociological interpretation of assimilation, see Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion and National Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). This work has had an enormous influence on modern Jewish historians, especially those educated in the United States. For one of the first studies sensitive to the distinction between acculturation and integration, see Todd Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England: Tradition and Change in a Liberal Society* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979).

their surroundings constituted a break (at first, nonideological) with a traditional Jewish mentality that had defined the Gentile as wholly Other. It also reflected an eagerness of the Jewish elites and then the masses to take advantage of the new economic, social, and cultural opportunities made available by Enlightenment humanism and the expansion of political rights. The process of assimilation also bespoke a new openness on the part of European and American elites to Jews as potential legal and social equals. As a process, then, assimilation may be divided into two components: acculturation, which depends on the behavior of the minority, and integration, which demands changed attitudes and behavior on the part of members of minority and majority alike.

As a project, assimilation was the official response of Jewish communal leaders in both Europe and the United States to emancipation and was expressed in communal policy. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, emancipation was placed on the general public agenda, but it took more than a century for the Jews of the various western and central European countries as well as the United States to secure fully equal political rights. (The vast majority of European Jews, those living in the Russian Empire, were not accorded equal citizenship until the 1917 Russian Revolution, and as we shall see in the following chapter, the dynamics of assimilation were quite different there.) Because of the intense interest in the "Jewish question" and particularly the debates surrounding the first emancipation of Jews in France during the French Revolution, Jewish leaders understood that citizenship was conferred with the explicit expectation that Jews would become like their fellow countrymen. Both those who favored and those who opposed Jewish emancipation at the end of the eighteenth century looked askance at contemporary evidence

of Jewish economic and cultural particularity, which they described as moral and cultural debasement. Opponents of emancipation saw this particularity as inherent in Judaism or in the Jews. Emancipation should be deferred until Jews had changed, they argued. Proponents of Jewish emancipation, on the other hand, predicted that emancipation would lead to a thoroughgoing improvement in Jewish behavior because the alleged defects of the Jews, such as their superstitiousness and their dishonesty, resulted from persecution. Bring an end to persecution and Jewish behavior would automatically be transformed, they argued. As one writer of the French Enlightenment confidently put it in 1788, "we can make of the Jews what we want them to become."⁶ With the cessation of legal discrimination and of restrictions on Jewish economic activity and the elimination of Jewish communal autonomy and self-government, the Jews would assimilate to their neighbors, differing from them only in the matter of their creed.

Without exception Jews of western and central Europe and the United States publicly accepted emancipation and welcomed the possibilities it offered, including opportunities for acculturation and social integration. One French Jewish communal leader, for example, took the occasion of the emancipation decree of 1791 to call upon his fellow Jews to help realize an idyllic future of social harmony, in part by sending their children to public schools: "Through this union in the schools, our children, as well as those of our fellow citizens, will note from their tender youth that neither opinion

6. [Adolphe] Thiéry, *Dissertation sur cette question: Est-il des moyens de rendre les Juifs plus heureux et plus utiles en France?* (Paris, 1788), p. 66; reprinted in facsimile in *La Révolution française et l'émancipation des Juifs* (Paris: Editions d'Histoire Sociale, 1968), vol. 2.

nor religious difference prevents fraternal love."⁷ For the most part, Jewish voices dissenting from this expectation of the easy attainment of fraternity would not be heard until the end of the nineteenth century. Throughout the nineteenth century the male Jewish elites who controlled Jewish communal institutions, and who were generally recruited from among the prosperous and the acculturated, exhorted their less upwardly mobile constituents to demonstrate either that the faith of the proponents of emancipation had not been misplaced (in the case where civic rights had already been granted) or that the Jews were now worthy of equal rights (in the numerous cases where emancipation had been partial or deferred).

Yet the Jewish project of assimilation differed somewhat from the Enlightenment version. Although Jewish spokesmen forecast a harmonious future of equality, they did not intend to disappear as a recognizable group into a homogeneous national society. In that respect they dissented from the hopes of many Gentile proponents of Jewish emancipation. As the historian Uriel Tal (and others subsequently) has pointed out, Jewish leaders defined the goals of assimilation as the acculturation and social integration of the Jews, ideally into the bourgeoisie, along with the retention of some form of Jewish identity based upon a shared religious culture and memory.⁸ They encouraged acculturation and the shedding

7. Berr Isaac Berr, "Lettre d'un citoyen, membre de la ci-devant Communauté des Juifs de Lorraine, à ses confrères, à l'occasion du droit du Citoyen actif, rendu aux Juifs par le décret du 28 septembre 1791" (Nancy, 1791); reprinted in *La Révolution française et l'émancipation des Juifs* (Paris: Editions d'Histoire Sociale, 1968), 8:16-17.

8. See the sources cited in n. 2.

of external markers of Jewishness but supported religious, educational, and philanthropic institutions that would maintain a sense of Jewish particularism within the larger society. Denying the possibility of conflict between religious and civic obligations, they also presumed that successful completion of this project of assimilation would eliminate the last vestiges of social prejudice against Jews.

The historiography of modern Jewry has documented the relatively rapid acculturation of the Jews of nineteenth-century western and central Europe and the United States along with their impressive upward social mobility. I will begin my exploration of the interplay of gender and assimilation by addressing the experience of these Western Jews because they became the model, for good and bad, of assimilation. They also defined the problems associated with both the process and the project of assimilation. To be sure, village and small-town Jews in western and central Europe initially resisted assimilation and maintained their traditional religious and economic patterns for several generations after the promise or reality of emancipation had transformed the culture and socioeconomic structure of their more urbanized kin. Local political and social contexts shaped a multiplicity of social and cultural patterns even among Jews of the West, who had been most affected by Enlightenment and emancipation. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, however, the majority of western and central European and American Jews were city dwellers, assimilated in language and comportment into the local middle classes and succeeding as players in the capitalist economy. In the German states, for example, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Jews were poorer than their fellow countrymen, paying a disproportionately low share of taxes; by the end of the century, their higher tax contributions indi-

cate they were more prosperous than other Germans.⁹ Taking advantage of educational opportunities, impressive numbers of Jewish men became doctors and lawyers. And, as is well known, in such major European centers as Paris, Berlin, and especially Vienna, Jews exerted a considerable influence as creators, critics, and consumers of high culture. Middle-class Jews thronged the concert halls and art galleries and regularly purchased the liberal newspapers, among whose editors and writers Jews figured prominently.¹⁰ The assimilation of Jews in Western societies in the past two centuries and the forging of a modern Jewish identity cannot be separated from the middle-class context in which these processes were embedded.

Jewish women assimilated along with their male kin, but they did so in different frameworks. The examination of women's experiences reveals how gender shapes the process of assimilation. In the nineteenth century in western and central Europe and in the United States, whose Jewish population then derived primarily from central Europe, Jewish women's gender limited their assimilation by confining them, like other middle-class women, to the domestic scene and thereby re-

9. Jacob Toury, "Der Eintritt der Juden ins deutsche Bürgertum," in *Das Judentum in der deutschen Umwelt, 1800-1850*, ed. Hans Liebeschütz and Arnold Paucker (Tübingen: Mohr, 1977), pp. 139-242.

10. See Michael Marrus, *The Politics of Assimilation: A Study of the French Jewish Community at the Time of the Dreyfus Affair* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 35-45; Marsha Rozenblit, *The Jews of Vienna, 1867-1914: Assimilation and Community* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), pp. 1-2; Steven Beller, *Vienna and the Jews, 1867-1938: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Robert S. Wistrich, *The Jews of Vienna in the Age of Franz Joseph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Calvin Goldscheider and Alan Zuckerman, *The Transformation of the Jews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 44-49, 85-90.

stricting their opportunities for education and participation in the public realm of economy and civic life. Unlike their brothers and husbands, middle-class Jewish women in Western societies confronted neither the workplace nor, until the twentieth century, the university. Because their social life occurred within their domestic context and the religiously segmented philanthropic associations considered appropriate for women of their class, they initially had fewer contacts with non-Jews and experienced fewer external challenges to their childhood culture than did Jewish men.¹¹ Although the twentieth century offered new educational and employment opportunities for women, gender divisions and presumptions of appropriate female behavior that had developed in the nineteenth century retained much of their power, only gradually succumbing to the blurring of the boundaries between domestic and public realms. For most of the modern period, then, Jewish women display fewer signs of radical assimilation than men.

If one examines statistics on the most-extreme manifestations of assimilation—that is, intermarriage and conversion—Jewish women throughout the Western world have “lagged behind” their brothers until the present day.¹² In Germany, to give but one example, between 1873 and 1882 only 7 percent of all Jewish converts were women. Moreover, men and women seem to have converted for different purposes: women, primarily to join with a non-Jew in marriage, their

11. I am relying here on the analysis of Marion Kaplan found in her “Tradition and Transition,” and “Priestess and Hausfrau,” as well as in her book *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class*.

12. Todd M. Endelman, “Introduction,” in *Jewish Apostasy in the Modern World*, ed. Todd M. Endelman (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1987), p. 13.

main vehicle of social survival and upward mobility; men, primarily to overcome obstacles to their professional advancement. Although both men and women converted to obtain social mobility, the gender division of public and domestic spheres determined the nature and timing of their decisions about radical assimilation. Only as lower-middle-class Jewish women entered the workforce in increasing numbers at the turn of the twentieth century and thereby had increasing contact both with non-Jews and with antisemitism did the proportion of female Jewish converts rise. Yet, at 37 percent of Jewish converts in Germany in 1908 and 40 percent in 1912, the conversion rate of Jewish women still remained substantially below that of men.¹³

Among Western Jewish communities of the modern period, there is only one exception to the generalization about women's lower rates of intermarriage and conversion. In Berlin in the years between 1770 and 1799, 60 percent of the 249 Jews who converted to another faith were women, and as the rate of conversion zoomed in the following decade, women again took the lead.¹⁴ Most prominent among these women was a small coterie of some two dozen women generally referred to as the "salon Jewesses." Celebrated as witty and charming, they took advantage of a short-lived, Romantically inspired openness on the part of intellectuals and penurious nobility to the company of wealthy and cultivated Jewish women to make their mark in society and to enter into socially advantageous marriages with non-Jews (conversion

13. Todd M. Endelman, "The Social and Political Context of Conversion in Germany and England," in *ibid.*, p. 90.

14. Deborah Hertz, "Seductive Conversion in Berlin, 1770-1809," in *ibid.*, pp. 58, 64, 67.

was necessary because civil marriage did not exist). Dorothea Mendelssohn, Henrietta Herz, Rahel Varnhagen, and their fellow salon Jewesses temporarily found in Berlin literary "high society" a celebrity impossible in Jewish society, where entertainment was largely gender-segregated and women's role as hostess and muse was neither developed nor admired.¹⁵

Despite the anomaly of their situation, the salon Jewesses have most often been discussed not in terms of their specific social and cultural context but as paradigmatic of Jewish women's experience as they confronted modernity. Such fine historians as Michael Meyer and Jacob Katz have suggested that the salon Jewesses typify the vulnerability of Jewish women to the blandishments of secular Western culture because of the failure of the Jewish community to provide them with any significant Jewish education.¹⁶ For most Western Jewish women, however, this argument is not borne out by evidence, for, as the historian Deborah Hertz has shown, the salon Jewesses deviated significantly from the experience of other Jewish women.¹⁷

Among the vast majority of Jews who neither converted nor intermarried, there does appear to have been a significant gender difference in Jewish practice and identity—but in the opposite direction from the example of the salon Jewesses. Marion Kaplan's history of middle-class Jewish women in Imperial Germany, for example, persuasively demonstrates that

15. For a compelling analysis of this group and their social context, see Deborah Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

16. Michael A. Meyer, *The Origins of the Modern Jew* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967), pp. 85-114; Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 56, 120.

17. Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*.

the same men who absented themselves from the synagogue and who saw themselves, and have been described in the historical literature, as thoroughly assimilated—indeed as prototypical assimilated Jews—lived in families where their wives continued to take cognizance of the Jewish calendar and its rituals. This occurred even as the traditional observance of many public practices waned among central European Jews.¹⁸ The dispute between Sigmund Freud and his wife, Martha, over the lighting of Sabbath candles is, therefore, not idiosyncratic but representative of a widespread gendered difference in attitudes toward religious tradition.¹⁹ Most Jewish women seem to have been eager to maintain Jewish rituals within the home, the domain that fell under their jurisdiction, and unlike Martha Bernays Freud, most seem to have prevailed. The rich collection of German Jewish memoirs and diaries from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, written largely by men, includes numerous assessments of the family as non-religious and assimilated while mentioning in passing that mothers taught their children Jewish prayers or even prayed regularly at home. Women seem to have persisted in ritual observance even after their husbands had abandoned these practices. A German Jewish woman born in 1862, for example, recounted sardonically in her memoirs that her mother fasted and prayed on Yom Kippur whereas her father found it “easier to fast after a hearty breakfast.”²⁰

In Victorian England, where the Anglo-Jewish elite encoun-

18. Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class*, pp. 69–84.

19. For an account of this dispute, see Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 54.

20. Anna Kronthal, *Posher Mübekuchen: Jugend Erinnerungen einer Posnerin* (Munich, 1932), p. 27, as cited in Kaplan, “Priestess and Hausfrau,” p. 71.

tered little discrimination and felt comfortable with a modest display of religiosity, Jewish women of the upper classes expressed a religious sensibility that was considered appropriate to their social class. Indeed, Todd Endelman has found that, as among assimilated central European Jews, “[t]he wives and daughters of communal magnates appear to have been more concerned with spiritual matters” than were their male kin.²¹ Thus, the wife and children of the liberal politician Viscount Herbert Samuel regularly attended Sabbath services, while he limited his synagogue participation to the High Holidays. Although Samuel abandoned the traditional Judaism of his youth after losing his faith while at Balliol College, Beatrice Franklin Samuel did succeed in persuading her husband to refrain from working or traveling on the Sabbath.²²

The inclusion of gender in the study of Jewish assimilation thus introduces for consideration the domestic realm, which has tended to disappear from historical view. Given the privatization of much of Jewish behavior in the wake of emancipation, historians must enter the Jewish home to assess the nature of Jewish assimilation. To do so, they have to work assiduously and creatively, mining resources like memoirs, diaries, personal correspondence, and material culture to bridge the division of public and private spheres and to explore the tensions between public and private selves. To offer just one suggestive example: A recent museum exhibition on the Dreyfus Affair included in the section on the Dreyfus family a decorative cloth that had been displayed on the

21. Todd M. Endelman, *Radical Assimilation in English Jewish History, 1656–1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 81–85. The quotation is from p. 84.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

wall in the Dreyfus home.²³ What does it signify when a highly assimilated Jewish family, often depicted as alienated from the Jewish community and Jewish tradition, chooses to display a cloth visually celebrating the three pilgrimage holidays of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles? Surely it suggests a more complex identity as assimilated French Jews than we might have previously imagined.²⁴

The persistence of Jewish ritual and of the expression of religiosity among Jewish women in assimilated families, as well as phenomena like the Dreyfuses' interior decor, illustrates how attention to gender and to domestic life challenges conventional views of assimilation. Gendered difference in religious behavior was by no means limited to the European scene in the second half of the nineteenth century. Considerable evidence of a similar gender division in religious practice exists among second- and third-generation Jewish families of central European origin in America. By the end of the nineteenth century commentators allude to the "feminization" of the synagogue, a phenomenon parallel to the feminization of the Protestant churches described by a number of historians.

- Typical is an 1897 remark of one Jewish woman, who wrote of Reform synagogues of the time, that "year in and year out, for many long years, . . . [the rabbis'] efforts in sermon and lec-

23. For the decorative cloth, see Norman Kleeblatt, ed., *The Dreyfus Affair: Art, Truth, Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 271.

24. Pierre Birnbaum has documented that the affirmation of Jewish identity and the practice of endogamy were common among Jews who made careers as servants of the French state, whether in the army or the civil administration. See his *Les fous de la République: Histoire politique des Juifs d'Etat de Gambetta à Vichy* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1992).

ture have been prepared for and delivered to congregational audiences composed almost exclusively of women."²⁵

This depiction of the greater retention of Jewish ritual observance by middle-class Jewish women than by their male kin is not intended to suggest that women were by nature more loyal than men to Jewish tradition. Rather, it points to the fact that middle-class gender norms of behavior eroded traditional patterns of Jewish practice among men while facilitating a measure of Jewish ritual observance among women. The comparatively high degree of religiosity of assimilated Jewish women is thus, in itself, a female form of the project of assimilation. By the middle of the nineteenth century western Jews had adapted themselves, and their Judaism, to the prevailing bourgeois model of female domesticity, the so-called cult of domesticity. This ideology called upon women to create a peaceful domestic environment free from the stresses of the larger society and devoted to the preservation and transmission of traditional morality, while men assumed the burden of earning a living and governing society. Religion fell naturally within women's domain, for it drew upon emotion to disseminate morality and fortify social order. Modern men were considered too busy with worldly concerns to assume

25. Faith Rogow, *Gone to Another Meeting: The National Council of Jewish Women, 1893-1993* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), pp. 47-49. The quotation (from Theresa Lesem writing in the *Reform Advocate*, 27 Mar. 1897, p. 90) appears on p. 47. On the feminization of American Christianity, see Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977), Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 151-74, and Barbara Welter, "The Feminization of American Religion: 1800-1860," in *Clio's Consciousness Raised*, ed. Mary Hartman and Lois Banner (New York: Harper, 1973), pp. 137-55.

this task. Bourgeois culture thus expected women to be at least moderately religious, certainly more religious than men, since they were deemed inherently more spiritual. The bourgeois division of labor between the sexes also conferred responsibility upon women for religiously based "good works," including the basic religious education of children. Although traditional Judaism had also recognized women's spirituality, it had reserved to men the premier manifestation of religious piety: the intensive study of sacred texts. When life in the modern Western world led most assimilating Jewish men to abandon traditional Jewish culture and limit their religious expression to periodic appearances at synagogue and the performance of some communal service, their wives absorbed the dominant societal expectations of women as the guardians of religion.

Bourgeois culture also linked religious expression to familial sentiment. Because so much of Jewish religious ritual is home centered, it was relatively easy for women to meet bourgeois norms. There was less dissonance between Jewish religious practice and women's daily routines than was the case for men, whose traditional Jewish role was centered in public ritual in the synagogue or house of study. By retaining some domestic aspects of Jewish tradition, including customary foods, and transforming others into ostensibly secular family celebrations, such as the Friday evening, rather than Sunday, dinner, Jewish women fulfilled their prescriptive role and transmitted what the anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff, in a very different setting, called "domestic Judaism."²⁶ The

26. Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978), pp. 232-68.

general norms of bourgeois society thus reinforced the retention by women of domestic Jewish ritual practice while undermining ritual observance for men.

Men and women alike within Western Jewish communities adopted the dominant middle-class view that women were responsible for inculcating moral and religious consciousness in their children and within the home more generally. According to this view, women were also the primary factor in the formation of their children's Jewish identity. The conservative role of maternal keeper of the domestic flame of Judaism became a fundamental aspect of the project of assimilation. In the countries of the West, the Jewish press, which emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century, frequently expressed this concept of women's centrality in maintaining the home as the primary site of Jewish sensibility and in transmitting Jewish culture and identity. Interestingly, although women's roles expanded by the end of the nineteenth century, the rhetoric of the true Jewish woman whose role it was to preside over the domestic sphere, ministering to the spiritual health of her family and thereby strengthening the Jewish community, continued unabated.

As early as 1844 the *London Jewish Chronicle* commented that because Jewish youth were "externally restrained by political hindrance and by allurements of apostasy . . . [they] require especial and particular maternal vigilance and attendance."²⁷ Similarly, in 1852 the *Archives israélites*, the journal representing progressive Jewish thought in France, depicted a bourgeois Jewish family where gender roles were highly differentiated and where the socialization of its children depended upon the mother:

27. *Jewish Chronicle* 1 (1844-45): 55, emphasis mine.

Our fathers, absorbed by their business, their commerce, their industry, their travels, . . . cannot follow with a vigilant eye the physical, moral, and intellectual progress of the young family; they abandon that care to maternal solicitude. The woman is the guardian angel of the house; . . . her religiosity, her virtues, are a living example for the children, whom she has constantly under her eyes.

The journal concluded, "Man exists for public life; woman, for domestic life."²⁸

The German Jewish press also waxed eloquent about the role of women within their proper sphere. One newspaper in 1895 went so far as to call "the Hausfrau" "a priestess of the home."²⁹ American Jewish leaders shared this assessment of women's nature, stressing the long-standing historical role of Jewish women within the home. In 1835 Isaac Leeser, an important leader and later publisher of the newspaper the *Occident*, declared, in a sermon that proclaimed the inappropriateness of serious education for women, that a woman's "home should be the place of her actions; there her influence should be felt, to soothe, to calm, to sanctify, to render happy the rugged career of a father, a brother, a husband, or a child."³⁰ Within a generation the shapers of American Jewish public opinion included a specifically Jewish component to the Jewish woman's domestic role: the "Mother in Israel," a Jewish version of the American "True Woman." In 1876 the editor of a traditionalist Jewish newspaper, the *Jewish Messenger*,

28. *Archives israélites* 13 (1852): 612.

29. As cited in Kaplan, "Priestess and Hausfrau," pp. 62, 77 n.

30. Isaac Leeser, "How to Educate Jewish Girls," as cited in *The American Jewish Woman: A Documentary History*, ed. Jacob Rader Marcus (New York and Cincinnati: Ktav Publishing House and American Jewish Archives, 1981), p. 130.

asserted: "The women of Israel have at all times been the conservators of our hallowed creed."³¹ The very same year that the German housewife was dubbed a priestess, prominent Reform rabbi Emil Hirsch described her American counterpart as a "Priestess of the Jewish ideal, Prophetess of Purity and Refinement."³² His colleague in the Reform rabbinate Kaufmann Kohler used the pages of the *American Hebrew* at about the same time to call upon Jewish women in a similar vein to become "the standard-bearer[s] of religion," who would "give us again Jewish homes, . . . a Judaism spiritualized."³³ In recognition of women's important role as the first (and sometimes only) Jewish teachers of their children, Jewish communal leaders began to emphasize the importance of providing sufficient Jewish education to girls to enable them to carry out their destined maternal responsibilities. As the *Archives israélites* put it in 1852, "[T]he health of our religion depends henceforth above all on the education of girls."³⁴

Although Jewish women in the West, who had encountered the challenges of secular culture, accommodated to prevail-

31. Abram S. Isaacs, "Our Daughters," *Jewish Messenger* 39, no. 12 (1876): 4, as cited in Diane Lichtenstein, *Writing Their Nations: The Tradition of Nineteenth-Century American Jewish Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 29 (on the Mother in Israel trope, see pp. 23-31).

32. *American Jewess* 1, no. 1 (Apr. 1895): 11, as cited in Jenna Weissman Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews: The Orthodox Community in the Interwar Years* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 97.

33. *American Hebrew*, 23 Mar. 1894, p. 621. Karla Goldman points out that Kaufmann Kohler's views on women's domestic role remained nearly unchanged over a period of some fifty years. See her "The Ambivalence of Reform Judaism: Kaufmann Kohler and the Ideal Jewish Woman," *American Jewish History* 79, no. 4 (1990): 477-99, esp. 484, 497.

34. *Archives israélites* 13 (1852): 612.

ing expectations of the middle-class woman's position in the home, they also reshaped the boundaries between the domestic and the public spheres and thereby assumed an expanded role within the Jewish community.³⁵ The female version of the project of Jewish assimilation contained potentially radical elements in addition to its conservative domestic thrust. Middle-class Jewish women in Western societies, particularly in the United States, happily claimed the new definitions of female responsibility for religious socialization of the young and for care of society's unfortunates. Drawing on these gender norms, and later on the ideology of domestic feminism that conceptualized society as merely the domestic realm writ large, they developed new forms of female Jewish expression. Subsequently, they began to demand communal recognition of their public roles.

In the small, new Jewish communities of nineteenth-century America, whose members were more highly integrated within the larger society socially than within any other contemporary locale, middle- and upper-class women adopted the prevailing American concept that charity was woman's work. At the same time they expanded the philanthropic activity that Jewish women had conducted in *hevrot* (associations) in the traditional Jewish community. Nearly every Jewish community of moderate size sustained a Hebrew Ladies' Benevolent Society.³⁶ In Philadelphia, for example, in

35. On the shifting of boundaries between public and private, see Beth Wenger, "Jewish Women and Voluntarism: Beyond the Myth of Enablers," *American Jewish History* 79, no. 1 (1989): 16-36.

36. For primary sources on Hebrew Ladies' Benevolent Societies in Hartford, Anniston (Alabama), Portsmouth (Ohio), Galveston, and Philadelphia, see Marcus, ed., *The American Jewish Woman*, pp. 204-22. On the Hebrew Ladies' Benevolent Society of Atlanta, founded in 1870, see Beth

1819 the renowned Rebecca Gratz along with several other women who worshiped in the city's premier synagogue, Mikveh Israel, established the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society. Its volunteers organized home relief and eventually medical care for the local Jewish poor, an employment bureau for women and children, and a traveler's aid society. Some twenty years later, in 1838, women active in the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society founded the first Hebrew Sunday School in the United States, which became a model for the many others that followed.³⁷ The women who dedicated themselves to philanthropic and educational work among their fellow Jews defined their activity in moral and religious terms. Although they were influenced by Christian models of female philanthropy, they saw their efforts as a safeguard against Christian missionaries who knocked on the doors of poor Jews to offer assistance accompanied by proselytizing. Jewish female activists enjoyed the possibilities for sociability that voluntarism offered them as well as opportunities for demonstrating their skills beyond the confines of their homes.

Similar concepts of female duties and possibilities for self-expression led Jewish women in western and central Europe to express their maternal roles in social institutions dedicated to caring for the Jewish poor and to providing Jewish education. In the small Jewish community of England, Louise

Wenger, "The Southern Lady and the Jewish Woman: The Early Organizational Life of Atlanta's Jewish Women" (senior honors thesis, Wesleyan University, 1985), pp. 23-24.

37. Evelyn Bodek, "'Making Do': Jewish Women and Philanthropy," in *Jewish Life in Philadelphia*, ed. Murray Friedman (Philadelphia: ISHI Publications, 1983), pp. 145-47. See also Linda Gordon Kuzmack, *Woman's Cause: The Jewish Women's Movement in England and the United States, 1881-1933* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990), pp. 20-22.

Rothschild played a role similar to Rebecca Gratz's, founding the Jewish Ladies' Benevolent Loan Society and the Ladies' Visiting Society in London in 1840. She also helped to administer the Jews' Free School, a communal elementary school. Rothschild and her fellow volunteers, like Jewish women in the United States, combined traditional Jewish patterns of charity (*zedakah*) with the new forms of denominational philanthropy conducted by Christian women.³⁸ In nineteenth-century Germany, on the other hand, Jewish women initially conducted their charitable work along more-traditional lines. They doled out poor relief, cared for the female dead as they had for generations through the female *hevrah kadisha* (burial society), gathered money to provide dowries for poor brides, and administered funds to ensure that indigent Jews had the means to celebrate holidays. Gradually they also expanded their philanthropy, creating women's societies organized according to the latest concepts of "scientific charity" and concerned with the education of girls and the welfare of children. By the end of the nineteenth century their philanthropic activity enabled them to forge connections across confessional lines with other German women.³⁹ In France as well, Jewish women continued traditional forms of *zedakah* while engaging in the types of modern philanthropy conducted by bourgeois Catholic women.⁴⁰

38. Kuzmack, *Woman's Cause*, pp. 10–12.

39. Kaplan, *The Jewish Feminist Movement in Germany*, pp. 67–68; Kaplan, "Tradition and Transition," p. 23; Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class*, pp. 192–227.

40. On Jewish women's philanthropy in nineteenth-century urban France, see my *The Emancipation of the Jews of Alsace: Acculturation and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 60–61. On the assumption by bourgeois Catholic women of increased responsi-

Although most Jewish women in the West expressed their Jewish sentiment primarily through private devotions in the home and sectarian philanthropy, there emerged a handful of exceptional individuals who saw it as their responsibility to use the written word to accomplish the defense of Judaism as well as the task of educating other Jewish women, who would then influence their children. They based their activity upon the modern expectation that women would serve as the primary inculcators of Jewish consciousness in children, just as Western bourgeois culture saw mothers as the first teachers of moral values to the younger generation.⁴¹ In traditional Jewish society in eastern Europe in the eighteenth century a few women had composed *tkhines*, petitionary prayers in Yiddish intended for a female audience.⁴² In central Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century, metaphorical descendants of Sarah bas Tovim and Sarah Rebecca Rachel

bility for charity, see Bonnie Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoises of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 123–61.

41. In France, for example, the leaders of the Alliance Israélite Universelle focused upon moral education as the central goal in the schools it founded throughout the Levant. They saw educating female students for the task of rearing their children with the values of the European bourgeoisie as crucial to their efforts. See Aron Rodrigue, *French Jews, Turkish Jews: The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Politics of Jewish Schooling in Turkey, 1860–1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 78–79.

42. On *tkhines* and their function among Jewish women in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, see Chava Weissler, "Prayers in Yiddish and the Religious World of Ashkenazic Women," in *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, ed. Judith R. Baskin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), pp. 159–81, and Chava Weissler, "Traditional Piety of Ashkenazic Women," in *Jewish Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 2:245–75.

Leah Horowitz, two authors of collections of tkhines, also wrote prayers in the vernacular (in German or English) and with a modern sensibility. The poet Penina Moise (1797–1880) of Charleston, South Carolina, composed the first American Jewish hymnal (and served, incidentally, as the director of Congregation Beth Elohim's Sunday School).⁴³ In 1855 Fanny Neuda (1819–1894), widow of one rabbi in Moravia and sister of another in Vienna, wrote a German prayer book for women. *Stunden der Andacht* (Hours of devotion) was so popular that by the 1920s it had gone through twenty-eight editions and had also been translated into English.⁴⁴

The most prolific and influential of these Jewish women writers who addressed religious themes was England's Grace Aguilar (1816–1847), of Portuguese Marrano descent. In her short life of thirty-one years, she wrote a number of books about Judaism, in addition to novels, poems, and translations.⁴⁵ Apologetic in tone, they were designed to instill pride in Jewish readers and reinforce the faith of Jews fully at home in Western culture. Aguilar saw her role as defender of the faith against widely accepted Christian disparagement of Judaism. In her 1845 volume *The Women of Israel*, which surveyed Jewish history with particular attention to the biblical era, she

43. For a selection of Moise's poetry, see Marcus, ed., *The American Jewish Woman*, pp. 124–28, and Ellen M. Umansky and Dianne Ashton, eds., *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality—A Sourcebook* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), pp. 88–90. For an analysis of Moise's work, see Lichtenstein, *Writing Their Nations*, pp. 71–74.

44. Fanny Neuda, *Stunden der Andacht* (1857; Prague: W. Pascheles, 1868). On Neuda, see the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 12:1008.

45. On Grace Aguilar see Kuzmack, *Woman's Cause*, p. 15, and Montagu Frank Modder, *The Jew in the Literature of England* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1939), pp. 182–88.

was anxious to prove that the position of women in Judaism was higher than in any other culture. “[I]t is impossible to read the Mosaic law,” she asserted, “without the true and touching conviction, that the female Hebrew was even more an object of the tender and soothing care of the Eternal than the male.”⁴⁶

Aguilar's defense of the high status of women within Jewish tradition, though intended to provide rationales for loyalty to Judaism, derived from assumptions about gender and assimilation widespread among acculturated Jews of her generation. In Aguilar's view, Jewish women had a special religious vocation, or “mission,” “as witnesses of that faith which first raised, cherished, and defended them. . . . A religion of love is indeed necessary to woman, yet more so than to man.”⁴⁷ Because of woman's natural spirituality, Aguilar urged the Jewish woman, in contradiction of traditional Jewish custom, to dedicate the gift of her “silvery voice and ear for harmony” not only to pleasing man but also to singing God's praises in his sanctuary as well as teaching songs of thanksgiving to her children at home.⁴⁸ In fact, Aguilar highlighted the role of Jewish women as teachers of their children. But rather than seeing this role as a recent addition to women's tasks, she asserted that its source was “our ancient fathers, whose opinion is evidently founded on our holy law.”⁴⁹ “To the women of Israel, then,” she concluded, “is intrusted the noble privilege of hastening ‘the great and glorious day of the Lord,’ by the instruction they bestow upon their sons, and the spiritual ele-

46. Grace Aguilar, *The Women of Israel*, 2 vols. in 1 (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1851), p. 9.

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 323. For other comments on women as the religious instructors of their children, see pp. 155, 157, 165.

vation to which they may attain in social intercourse, and yet more in domestic life."⁵⁰

Aguilar's *The Women of Israel* suggests the double-edged implications of the bourgeois gender division that placed religion and the inculcation of religious sensibilities within the female domain. On the one hand, Aguilar manifested a strong loyalty to Jewish faith and to Jewish distinctiveness; she expressed a firm belief in woman's inherent religiosity as well as in her physical and mental inferiority to man—doctrines that we might label profoundly conservative. On the other hand, on the basis of her understanding of women's religious mission, she championed women's religious education and the ceremony of confirmation for both sexes—innovations we could rightly see as progressive.⁵¹ In fact, she recognized the opportunities that her own time offered Jewish women, and she concluded her book with a call to the women of Israel to take advantage of their new opportunities, for, in her words, they were now "free not only to believe and obey, but to study and speak of their glorious faith." Anticipating some aspects of twentieth-century feminist analysis, she even recognized that the gendered division of labor in nineteenth-century Western societies provided women with advantages not enjoyed by their husbands and brothers: "it is fully in [women's] power so to do . . . yet more so than men; for the ordinances and commands of our holy faith interfere much less with woman's retired path of domestic pursuits and pleasures than with the more public and more ambitious career of man."⁵²

By the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning

50. Ibid., p. 335.

51. Ibid., pp. 9, 13, 317, 325.

52. Ibid., p. 326.

of the twentieth, acculturated middle- and upper-class Jewish women living in Western societies had taken to heart the message of women's potential for religious and social influence in both the domestic and the public sphere, as the image of the "New Woman" expanded the legitimate field of female activity. The writers and the editor of the *American Jewess*, for example, often referred to women as "queens of the home," who were meant to bring about the "reign of religion" and "reinstatement of the Sabbath to its old glory."⁵³ At the same time, Rosa Sonneschein, the editor of the magazine, called for women to serve as synagogue trustees and members of Sabbath School boards.⁵⁴ In England Lily Montagu, daughter of a prominent Orthodox family, became a central figure in the movement of Liberal Judaism, convinced that women had a contribution to make as spiritual leaders.⁵⁵ Building upon the accomplishments of the earlier female charitable associations and upon female activism within the larger society, Jewish women established important, nationwide organizations in the United States, in Germany, and, on a smaller scale, in England. Jewish women who had been active in secu-

53. *American Jewess* 7, no. 2 (May 1898): 97, as cited in Jenna Weissman Joselit, "The Special Sphere of the Middle-Class American Jewish Woman: The Synagogue Sisterhood, 1890–1940," in *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 207.

54. Selma Berrol, "Class or Ethnicity: The Americanized German Jewish Woman and Her Middle Class Sisters in 1895," *Jewish Social Studies* 47, no. 1 (Winter 1985): 29–30.

55. On Montagu, see Ellen M. Umansky, *Lily H. Montagu and the Advancement of Liberal Judaism: From Vision to Vocation* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1983), and Lily Montagu, *Lily Montagu: Sermons, Letters, Addresses and Prayers*, ed. Ellen M. Umansky (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1985).

lar women's clubs founded the National Council of Jewish Women in Chicago at the time of the World's Fair in 1893. With a membership of almost 50,000 by 1920, it carried out social welfare work and educational programs. It provided well-organized assistance and models of middle-class behavior for needy east European Jewish immigrants and spearheaded the fight against Jewish involvement in the international traffic in prostitution. For the spiritual and cultural growth of its own members, it promoted self-education in Judaism.⁵⁶

The National Council of Jewish Women gave female Jewish leaders the opportunity to present their views of women's role within Judaism: Speaking on "Woman in the Synagogue" at the 1893 Jewish Women's Congress, which gave birth to the council, Ray Frank, a woman who had served as a lay preacher in the frontier conditions of the American West, demonstrated how Jewish women could utilize the doctrine of "true womanhood" to enhance their own status and self-esteem, even while it constrained their aspirations.⁵⁷ Frank accepted as self-evident the idea that women were naturally more spiritual than men and that "religion [was] impossible

56. On the National Council of Jewish Women, see Rogow, *Gone to Another Meeting*, and Sue Levi Elwell, "The Founding and Early Programs of the National Council of Jewish Women: Study and Practice as Jewish Women's Religious Expression" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1982). For membership figures, see Rogow, *Gone to Another Meeting*, p. 241. On women volunteer activists in the American Jewish community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see June Sochen, *Consecrate Every Day: The Public Lives of Jewish American Women, 1880-1980* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), pp. 45-71. On Jews and the fight against prostitution, see Edward Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish Fight against White Slavery, 1870-1939* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983).

57. Ray Frank, "Woman in the Synagogue," reprinted in Umansky and Ashton, eds., *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality*, pp. 130-36.

without woman."⁵⁸ Surveying the important role of women in the survival of the Jews from biblical days to her own time, she defended Judaism's treatment of women and its recognition of mothers as teachers. "When the Lord said to Moses, 'And ye shall be unto Me a nation of priests and a holy nation,' " she asserted, "the message was not to one sex."⁵⁹ Indeed, Frank concluded her historical survey with the confident claim that she had proved that women were intellectually equal to men in religious matters and their superiors when it came to practicality. Yet Frank took the opportunity of her address to chastise Jewish women of her own time for failing to prevent the contemporary decline in religious practice and to call upon them to strengthen Judaism from their domestic throne:

[T]o be identical with man is not the ideal of womanhood. Some things and privileges belong to him by nature; to these, true woman does not aspire; but every woman should aspire to make of her home a temple, of herself a high priestess, of her children disciples, then will she best occupy the pulpit, and her work run parallel with man's. She may be ordained rabbi or be the president of a congregation—she is entirely able to fill both offices—but her noblest work will be at home, her highest ideal, a home. . . . Nothing can replace the duty of the mother in the home. Nothing can replace the reverence of children, and the children are yours to do as ye will with them. . . . Mothers, ye can restore Israel's glory, can fulfil the prophecy by bringing the man-child, strong love of the Eternal, to his Maker.⁶⁰

Frank's address reflects the profound internalization of prevailing gender norms even by a woman who flouted those

58. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

60. *Ibid.*, pp. 135-36. Emphasis in the original.

norms by talking from a public, rather than a domestic, pulpit. Similarly, in welcoming women in 1896 to the first convention of the National Council of Jewish Women, Rebekah Kohut, lecturer, writer, and teacher, hailed Jewish mothers' potential as "saviors of our people." "Every true Jewess is a priestess. . . . If not from our ranks, then from where shall come those who shall teach our children by religious example, and kindle within them the sparks of faith, that which will keep . . . ever glowing the coals of confidence in the God of Israel?"⁶¹ Only occasionally did a communal representative dissent from the exclusive emphasis on the maternal religious role. In a speech delivered at the 1893 Jewish Women's Congress where Ray Frank had spoken, Mary Cohen, a poet, teacher, and communal activist in Philadelphia, praised the inextricable linkage of home and synagogue within Judaism and the importance of domestic ritual, including the preparation of special holiday foods. Cohen's emphasis on the importance of "kitchen Judaism" necessarily highlighted the woman's role. "I can never see, in the sometimes punctilious care with which some Hebrew women prepare their homes for the religious festivals, the ground for annoyance or ridicule which it seems to furnish to many critics," she admitted. But she also referred to the shared responsibility of Jewish parents, rather than of mothers alone: "the synagogue is the home, and the home the synagogue. I mean that the intelligent and devout Hebrew parent is the priest or priestess of the family altar."⁶²

• American Jewish women were not alone in organizing for

61. Rebekah Kohut, "Welcoming Address, First Convention of the National Council of Jewish Women," in *ibid.*, p. 141.

62. Mary M. Cohen, "The Influence of the Jewish Religion in the Home," in *ibid.*, pp. 137, 136.

philanthropic, educational, and communal political purposes. In Germany in 1904 Jewish women established the Jüdischer Frauenbund, which attained a membership of 35,000 within a decade and 50,000 by the end of the 1920s.⁶³ The smaller Union of Jewish Women emerged in Great Britain in 1902.⁶⁴ The American, British, and German Jewish women's organizations cooperated in the international campaign against white slavery and lobbied for greater recognition for women within their respective Jewish communities. Despite differences in their specific programs stemming from the nature of their home countries and of their respective Jewish communities, all three of these women's organizations asserted a distinct role for women as sustainers of Jewish communal life and guardians against defection from Judaism. Without challenging the primacy of home and domestic responsibilities as the proper focus of women's lives, they reconfigured the boundaries between the domestic and public spheres, although some of their spokeswomen might have been reluctant to acknowledge this. In teaching administrative skills and conferring public positions of authority and responsibility upon their members, they also expanded the range of appropriate female behavior.

In addition to taking upon themselves extensive responsibility for philanthropy and social welfare as part of the middle-class woman's religious and moral burden, American Jewish women in the twentieth century carried their domestic talents into the synagogue and sacralized the home as the site of Jewish observance. It became their mission to make the synagogue more "homey" and to realize the potential of the home

63. Kaplan, *The Jewish Feminist Movement in Germany*, pp. 10–11.

64. Kuzmack, *Woman's Cause*, pp. 49–50, 82–83, 165–68.

as a sacred sphere for the transmission of Judaism. The synagogue sisterhood conceived as a charitable organization—a synagogue-based Ladies' Benevolent Society—declined at the turn of the century as philanthropy became professionalized and centralized. Jewish women then turned their attention to the domestic management of the synagogue. National organizations of synagogue sisterhoods, divided denominationally, gave women a visible role within the synagogue. Most sisterhood members devoted themselves to decorating the sanctuary for festivals, serving tea at the Oneg Shabbat, and promoting attendance at synagogue services. Sisterhoods organized sisterhood Sabbaths (special Sabbath services that honored women), performed manifold housekeeping functions within the synagogue, and took a particular interest in the smooth functioning of the religious schools. Some historians have shown that the Reform sisterhood organization provided a platform for the articulation of demands for greater public participation of women in the synagogue.⁶⁵ Reform sisterhoods, for example, often assumed responsibility for conducting services during the slow summer months. In 1924 the president of the Reform National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods could declare:

Woman has at last found her niche in religious life as well as in civic and political work. We do not find her today relegated to

65. On synagogue sisterhoods, see Joselit, "Special Sphere," pp. 206–30. On women in Orthodox synagogues, see her *New York's Jewish Jews*, pp. 97–122. For the role of sisterhoods as sources of promotion of equality for women within the synagogue, see Pamela Nadell, "The Beginnings of the Religious Emancipation of American Jewish Women" (paper delivered at the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians, New Brunswick, N.J., 8 June 1990).

the gallery of the synagogue docilely watching the men of the congregation. Her voice is heard on the Temple Board, her advice is asked in the direction of affairs of the Sabbath School, she is in fact a force in the religious community.⁶⁶

On the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the organization in 1938, its founding president, Carrie Simon, even called for the ordination of women as rabbis.⁶⁷

In the 1920s sisterhood organizations also elaborated upon the stereotypical representation of the woman's domestic role as priestess. The Conservative movement's Women's League, more concerned with Judaizing the home under female auspices than with feminizing the synagogue, sponsored a number of publications designed to facilitate the Jewish housewife's ritual task as she enhanced the Jewishness of her home. Most popular was Deborah Melamed's *The Three Pillars*, first published in 1927. It outlined the obligations of the Jewish woman in the areas of Sabbath and holiday observance, prayer, and child rearing. *The Three Pillars* crystallized the by now familiar view of the woman as the religious and moral arbiter of the Jewish family par excellence and called for the education of women to prepare them for their maternal responsibilities. As Melamed wrote, "The importance of the woman in Jewish life cannot be overestimated, and an intelligent Jewish woman bespeaks a certain amount of Jewish training and education." In describing the Sabbath, she added that "in many homes it is [the Jewish woman] who must assume almost the entire responsibility of fostering her children's religious life, and of transmitting to them that spiritual heritage which has moulded her own." By encouraging the observance of kashrut,

66. Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews*, pp. 98–99.

67. Nadell, "Religious Emancipation," p. 11.

the Jewish mother attained two goals: "character building" and inculcating the sense of belonging to "a special people."⁶⁸ To facilitate their members' fulfillment of their central role in preserving and transmitting Judaism, in 1931 the Women's League spurred the establishment of a Women's Institute of Jewish Studies by the Jewish Theological Seminary. Reform and Orthodox sisterhood groups, too, took steps to deepen the Jewish knowledge of their members to strengthen ritual observance in the home and to prepare mothers for instilling a positive Jewish identity in their children.⁶⁹ The Western, middle-class definition of womanhood thus provided Jewish women with a conservative role but also allowed innovation in expanded educational opportunities for females and a more visible presence in the synagogue.

The adoption of Western bourgeois concepts of female religiosity also had negative consequences for the depiction of Jewish women, at least in the Jewish press. The representation of women and assimilation in public Jewish statements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries diverges markedly from the demonstrable historical record, in part due to the failure to recognize the gender differences in both the timing and the extent of Jewish assimilation in nineteenth-century western and central Europe and America. Exploring the contradiction between female experience and female representation uncovers a fundamental ambivalence about the

68. Deborah Melamed, *The Three Pillars: Thought, Worship and Practice for the Jewish Woman* (New York: Women's League of the United Synagogue of America, 1927), pp. 36, 68–69, 41–42. The book was reprinted many times.

69. Nadell, "Religious Emancipation," p. 15; Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews*, pp. 108–9.

project of assimilation even among male communal leaders who generally supported it.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, as assimilation was proceeding apace in the cities of Europe and the United States, articles critical of Jewish women began to appear regularly in the Jewish press in Germany, France, England, and the United States. Rather than noting the gender differences in Jewish practice which we have documented and chastising men for their defection from the Jewish community, these articles blamed women, particularly mothers, for the signs of radical assimilation that were capturing the attention of Jewish critics. Certainly, this criticism is not wholly surprising, for, as we have seen, bourgeois ideology conferred on wives and mothers responsibility for the moral and religious tone of the home, and Jewish spokesmen had adopted this ideology.⁷⁰ If the family was no longer succeeding in transmitting Jewish knowledge and loyalty to the younger generation, then the guardians of the hearth had failed in their task. In preparing their sons so well to enter into the institutions of the larger society, mothers were neglecting the inculcation of a Jewish identity. As the *Archives israélites* noted with regret in 1889, the Jewish woman was not the model of piety she had been only fifty years before: "All the general qualities of the modern woman have developed in her at the expense of the particular qualities of the Jew." And, therefore, "she leaves her children, unfortunately, in absolute ignorance of their faith."⁷¹

70. See my "The Modern Jewish Family: Image and Reality," in *The Jewish Family: Metaphor and Memory*, ed. David Kraemer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 179–93.

71. *Archives israélites* 50 (1889): 399–400.

This communal expression of disappointment at the failure of Jewish mothers was by no means limited to the French milieu but was articulated in all the societies which had experienced emancipation and assimilation, irrespective of the levels of social and political antisemitism. In 1875 the *London Jewish Chronicle* commented, "[P]ossibly there is no feature of the age more dangerous or more distressing than the growing irreligion of women."⁷² Similarly, German Jewish spokesmen took women to task for failing in their sacred responsibility. "Women are giants who carry the world on their shoulders by caring for the home," editorialized one paper. "If the religious home falls, so does the world of religion."⁷³ In commenting in an 1871 article on the historic piety of Jewish women and the inspiration they offered to their families and communities, Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler lamented the neglect by contemporary Jewish women of their time-honored noble task of bringing spirituality to their homes, and this at a time when Reform had granted them a larger role within the synagogue.⁷⁴ And in Texas, too, in the late 1870s Jewish women were pointedly reminded of their responsibilities: "You as daughters of Sarah and Rebecca ought never to forget that it is your sacred duty . . . to instruct your children, to give them a religious and moral training. . . . [R]emember that there is a great debt of responsibility resting upon you, and that you are held accountable for the acts of your children."⁷⁵ Some women also

72. *Jewish Chronicle*, 12 Mar. 1875, p. 801.

73. As cited in Kaplan, "Priestess and Hausfrau," p. 62.

74. Goldman, "The Ambivalence of Reform Judaism," pp. 481-82. Kohler continued for decades to voice his disappointment that women had not reinvigorated either the Jewish home or the synagogue. See pp. 490-91.

75. As cited in Wenger, "The Southern Lady and the Jewish Woman."

participated in the critique of Jewish mothers of their time. In her speech at the 1893 Jewish Women's Congress, Ray Frank, for example, castigated her peers:

Go to the synagogue on Friday night; where are the people? Our men cannot attend, keen business competition will not permit them. Where are our women? Keener indulgence in pleasures will not permit them. . . . With whom lies the blame? Where are the wise mothers of Israel today? . . . That we are now in the position of backsliders is owing to us women.⁷⁶

Fathers are absent from communal discussions about the younger generation, although as lay and rabbinic leaders of the Jewish community they continued to invest time and resources in educational institutions dedicated to the transmission of Jewish culture and identity. In my survey of the nineteenth-century Jewish press of England, France, Germany, and the United States and of public Jewish pronouncements, I have found no references specifically to fathers' responsibilities for the education of their children or for the inculcation of a Jewish identity nor blame of fathers for the defection of their children from the Jewish community. In the gendered project of assimilation the female sex was at the center.

Yet within the preemancipation Jewish community the obligation to educate children, primarily sons, rested precisely upon fathers. In practice the father's obligation was socialized, for the male heads of household within a community assumed responsibility for establishing educational institutions for all the children of the community. Indeed universal literacy in Hebrew and familiarity with the biblical text

76. Frank, "Woman in the Synagogue," p. 135.

were communal ideals for all males, and many communities provided basic instruction in reading for girls as well. The transfer of the obligation to educate Jewish youth from fathers and communal institutions to mothers, with reduced supplementary assistance from communal institutions, was, as I have suggested, a major aspect of the assimilation of Western Jewry to the norms of the larger society. It permitted Jewish men to pursue success in the worlds of commerce and civic affairs and to assume leadership positions within the Jewish community while relegating the transmission of Jewish knowledge and identity to the domestic sphere and to women, who, incidentally, had fewer educational and material resources to accomplish the task. By focusing, in the case of Jewish communal critics, on the failure of Jewish women to fulfill their assigned role or, in the case of Freud and other Jewish men who had become highly secularized, on women's eagerness to fulfill it all too well, Jewish men were able to ignore problematic elements within the project of assimilation itself, particularly as they related to their own behavior.

The project of assimilation contained an unacknowledged source of tension: the assumption that limits could be set to assimilation, that Jews would not disappear completely within the larger society, that individual mobility would not conflict with group survival. As the Jewish elite pressed for social and civic equality, their behavior belied that assumption. With each succeeding generation, Jewish learning and practice declined and signs of radical assimilation increased. Men predominated among those who converted and intermarried. Because the bourgeois ideal of female behavior restricted women's access to the public arena and saw religiosity as a feminine attribute, assimilating Jewish women apparently retained more signs of Jewish identification than did the men

in their families. The male leadership of the Jewish community would not renounce the social, economic, and psychological benefits of emancipation and adoption of Western culture nor could it devise an effective strategy for promoting Jewish communal persistence without setting limits to individual male ambition. Blaming Jewish mothers for the decline in Jewish knowledge and religious practice enabled Jewish men in western and central Europe to continue the process, and the project, of Jewish assimilation.

The Jews of the West were the first to confront the new political and social conditions that accompanied modernity, but they constituted only a small minority of world Jewry. The much larger Jewish population of eastern Europe was also compelled to redefine its identity and relationship to the larger society. The particular social, political, and cultural contexts of eastern Europe took the process and project of Jewish assimilation, and the gender relations encoded within both, in vastly different directions from the nineteenth-century Western model.