

# Gender and profound changes in European Judaism

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## ABSTRACT

The role of Jewish women and men in European societies has undergone profound changes over the last two centuries. Their gradual equality of rights with non-Jews—in addition to the process of secularization and assimilation, anti-Semitism, and internal reforms of Judaism—had a different impact on women and men, and transformed Jewish representations of femininity and masculinity. The renewed value ascribed to women as “guardians of tradition” during the nineteenth century was a change that paradoxically enabled them to take on new roles as educators, leaders of Jewish organizations, and sometimes as officers. A major revolution came with their access to secular education, which was particularly early, and also to religious education somewhat later. The profound reorganization of Jewish collective institutions after the Holocaust led to renewed religious polarization opposing the “Orthodox,” who were often in the majority, and “liberals” with respect to women’s participation in the synagogue and the study of religious texts.



Festive prayer service at the synagogue of the Jewish Retreat Center in Lehnitz. Lehnitz, circa 1934-1938. Source: Jewish Museum Berlin, gift of Ernest J. Mann, born Ernst Glücksmann. (Note: Contrary to orthodox practice, the sexes are not separated. The Torah scroll is carried by young boys wearing hats, but also by a young girl.)



Sabbath Nachmittag. Postcard after the painting by Moritz Oppenheim (1800-1882), printed circa 1904, Germany. Source: Joseph and Margit Hoffman Judaica Postcard Collection, Folklore Research Center, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.



The Great Synagogue of London. Source: George R. Sims, Living London: its Work and its Play, its Humour and its Pathos, its Sights and its Scenes, vol. II, London, Cassell and Company, 1902.

The process of emancipation, secularization, and assimilation profoundly changed gender relations within the Jewish populations of Europe beginning in the eighteenth century, with regional variations according to when equal civil rights were obtained (right to mobility, work, and worship, equality with respect to taxation, education, voting, etc.).

Professional, intellectual, and matrimonial exchanges in Western Europe with non-Jews involved men more so than

women, despite exceptions such as the *salonnières* of Berlin (Rahel Levin Varnhagen, 1771-1833) or Vienna (Fanny von Arnstein, 1758-1818). This mostly male secularization led to a relative feminization of synagogue attendees (where the sexes were separated). Religious modernization was nevertheless firstly conceived by men, whether it involved the Haskalah, an intellectual movement encouraging dialogue between secular and Hebrew studies (late eighteenth century), or Reform Judaism (early nineteenth century), two movements born in Germany. The gender of secularization was entirely different in Eastern Europe, where a large portion of the European Jewish population lived. While later access to civil rights limited incentives for men to assimilate or secularize, a larger number of women, who were traditionally deprived of religious education and excluded from studying Hebrew texts—the most esteemed religious practice in Judaism—left Jewish religious institutions, often in favor of secularized Jewish sociability such as cultural activities in Yiddish, Jewish socialism, Bundism (Jewish nationalism of the left), and Zionism.

Jewish norms of masculinity and femininity changed greatly during the nineteenth century, partly in reaction to anti-Semitism, which was highly gendered: Jewish women were sexualized and exoticized (“the beautiful Jewess”), or accused of dominating men who, on the contrary, were caricatured as being effeminate. In the late nineteenth century, Zionist activists responded to anti-Semitic stereotypes by emphasizing *Muskeljudentum* (“muscular Judaism”), as opposed to the former Jewish male ideal of studying at a yeshiva (Talmudic academy). For women the primary revolution involved access to education, initially secular and later religious. More Jewish girls, who could not read the vernacular or Yiddish, joined public schools teaching in the vernacular than Jewish boys, and often even than non-Jewish girls; they continued their studies in high schools and universities wherever these institutions were open to women and Jews.

The late nineteenth-century Jewish elite contended with this gap by making women’s religious education a shield against assimilation. The traditional role of the “valiant woman” whose economic activity allows her husband to pursue religious studies was discredited in favor of their role as “keepers of tradition,” entrusted with transmitting Judaism (this educational role had previously fallen to fathers and community institutions). This discourse, which gave new meaning to domestic religious practices (especially Shabbat and celebrations), made the religious education of girls—and future mothers—a new consideration. The synagogues inspired by Reform Judaism established new ceremonies for these girls, to go alongside the traditional male *bar mitzvah*. In the Orthodox world, opposition to religious education for women lasted up until the Holocaust, although Sarah Schenirer (1883-1935) did found the Bais Yaakov elementary schools in Poland.

Involvement in associations and philanthropy was another new role for Jewish women, ranging from the “women’s committees” of synagogues to feminism, social work, socialism, and Zionism. In Germany, Bertha Pappenheim (1859-1936), a practicing Orthodox Jew and feminist, founded the Jüdischer Frauenbund in 1904, while the International Council of Jewish Women was founded in Rome in 1914. A phenomenon that was more in the minority—practiced in liberal Judaism, in which coeducation became the rule in the twentieth century—was women’s occasional access to new religious responsibilities, such as the pioneers Lily Montagu (1873-1963), co-founder of English Liberal Judaism, or Regina Jonas (1902-1944), who was the first woman ordained as a rabbi in Germany.

The Holocaust was a major break. Europe was no longer the center of global Judaism, coming after the United States and Israel. The questioning of assimilation during the 1960s can partly be explained by the experience of the Holocaust. Unlike the United States, where feminism and a “return to one’s roots” went hand in hand, in Europe religious revitalization was accompanied by conservative discourses on gender, for the collapse of liberal German Judaism led to the expansion of Orthodox Judaism. It opposed the lack of gender differentiation associated with assimilation by promoting a strict gendered division of religious roles: emphasis on a masculinity based on textual study, celebration of a female role based on demanding domestic practice (Shabbat, kashrut, sexual prohibitions during menstrual periods, modest dress).

Like global Judaism, European religious Judaism was increasingly polarized between Orthodox and non-Orthodox movements, with the latter experiencing a revival in Europe starting in the 1980s. Tensions were crystallized by the question of “intermarrying” (and non-Jewish women converting to Judaism), and the role of women in the synagogue. Liberal, reform, and conservative (non-Orthodox but more traditionalist) branches were favorable to mixing genders and equal ritual participation in synagogues, as well as the ordination of women and later of gays and lesbians. By contrast, on the Orthodox side the ritual participation of women in the synagogue was a source of major conflict, with the rabbis of the French Consistory, for instance, being opposed to the ritual reading of the Torah by women, even with separation of the sexes.

Adult women have gained access to more advanced religious learning, but once again in polarizing fashion. In the Orthodox world, the new training centers that opened up to adult women (such as in Gateshead in England during the 1940s) were generally single-sex, and did not offer the same curriculum to women as to men, who to a great extent conserved their monopoly over Talmud study and legal-religious authority. On the contrary, in non-Orthodox Judaism, rabbinical seminaries opened to women in the 1970s. European women were trained as rabbis in London, Berlin, the United States, and Israel, such as the pioneers Jackie Tabick for England (1975), or Pauline Bebe for France (1990). Since 1999, the German feminist movement Bet Debora has organized conferences bringing together Europe’s female and Jewish intellectuals, activists, and rabbis.

Finally, women have gained access to the management of national Jewish organizations, albeit without genuine debates regarding parity within them: Tullia Zevi for the Union of Italian Jewish Communities (1983), Josephine Wagerman at the Board of Deputies of British Jews (2000), and Charlotte Knobloch at the German Zentralrat (2006).

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