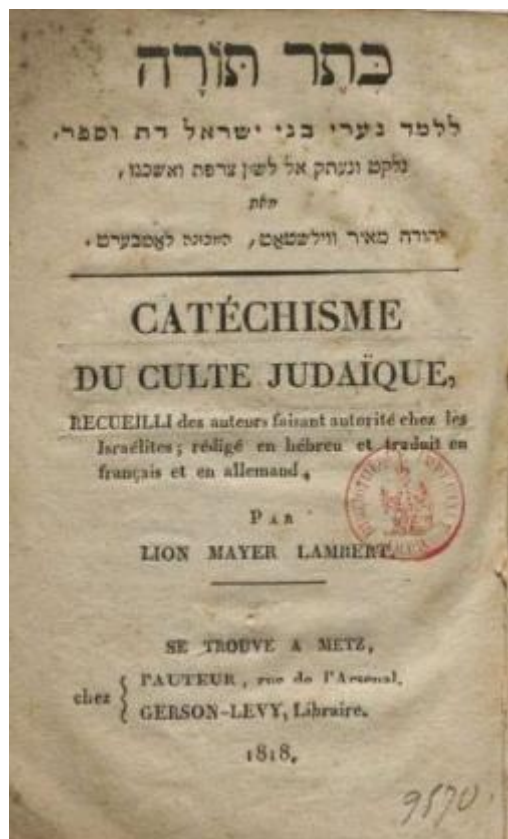


Jewish Religious Instruction Manuals in 18th and 19th Century Europe

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the evolution of Jewish religious instruction manuals during the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe. It traces the shift in educational practices and content as Jewish communities adapted to changing societal norms and the process of emancipation. The article highlights the innovative use of the catechism format and its impact on the structure of knowledge, redefining Judaism and reshaping Jewish identity in the modern era.



Jewish Catechism, Front Page, France, Metz, 1818. Source: National Library of

France.

The Duty to Learn

One of the key obligations of Judaism since Antiquity is its injunction to engage in daily, life-long reading and study of the Torah (the Bible, and more broadly, Jewish laws and customs). Unsurprisingly, the Jewish people have invested heavily in the literacy, instruction and education of its future generations. This duty does not derive from the need to perpetuate the collective via a process of socialization through its sacred texts. Rather it constitutes a religious mandate making childhood education a requirement to which that all heads of households must comply, thus allaying knowledge and knowhow with traditional learning.

In medieval Europe, Jewish families hired a local teacher, the *melamed*, to fulfill this duty. He taught children starting from the age of 5-6 in a room adjacent to the synagogue known as the *cheder* (literally, room or chamber) or in his own home throughout the year. After spending several years learning to read Hebrew, engaging in Bible study and mastering the rudiments of Talmud study, the fundamental text of Jewish law, most students left the cheder to work in the family business. More gifted students or those from wealthier families were sent to Talmudic study centers for adolescents (*Yeshiva*) to continue studying the Talmud with eminent rabbis.

Hence the centrality of the *Book* in traditional Jewish education in Europe was not a new phenomenon that emerged on the cusp of the modern era in a text-oriented society which defined itself in terms of the *written word*.

What was unprecedented was the transformation of religious education manuals in the 18th century and their didactic innovations over the course of the 19th century which resulted in religious instruction manuals as we know them today.

Education and Emancipation

At the end of the 19th century, most Jewish children in Europe were enrolled in either state schools, as was the case in France, Italy and Germany or communal schools, which were more typical of Central Europe and Russia. Some of these Jewish institutions continued to teach a curriculum centered on the traditional study of the Torah, using its time-honored methods. Others taught a more modern program that combined Jewish subjects with secular topics and applied a range of updated pedagogical and didactic techniques.

Beyond their role as a didactic resource for the transmission of knowledge, textbooks reflect the societal views of their authors and users. The diversity of Jewish textbooks used in Jewish communities as of the second half of the 19th century captures the different phases of the emancipation of the Jews and their integration into modern society. Although France was the first to grant full and equal rights to the Jews in 1791 through a vote of the Constituent Assembly, jurisprudence enacting the Emancipation dates back ten years earlier to the Edict of Tolerance proclaimed by Joseph II of Austria (1781) which granted freedom of worship to both Protestants and

Jews. Emancipation in Germany emerged from the intersection of the philosophy of the Enlightenment and the Jewish *Haskalah* movement which inspired European Jewish communities' first steps toward modernity.

Throughout the 19th century, emancipation extended in Europe from West to East with proclamations in Prussia in 1812, Belgium and Greece in 1830, Austria-Hungary in 1867 and Russia in 1917. This took the form of a series of legislative acts in which states granted citizenship to Jews, which thus authorized them to exercise numerous professions that previously had been forbidden to them. It also radically altered the relationship of the Jews to their religion, which no longer orchestrated the unfolding of their daily lives. This transformation in identity manifested itself clearly in changes in Jewish education and, in particular, in the textbooks used in Jewish schools.

From 1750 to 1900, several hundred textbooks were published for Jewish students in Europe. Some were the initiative of new Jewish institutions founded after the Emancipation such as the Jüdische Freyschule in Berlin (1778) or The Society for the Promotion of Culture among the Jews of Russia (1863), which promoted the revival of the Jewish people. These textbooks taught subjects that had not been covered in the traditional curriculum such as arithmetic and geometry, the modern history and the geography of other continents, and national languages such as Russian, Polish and English, as well as literature. All these textbooks were characterized by the growing use of modern didactic principles.

Other manuals focused on religious education, and were written for communities that had already been emancipated and whose children were already attending State schools and studying the general curriculum taught to all young citizens. They also attended exclusively Jewish schools where they learned about Judaism, and acquired enough basic Hebrew to take part in ritual activities. These religious instruction manuals were religiously-oriented, primarily written by rabbis, and were intended for 12-13 year olds (in preparation for the bar mitzvah). These new religious textbooks were characterized by a new didactic format known as catechism rhetoric.

A new educational format

Catechism rhetoric consists of a series of questions and answers forming a capsule version of the principles of faith which was designed to be accessible to all, and which could be easily transmitted, taught and memorized. First introduced by Luther in 1529, then adopted by the Catholic church, catechisms were also implemented in non-religious frameworks towards the end of the 18th century to present abridged versions of political doctrines, scientific topics, approaches and techniques.

The Jewish 19th century adoption of the catechism format was innovative in both form and content. Unlike religious education in Christian settings where the credo, the proclamation of faith, was of prime importance, Jewish catechisms did not deal with belief, but rather with the principles of Jewish ritual observance. Traditional catechisms taught the younger generations the rules and regulations of Jewish observance. Newer catechisms provided definitions of the Jewish religion, its dogma and its moral principles. Civic duties were extolled alongside religious obligations. Love of one's country was anchored in Biblical verses or rabbinical rulings.

These catechisms thus reflected changes in the teaching of the Jewish religion. Although the dialogue format is found frequently in traditional Jewish literature from Talmudic disputations to the philosophical treatises of the Renaissance, these works primarily addressed an erudite adult public, were written in Hebrew/Aramaic, and could not be understood without a solid background. The new catechisms were aimed at children, were written in European vernaculars, and aimed to be simple and accessible to all. The use of catechisms in the teaching of Judaism thus led to two radical changes: the emergence of new themes, and the development of new pedagogical methods. The catechism corresponded to a new way of structuring knowledge, a redefinition of Judaism, and a reshaping of Jewish identity in the modern era.

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