

**Role Model and Counter Image**  
**Iberian Jewry and the perception in German-Jewish Remembrance Culture**  
**1779-1939**

by  
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Translated from the German original *Vorbild und Gegenbild. Das iberische Judentum in der deutsch-jüdischen Erinnerungskultur 1779-1939* (Cologne: Böhlau Publishers 2011) by Corey Twitchell

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**Prologue:** In 1854 Ludwig Philippson, the prominent scholar of Reform Judaism, petitioned the Spanish Parliament to establish religious freedom in Spain. Philippson acted as a modern *shtadlan* or mediator who tried to reverse the expulsion of Spanish Jewry in 1492, an event that functioned as the central catastrophe for the Jews at the end of the Middle Ages. In Moslem and Christian societies on the Iberian Peninsula prior to the expulsion the degree of integration of the Jews in the non-Jewish major societies had been extremely high. Jews had contributed to the general arts and sciences for centuries. In dress and language they identified with Muslim culture in particular. The revocation of the edict of expulsion would have enabled Jews to settle again in Spain. Readmission to Spain, Philippson argued would create an option for the Jews to connect with their glorious past. Furthermore it would be a boon to Spain, bringing to an end the poverty and cultural isolation of contemporary Spanish society and culture.

## **A Introduction**

What does this story illuminate about German Jewry whose high degree of assimilation into the German society was widely considered a role model for Jewries even beyond the borderlines of the German-speaking world? My book explores the construction of medieval Iberian Jewish Culture as a “Golden Age” among German-speaking Jews during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century what Ismar Schorsch has named “The Myth of Sephardic Supremacy”. It locates manifestations of this discursive relationship within different historical eras, within different genres (from scholarly writing to fiction and journalism), and within different religious and cultural camps (assimilated or traditional, religious or non-religious, liberal or neo-orthodox). From this examination of a “usable past”, my book develops an alternative account of the emergence of a modern German-Jewish identity. Through their reflections upon medieval Iberian-Sephardic history and its aftermath in exile, modern German Jews re-evaluated their own contemporary situation in the German-speaking lands. What David N. Myers has described as “an ongoing, dynamic, and vitalizing process of exchange” did not merge into “counter-models of *Deutschtum*” (Steven Aschheim) but developed by means of the perception of Jewish culture in Spain into an open concept of culture that was marked by “cultural difference” (Homi Bhabha). German Jews sought from this legacy not so much

paradigms of assimilation or acculturation but rather models for the integration and secularization of a Jewish milieu within the dominant society, models that would not require conversion or the sacrifice of Jewish identity. In a final chapter the book also describes an eventual rejection of the Iberian-Sephardic role model within modern Zionism.

A central theme that emerged through the engagement with Iberian-Sephardic history and helped to shape the new German Jewish identity is what I term “intercultural mediation.” German Jewish writers understood Iberian-Sephardic Jews as having acted as integrated members and even full stakeholders of the Moslem and Christian societies on the Iberian Peninsula. More strikingly their leaders were *shtadlan* who represented Jewish communities and dealt face to face with the sovereign or their representatives. For German Jews before national unification, who only received civil equality and citizenship after 1871 and even then struggled for complete integration and acceptance, the historical path of intercultural mediation and negotiation seemed the key to the future. Indeed, the rise of anti-Semitism during the 1880s as a “cultural code” (Shulamit Volkov) led to a Jewish response in the form of modern Zionism that would also reject this model of an intercultural mediation in Spain.

My book is the first book length study of its nature. Its fresh interpretation of German-Jewish history during the era of emancipation will be of interest for scholars, graduate students and advanced undergraduate students in the fields of Modern Jewish History and in particular German-Jewish History, Sephardic History, and German Studies.

## **Section B**

As early as the last third of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, representatives of the Jewish Enlightenment or *Haskalah* set out in quest of a new understanding of Sephardic Jewry. In periodicals such as *Ha Me’assef*, *Sulamith* and *Jedidja* these enlightened Jewish authors or *Maskilim* looked to exemplary personalities of Sephardic Jewry such as Yehuda ha-Levi and Moses Maimonides. The rehabilitation of the Sephardic intellectual legacy helped legitimize the contemporary Jewish interest in science and philosophy. At the same time, for authors such as Joseph Wolf, Salomo Löwisohn, and Isaac Jeitteles, these eminent Sephardic figures from the past came to represent intercultural role models within a broader European cultural tradition. Their lives showed that it was

indeed quite possible to live within Jewish tradition on the one hand and yet participate fully in the general development of culture and science on the other. These eminent Sephardim were thus held up as “noble Jews” and *shtadlan* - models worthy of emulation in German-speaking communities.

The growing role of Iberian-Sephardic history within the *Haskalah* has to be understood in relationship to the Christian discourse of a “Civic Improvement of the Jews” that also developed during the final decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Assimilation became the essential condition for emancipation in the German states in general. Jews were encouraged to assimilate, for example, by learning and adopting the German language. However, Christian Germans did not acknowledge these efforts by the Jews through greater acceptance or integration. (Only in those territories under French influence did Jews become citizens for a time.) As hopes for integration into German society remained unfulfilled, many Jewish intellectuals realized the costs exacted by an exclusive orientation toward German language and culture. Consequently, they turned to Iberian-Sephardic experience as a way of arguing that Jews in the past had already contributed to a general European civilization.

### **Section C**

Focusing on authors of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, I argue that the conception of Iberian-Sephardic culture as a “golden age” in Jewish history had a fundamental impact on modern Jewish historiography and the ways German Jews memorized the Jewish past. For German-Jewish historians such as Leopold Zunz, Isaak Markus Jost, Heinrich Graetz and Abraham Geiger, Jewish history in Iberia took on a truly exemplary significance as an integral part of European history. Jost’s *History of the Israelites* understood the *Reconquista*’s revocation of the status as citizens of the Jews’ as a violation of “human rights.” Graetz described in his *History of the Jews* the role of Sephardic Jews as “Princes among the Jews” who “obtained the leadership over entire Jewry” from Babylonian Jewry. Meanwhile, the identification with Iberian-Sephardic History reinforced an already existing criticism of Polish Jewry as backward and Polish institutions and individuals as not compatible with the achievements of modernity. Some, such as Graetz, went so far in their idealization of Iberian-Sephardic Jews as to distance themselves from, or implicitly reject, their own Ashkenazic origins. Abraham

Geiger took a somewhat more complex view of the Sephardic legacy, noting that for some Sephardic Jews the outcome of assimilation was ignorance of Judaism. He also criticized contemporary Sephardic Jews in Amsterdam who only referred to their glorious past without connecting themselves with the achievements of modern society. Thus Geiger saw the “German-Jewish middle-classes” as the inheritors of the constructive, integrative culture of Iberian-Sephardic Jewry. In one way or another these scholars of the new *Science of Judaism* looked to the historical Jewish community in the Iberian Peninsula for strategies on how to participate in the emerging German national culture.

## **Section D**

This chapter addresses two popular mid-century genres: the Jewish historical novel and German-Jewish journalism (ranging from the liberal *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* edited by Ludwig Philippson to the neo-orthodox *Der Israelit*, edited by Markus Lehman). These literary genres show that the encounter with Iberian-Sephardic culture placed German-speaking Jews of all camps in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a position to counter the catalogue of demands from the surrounding society for Jewish transformation by putting forward a self-determined alternative: a potential grounded on an understanding of a specifically Jewish component to general culture, and on a model of intermediation. In its representations of Iberian-Sephardic culture, the Jewish historic novel provided an effective popular counterweight against the internal and external pressures of assimilation. Developed against the background of the German Realist novel, on the one hand, and in distinction to the Jewish “ghetto tale” and folkloric stories of village life on the other, the Jewish historical novel presents in its Sephardic characters an idealized “new Jew” who was confident of his Jewish identity and well integrated into Spain as a Jewish homeland. As part of this “imagined community” Sephardic Jews were in these novels, as Ludwig Philippson’s brother Phöbus argued, “not strangers in a strange country, but sons of Spain.”

As my opening anecdote about Ludwig Philippson illustrates, the writers profiled in this chapter did not consider themselves solely as intellectuals but also as political intercessors or *shtadlan*. In making his case that the Spanish Parliament should rescind the expulsion of the Jews Philippson argued that the expulsion not only brought

destruction to the Jews it also led to an overall economic and intellectual decline in Spain with consequences up to the present day. Philippson, who as a German Jew, considered himself a representative of the most enlightened and progressive nation of the time, not only spoke on behalf of his own religion but for the sake of universal human values.

Moreover, this chapter addresses the way German-Jewish literary historians drew on Iberian-Sephardic culture to develop an alternative literary paradigm, in opposition to conceptions of German national literature that excluded 'foreign literary elements'. For example, in his 1859 monograph *Sephardim, Romanische Poesie der Juden in Spanien* the literary historian Meyer Kayserling interpreted Sephardic culture as a culture of mediation that contributed to general non-Jewish culture. It was essential for Kayserling that the Jews had not suffered from social isolation on the Iberian Peninsula. Quite the opposite, in particular, during the Muslim reign over Spain they contributed actively to sciences, scholarship and poetry and were thus able, as Kayserling phrases it, "to transform this country, ravaged by an entire chain of internal struggles, into a seat of serious research and clear, inspired thought." The fusion of Jewish and Arabic culture created a distinct tradition of mediation that served as the prerequisite for a creative literature. Their contributions to poetry in particular made Jews integral to European culture. Indeed the literary historian Gustav Karpeles applied Goethe's term "world literature" to this creative intercultural mixture.

And yet, as Karpeles also emphasised, Jewish writing from this time was authentic precisely because Jews did not convert or completely assimilate into their Arabic, Latin, or vernacular cultural and linguistic surroundings. The result, in Karpeles's view, was Hebrew literature at its best. Thus as German Jews experienced some further integration into the German culture but still fell far short of acceptance by the German majority these models of literary mediation let German-speaking Jews take pride in the distinct status of *Jewish* writers.

Due to the rise of modern Anti-Semitism Zionist writers emphasized the need to dissociate oneself from an Iberian Judaism whose assimilatory tendencies were seen in predominantly negative terms. Indeed a distinct Zionist counter-history emerged in the works of Max Nordau and Yitzhak Baer. Both argued that assimilation not only led to disconnection from Judaism and ignorance of Jewish history, but ultimately to



conversion to Christianity. Nordau, the leading theorist of early political Zionism, who coined the term “muscular Jews”, contended that assimilated and emancipated Jews in the West had lost their inner bond and contact with their fellow Jews, and in addition faced political and social anti-Semitism that excluded them from non-Jewish societies. In 1873 Nordau travelled for several weeks in Spain; from Catalonia in the North to Andalusia in the South and described his experiences in his two-volume travel novel *From the Kremlin to the Alhambra* (1880). Nordau utilized the experience of the Moriscos, Muslims who were forcibly converted to Christianity, as a projection for the situation of the Jews: assimilation even to the point of Christian conversion, would not work because anti-Semitism would always exist despite whatever efforts they would make. Nordau’s rejection of assimilation is probably best described in his *Zionist Writings (Zionistische Schriften)* from 1909, where he compared the image of the “smiling Jewish millionaires” in Spain with contemporary assimilated German Jews, who, according to Nordau, had already lost a distinct Jewish identity and the capacity to see that assimilation was a complete failure.

A generation later, the co-founder of the Jerusalem School at the Hebrew University, Fritz Yitzhak Baer, trained at the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, also developed into a critic of assimilatory practices among Spanish Jews under Christian rule. I will concentrate on Baer’s *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain* (1929/36), *Galuth* (1935/36) and *Jehuda ha-Levi und seine Zeit* (1938/39) all written in German and later translated into Hebrew and English. In Baer’s account, the Jewish elites in particular were in constant touch with Christian Spaniards, a situation he described as “collaboration with one of the most gifted peoples.” Nevertheless, this collaboration did not allow a well-balanced co-existence. Jews converted to Christianity, and Judaism lost its authentic character. In this way Zionist counter-history and the Iberian-Sephardic experience addressed the opposite in this intercultural system of reference: to dissimilate from the influences of non-Jewish major societies specifically Christian societies, and moreover to recognize Jewish History as an integral part of the Zionist agenda to create a separate Jewish state.

## **Conclusion**

The book explores the Myth of a Golden Age in Spain and its aftermath in exile as a subject of historiography, literature, political discussion and memory among German-speaking Jews during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This discourse over a usable past provided a forum for German Jews to engage in internal, as well as external, dialogue and struggle over questions of religious, political and national identity. My book significantly contributes to an already established scholarship discussing the era of emancipation in Germany. Moreover, it seeks to broaden this understanding when focusing on this historical example arguing that not so much an understanding of assimilation or acculturation of German Jews but rather models for the incorporation of a Jewish milieu within the dominant society have to be considered here. For German-speaking Jews, the history of Sephardic Jewry became a historical example with its distinctive valence and signature within German national history. While Zionist authors rejected the myth of Sephardic Supremacy, and Zionism in general turned to the biblical past for a useful model, 19<sup>th</sup> century German Jewry found the Iberian experience an indispensable linchpin in its struggle for a modern Jewish identity. In this respect a notion of intercultural mediation is of central significance emphasizing the skills and values Jews had to offer to civilization in the past and can still play a part in present and future societies namely in Germany.