
REBEL IN FRANKFURT: THE SCHOLARLY ORIGINS OF JACOB KATZ

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Jacob Katz's stature as a towering figure of contemporary Jewish historiography was belied by his unimposing physical presence, elfin physique and small, high-pitched voice. But it was also belied by a set of qualities not usually associated with a scholar of his reputation—an uncommon modesty, a ceaseless curiosity, and a sweeping generosity extended to young student and distinguished colleague alike. Perhaps this rare combination of virtues can be traced back to his humble origins in Magyargencs, the small village in western Hungary where Katz, along with six other Jewish families, lived amidst the thousand or so Christian inhabitants.¹ Or perhaps these qualities were ingrained in Katz through his youthful travails as a foreign student seeking admission to a German university or his more well-known difficulties in gaining a professorial appointment in an Israeli university. Although there is something poignant in Katz's educational and professional struggles, there are few traces of self-pity in the man. In a retrospective moment, Katz demonstrated little regard for the fact that he was first granted a place on the faculty of the Hebrew University at the age of forty-five. Explaining his lack of bitterness, Katz simply averred: "Academic age is one thing, biological age another."²

Such magnanimity is not merely the product of a gracious man, but of a supremely confident man. Indeed, behind the placid façade of the undeniably humble Jacob Katz lay a fierce, and often contrarian, intellectual spirit. This spirit did not develop late in life, after Katz secured both recognition and honor for his work, but was present already in his first published essay—a withering review of a book proclaiming the historical inevitability of the

1. Jacob Katz, *With My Own Eyes: The Autobiography of an Historian*, translated by Ann Brenner and Zipora Brody (Hanover, N.H.: 1995), p. 2.

2. *With My Own Eyes*, p. 168.

decline of Judaism.³ It remained a constant feature of Katz's work up to his final book, whose opening chapter excoriated historians afflicted with what he saw as the malady of postmodernism.⁴ The intervening years between first and last publication revealed many incarnations of this fierce spirit, and perhaps for the better, since Katz faced more than a modicum of adversity in his long career. At the same time, the long passage from first to last publication exposed the shifting winds of historiographical discourse, as Katz moved from radical methodological innovator at the outset of his career to defender of scholarly orthodoxy by the end. The mission of this paper is to focus on the less well-known but formative stages of Katz's early career, highlighting a number of important and innovative themes in his work that have become pillars of Jewish historical scholarship at large.

I.

Born in 1904 in rural Hungary, Katz was compelled to learn to negotiate within and between competing cultural universes. The Jews of his town, although strictly observant, were not numerous enough to sustain either a synagogue or school. As a result, the young Katz studied in a local Protestant school in which he came to admire Martin Luther—to the point of deeming him “a most revered, almost celestial light,” a sentiment bitterly crushed when Katz read Heinrich Graetz's portrayal of Luther in his *History of the Jews*.⁵ It is interesting to note, though, that Katz was better able to gain a youthful appreciation for Luther than he was to win friends among his Protestant classmates. As he observed in his autobiography, the Jews of his village “had no social links to their environment; their contact with non-Jews was limited to business.”⁶ Clearly, sensitivity to the complicated nature of social and commercial relations between Jews and Christians came early to Katz, and would later inform his pioneering studies of medieval and early modern Jewish history (e.g., *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, *Tradition and Crisis*, and *Out of the Ghetto*).

If Magyargencs exemplified a social dynamic that Katz labored to understand in his scholarly work, then Frankfurt am Main represented an important

3. Katz's review of Otto Heller's *Der Untergang des Judentums* was published as “Das untergehende Judentum” in *Nachalath Z'wi* 3 (1933): 219–26, 281–89.

4. Katz, “Historyah ve-historyonim, ḥadashim ke-yeshanim,” *Et laḥkor ve'et lehitbonen: Masa historit 'al darko shel bet Yisrael mi-az tse'eto me-artso ve-'ad shuvo eleha* (Jerusalem: 1998/9), pp. 11–45.

5. *With My Own Eyes*, p. 4.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

variation of that theme. It was there that the tension between two core sensibilities in Katz reached their tautest point: the first, his ongoing commitment to a fully observant, halakhic existence, and the second, his voracious appetite for fields of study, scholarly methods, and languages that fell outside of the traditional Jewish canon.

Before arriving in Frankfurt, Katz became well acquainted with the yeshivah world of Hungary and Slovakia, in whose precincts he traveled from the age of twelve. Over the course of his studies, Katz encountered new trends in Hungarian Orthodoxy calling for increased stringency in ritual observance. Katz's own father was swept up in this current, though the teenage Katz assumed "a firm stand against the new trend, particularly because of its negative attitude toward secular studies."⁷ In fact, it was the pervasiveness of that negative attitude in yeshivah circles that led Katz to make his way to Frankfurt in 1928. Katz had every intention of continuing Talmud study, but he would do so in a setting quite unlike that of Hungary. The Frankfurt yeshivah to which he moved was inspired by the *Torah im derekh erez* philosophy of the nineteenth-century Neo-Orthodox rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch. Although calling for steadfast adherence to the precepts of rabbinic Judaism, the Hirschian philosophy maintained a proud openness to secular literature and culture. At the same time, Rabbi Hirsch insisted on a community of followers separate and distinct from the mainstream Jewish community of Frankfurt. After his death, leadership of the separatist community fell to the hands of his son-in-law, R. Solomon Breuer, who established a yeshivah based on the ideal of *Torah im derekh erez*.

Jacob Katz had encountered nothing like the Hirsch-Breuer community in his previous travels. The community was noteworthy not only for its bourgeois affluence, but also for its dual, and somewhat bewildering, commitments to a fierce intellectualism born of secular learning, on the one hand, and complete segregation from the mainstream Jewish community, on the other. Moreover, in the figure of Dr. Isaac Breuer, son of R. Solomon Breuer, Katz encountered a learned iconoclast who not only ably managed those dual commitments, but served as a model of integrity for Katz.⁸

Consistent with the precepts of the Breuer community, Katz was encouraged to pursue an expansive curriculum of secular studies, including at the university. The major obstacle preventing him from meaningful progress in

7. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

8. It must be noted that Katz, already a budding Zionist, disagreed vigorously with Isaac Breuer's unrelenting opposition to Zionism. Consequently, Katz was explicitly requested not to discuss political matters with R. Breuer's sons. *With My Own Eyes*, p. 67.

this regard was his inadequate mastery of the German language. In order to pass the external matriculation exam required for university admission, Katz had to improve his command of written German. He began to work with another foreign student in the Frankfurt yeshivah, the Moravian-born Baruch Kurzweil, with whom Katz would go on to have a vexing relationship in Israel, culminating in a bitter polemic over the possibility of historical objectivity in 1965.⁹ But back in Frankfurt, Kurzweil was of great assistance to Katz, helping him to achieve a level of German necessary for the matriculation exam.

Shortly thereafter, in 1930, Katz entered the University of Frankfurt. Up to that point, he had covered a great physical and intellectual distance, moving from small-town Hungary to cosmopolitan Frankfurt. In thinking of this journey, one cannot help being struck by the fact that, at almost every turn, Katz demonstrated a stubborn independence of mind that eschewed commonplace assumptions about political or intellectual matters. This trait made him an unusually discerning university student, particularly so for a first-year foreigner with imperfect German. For example, Katz relates his considerable pleasure at studying philosophy with Paul Tillich and Theodor Adorno, but his strong dislike for Max Horkheimer, who, in Katz's eyes, "seemed to lack any inspiration."¹⁰ Katz's attitude was not merely a matter of personal chemistry. Horkheimer presided over Frankfurt's Institut für Sozialforschung, where adepts of the newly emerging Critical Theory attempted to rethink conventional philosophical, political, and cultural categories from a neo-Marxist perspective. Katz's own intellectual curiosity was never drawn to the Frankfurt School, which makes understandable his great reverence for a social theorist of a different stripe, Karl Mannheim. Katz's affinity for Mannheim emanated from their shared Hungarian origins, though Mannheim's background reflected the other, highly assimilated, end of the Hungarian-Jewish spectrum.¹¹ As a young man in Budapest, Mannheim had fallen under the influence of the Marxist theorist Georg Lukacs, but later foreswore his youthful leanings. In Katz's recollection, this act was an essential step in Mannheim's "becom(ing) a sociologist who espoused a method of empirical criticism."¹²

9. See D. N. Myers, "The Scholem-Kurzweil Debate and Modern Jewish Hagiography," *Modern Judaism* 6 (1986): 261-86.

10. *With My Own Eyes*, p. 77.

11. *With My Own Eyes*, p. 78.

12. *With My Own Eyes*, p. 78.

Indeed, Mannheim's commitment to a scientifically grounded empirical criticism attracted the young Katz. By contrast, it was this commitment that drew the critical ire of Max Horkheimer.¹³ Horkheimer attacked Mannheim's objectivist illusions in an essay from 1930, the same year in which both Katz and Mannheim joined the University of Frankfurt. Horkheimer's criticism of Mannheim may well have solidified Jacob Katz's dislike of the former and affinity for the latter, both on the grounds of intellectual disposition and, perhaps, out of a sense of tribal loyalty for his fellow Hungarian. In any event, Katz fell under Mannheim's sway soon after joining his Frankfurt seminar on the historical origins of liberalism. Mannheim had earlier published an important study on the function and varieties of conservative thought (1925); his seminar on liberalism was, according to another student, "an empirically oriented, interdisciplinary" extension of that earlier work.¹⁴ Katz's own task in this seminar was to begin work on a collective project on Jewish assimilation and liberalism. This resulting research was to leave a deep imprint on his intellectual development. Indeed, the critical attitude he developed to modern liberalism became one of the conceptual pillars of his Frankfurt dissertation, "The Origin and Ideology of Jewish Assimilation in Germany."¹⁵

Apart from his encounter with Mannheim, Katz found further inspiration in the work of Hans Weil, another Frankfurt sociologist of Jewish origin. Before beginning to teach in the Department of Education at Frankfurt, Weil had written a doctoral dissertation at Göttingen on the origins of the German ideal of *Bildung* in 1927.¹⁶ The dissertation sought to trace the emergence of

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13. See Max Horkheimer, "Ein neuer Ideologiebegriff?" *Grünbergs Archiv* 15:1 (1930) and the helpful discussion in Martin Jay, "The Frankfurt School's Critique of Karl Mannheim and the Sociology of Knowledge," in his *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America* (New York: 1986), p. 70.
 14. See the unattributed reference in the intellectual biography by David Kettler and Volker Meja, *Karl Mannheim and the Crisis of Liberalism: The Secret of These New Times* (New Brunswick, N.J.: 1995), p. 132. Mannheim jointly offered the seminar with the economist Adolf Löwe, and drew a diverse array of students and colleagues.
 15. Written in 1933, this text was published in Frankfurt in 1935, a point to which we shall return later.
 16. Weil's dissertation was published in 1930 as *Die Entstehung des deutschen Bildungsprinzips*; I have relied on the second edition with a new preface published in New York in 1967. Weil left Germany for Italy in 1937, and then settled in the United States in 1940. Unfortunately, little is known of Weil's subsequent life in the United States.
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the ideal of *Bildung* out of German pietism in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Rooted in the dual values of worldliness (*Weltlichkeit*) and inwardness (*Innigkeit*), this ideal found its chief expression in an elite cohort of German intellectuals, a *Geistelite*, that served as a vital instrument of transition between the traditional nobility and the new meritocratic bourgeoisie (*Bildungsbürgertum*).¹⁷ In tracing the path of this *Geistelite*, Weil melded intellectual history à la Dilthey with Weberian sociological tools. Thus, his intent was not to delve into the earliest chronological roots of the *Bildung* principle, but rather to attempt a synchronic study “of the interplay of individual intellectual concepts on one hand and socio-cultural constellations and receptivity on the other.”¹⁸ As we shall see, Jacob Katz was much taken by the subject and method of Weil’s book in his own dissertation. In fact, he later remembered Weil as “my guide to the structure of German society within which the first stages of Jewish assimilation had occurred.”¹⁹

In general, the intellectual culture of Frankfurt, in which Jacob Katz found himself from 1928, was a cauldron of ferment, particularly in the areas of sociology and social theory. With the Critical Theorists, on one hand, and Mannheim, on the other, sociology was subjected to new and innovative approaches, building upon the earlier efforts of Max Weber to place that field at the pinnacle of the *Geisteswissenschaften* (human sciences). Katz threw himself into the swirling theoretical channels of Frankfurt, tending to the more conservative political and methodological inclinations of Mannheim. This tendency is on display in his first published article, in which Katz used his recently acquired sociological prowess to attack Otto Heller’s *Der Untergang des Judentums*—a book described by its author as “a historical-materialist presentation of the overarching problem of the Jewish question.”²⁰ Katz rejected Heller’s assertion that the Jews were an economic caste best suited for a primitive economic order—and hence destined to assimilate into modern society given their vanishing economic utility. Such claims of the inexorability of Jewish assimilation were deeply misguided. Contra Heller, Katz declared that even in the most extreme modern case: “There is no fall of Jewry in Germany. There are only (individual) fallen Jews.”²¹

17. Weil, pp. 5, 210ff.

18. Weil, p. viii.

19. *With My Own Eyes*, p. 79.

20. Heller, *Der Untergang des Judentums* (Vienna and Berlin: 1931), p. 5.

21. “Das untergehende Judentum,” 288.

Notwithstanding that judgment, Katz chose to devote his early research precisely to the *movement* of Jewish assimilation in the late eighteenth century. In retrospect, we notice the convergence of several important intellectual vectors marking Katz's interest: his own personal experience of Jewish-gentile relations in Hungary and Germany; the provocative and unsatisfactory theories of Jewish group identity advanced by Heller and others (e.g., the earlier sociologist Werner Sombart); and the inquiry by sociologists such as Mannheim and Weil into the origins of German society at the cusp of Enlightenment.

We must also mention another factor that explains the salience and extraordinary sensitivity of Katz's chosen topic. On the eve of and during the Nazi rise to power, Jewish assimilation had become more than a matter of mere academic or communal concern. Rather, it was a matter of official state deliberation in an era in which Jews were beginning to be segregated from "Aryans." Because of the delicate nature of his subject, Katz was unable to find a publishing house (including the renowned Schocken house) to print his dissertation, with the sole exception of the David Droller firm associated with the Breuer community.²² For a similar reason, Katz's nominal advisor at Frankfurt, the historian Georg Künzel, made a curious request. When Katz presented a complete draft of his dissertation to him in the spring of 1934—after Jewish professors, including Karl Mannheim, had been summarily dismissed from the university—Künzel asked that Katz add a disclaimer that made it clear that, despite his research on the origins of Jewish assimilation into German society, he *did not* regard assimilation as "the solution to the Jewish question."²³

The disclaimer that Katz included in the preface to his dissertation made note of the fact that "the historic turn of 1933 had transformed the scholarly question (of assimilation) into a matter of great significance." Among other momentous effects, this turn signaled to Katz the end of the very process of Jewish assimilation into German society. But rather than facilitate dispassionate study of this stunted process, the "turn of 1933" invariably pushed Katz toward "an extra-scientific point of view."²⁴ Who could blame Katz, the devoted Jew and astute observer of Jewish life, for his strong interest in the tortuous path of German-Jewish integration? Still, it is quite striking to see a young Hungarian-Jewish doctoral student proceed with work on such a

22. *With My Own Eyes*, p. 95.

23. *With My Own Eyes*, p. 93.

24. *Die Entstehung der Judenassimilation in Deutschland und deren Ideologie* (Frankfurt: 1935), "Vorwort."

topic in Germany through 1934 and in an institutional setting singularly hostile to Jews. Was it the folly of youth? Was it Katz's status as a foreigner navigating between, but not fully at home in, parallel worlds, that of the Frankfurt neo-Orthodox and the Frankfurt sociologists? Or was it his confidence, borne of a firm Zionist faith, that he would imminently depart Germany for Palestine, and hence avoid both assimilation and its foil, anti-Semitism? Without dismissing any of these possibilities, we should not neglect another factor: Katz's intellectual audacity, a quality masked beneath his quite demeanor, but present from his earliest days as a yeshivah student.

II.

Sixty-five years after its publication, Jacob Katz's dissertation on the origins of Jewish assimilation hardly seems radical. On the contrary, it is rather commonplace to identify the late-eighteenth-century *Maskilim* as the transitional figures between tradition and modernity, as the first cohort of Jews to participate in a "neutral" (or later "semi-neutral") society.²⁵ Yet, the very vocabulary of a "neutral society"—and, moreover, the close attention to the social processes that underlay it—that have figured so prominently in subsequent scholarship received an initial airing in Katz's dissertation. Likewise, the sociological method Katz employed blazed a novel path in scholarly accounts of the modern Jewish experience. This method, with which Katz became acquainted in Frankfurt, had been refined over years of struggle between sociology and history, the latter of which had exerted a dominant influence on German humanistic scholarship through the *fin-de-siècle*. It may be helpful to examine briefly this disciplinary contest, since Katz's own method developed as a reaction to existing historical scholarship.

When Katz arrived in Frankfurt, an air of malaise had been hanging over the enterprise of history for decades. Even before the historian Ernst Troeltsch declared a crisis of historicism in 1922, the discipline of history had come under attack from at least two competing camps: theologians and philosophers, who decried the lack of holism and interpretive naïveté of historians; and empiricists of various sorts who bemoaned the lack of scientific rigor in historical method. Concurrent with this latter critique was the emergence of new modes of social scientific analysis—the *Sozialwissenschaften* (as distinct from the *Geisteswissenschaften*)—in German intellectual circles.

By the turn of the century, historians began to confront these new analytical modes. In one celebrated case, the German historian Karl Lamprecht attempted to transform history from its idiographic orientation, based on the

25. See the various references in *Die Entstehung der Judenassimilation*, pp. 25, 28, 32ff.

description of a single event, into a scientific enterprise whose goal was an historical typology drawn from a series of individual data.²⁶ Lamprecht was disturbed by the “micrology” of historical scholarship—its tendency to focus on the minutiae rather than the large structures of history.²⁷ His impulse to overcome the hyper-specialization of historical research, though challenged by many fellow historians, was shared by historically minded sociologists like Max Weber and Werner Sombart, who came to prominence in the first decades of the twentieth century. Weber set a new standard for theoretical sophistication and historical breadth in the emerging sociological discipline. In particular, his use of the “ideal type,” rather than the individual datum, as a basic unit of scholarly investigation sought to lift sociology above the atomized state of history. At the same time, Weber’s work introduced another sea change into the study of the past. Through books such as *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, *Ancient Judaism*, and *Economy and Society*, Weber redirected the focus of research away from political and diplomatic developments toward economic, social, and cultural factors.²⁸

The impulse to focus on larger social structures rather than particular historical details became a defining feature of sociological research. And yet, in seeking to differentiate their discipline from history, Weber and succeeding generations of sociologists were not anxious to dismiss the contextualizing work of the historian. For instance, Jacob Katz’s own teacher, Karl Mannheim, recognized the importance of historical contextualization in his analysis of major ideological types (liberalism, conservatism, and socialism) that inform modern Western society. Moreover, sensing that the attack on

26. See, for example, Lamprecht, “Die geschichtswissenschaftlichen Probleme der Gegenwart,” *Die Zukunft* 17 (1896): 300–11, as well as Horst Walter Blanke’s discussion in *Historiographieggeschichte als Historik* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: 1991), pp. 397–98.

27. Blanke, p. 405.

28. See Guenther Roth’s chapter, “Duration and Rationalization: Fernand Braudel and Max Weber,” in Roth and Wolfgang Schluchter, *Max Weber’s Vision of History* (Berkeley: 1979), p. 172. It should be noted that Weber’s direction was not unique to Germany. In neighboring France, a debate was raging in the first decade of the twentieth century between defenders of the historical old guard and upstart sociologists. The latter, taking aim against what they saw as “German fact-grubbing,” sought a more systematic scholarly analysis of past and present society. One of the chief representatives of this position, Emile Durkheim, called for sociology to supplant history as the chief method of investigation of the “human sciences,” with the latter consigned to mere fact-gathering. See Carole Fink, *Marc Bloch: A Life in History* (New York: 1989), pp. 29–33.

historicism had gone too far in his day, Mannheim wrote a long theoretical essay in 1924 underscoring both the ubiquity and virtue of historicism.²⁹ At this point, the gap between sociological and historical method, which had been widening since the turn of the century, began to close.

One of the hallmarks of Jacob Katz's mature career was his ability to bridge the methods of history and sociology. And yet, as a young scholar in Frankfurt, Katz was intent on challenging the hegemony of history, particularly the underlying assumptions of what he called "liberal (Jewish) historiography."³⁰ In his dissertation, Katz set out to rebuff previous historians', particularly Heinrich Graetz's, anxious embrace of Moses Mendelssohn as the harbinger of progress after centuries of decline. Seven years after Salo Baron's famous "Ghetto and Emancipation" (though without any hint of knowledge of it), Katz echoed Baron's rejection of a post-Enlightenment Manicheism whereby the pre-modern world of darkness was set against the modern era of light.³¹ Thus, Katz noted early in his eighty-page dissertation that "(o)ne cannot sustain the claim of intellectual stagnation in pre-assimilatory times." To do so was to reveal a strong bias against rabbinic culture.³² Katz's own intimate acquaintance with the textual sources of pre-modern Judaism, as well as his ongoing commitment to religious Orthodoxy, led him to regard with suspicion the triumphalist view of modernity characteristic of German-Jewish liberalism.

As noted earlier, Katz's critical reserve toward the modern liberal project owed a good deal to his encounter with Karl Mannheim. Katz began to study with Mannheim in a seminar on liberalism just after Mannheim had published *Ideology and Utopia* (1929). In that work, Mannheim does not appear

29. See Mannheim's analysis in "Historismus," *Wissenssoziologie* (Berlin: 1924), pp. 246–307, or the English version, "Historicism," reprinted in Mannheim, *Essays in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: 1952). See also Henk Woldring's discussion of Mannheim's essay (acknowledging its debt to Hegel) in his *Karl Mannheim: The Development of His Thought* (Assen/Maastricht: 1986), pp. 103–19.

30. *Die Entstehung*, p. 9. For Katz, the emblem of this historiographic tradition was Heinrich Graetz, for whom Moses Mendelssohn marked the advent of Jewish assimilation into German society. Although Katz deliberately veered from the path of previous historians, he also assumed a course quite distinct from Jewish scholars operating under the banner of sociology at the beginning of the century. One thinks immediately of Arthur Ruppin with his statistically oriented analysis of contemporary Jewry.

31. Salo Baron, "Ghetto and Emancipation," *The Menorah Journal* (June 1928): 515–26.

32. *Die Entstehung der Judenassimilation*, p. 10.

as a one-dimensional anti-liberal, but rather as a critic of the lifeless abstraction of idealism, which he cast as liberalism's chief philosophical expression.³³ Following his teacher, Katz was not an indiscriminate critic of liberalism. For instance, he did not believe that Jewish assimilation, nurtured by liberal ideas, prompted total "severance from the historical religion" of Judaism. But it did produce a gradual loosening of attachment to traditional ritual practices, as well as the characteristic state of social ambiguity of the modern Western Jew.³⁴

Katz's unsentimental view of modern Jewish liberalism, and particularly of liberal Jewish historiography, was an important feature of his evolving intellectual personality. And yet, what makes Katz interesting is the presence of another, radically innovative, side to him. Though not yet armed with an articulate rationale, Katz attempted in his dissertation to move definitively away from an historical method rooted in what the French sociologist François Simiand once labelled *l'histoire événementielle* (event-based history). Katz would provide an articulate rationale for this method thirty years later in a well-known essay, "The Concept of Social History and Its Possible Use in Jewish Historical Research." There, he asserted that for both the sociologist and social historian, "ignoring details" was an essential requirement.³⁵ Rather than focus on the individual detail, both had "to observe the structure and functional efficiency of a certain society" by focusing on the general, representative, or typical features of that society.³⁶

It was this methodological principle that guided Katz already in his dissertation. As against previous practitioners of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, Katz eschewed the individual for the general, the intellectual for the social, the stark rupture for the subtle shift. Thus, in seeking to identify the origins of Jewish assimilation in Germany, Katz consciously ignored the efforts of single individuals in penetrating the surrounding intellectual culture. By contrast,

33. The first substantial piece of what would become *Ideologie und Utopie*, including an extended discussion of liberalism, was published in 1929. See Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, translated by Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (San Diego: 1985), pp. 220–22. See also the discussion in Kettler and Meja in *Karl Mannheim and the Crisis of Liberalism*, pp. 15–25.

34. *Die Entstehung der Judenassimilation*, p. 49.

35. Katz, "The Concept of Social History and Its Possible Use in Jewish Historical Research," originally published in *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 3 (1956), and republished in Katz, *Emancipation and Assimilation: Studies in Modern Jewish History* (Westmead, England: 1972), p. 178.

36. "The Concept of Social History," pp. 180, 182.

he focused on the conditions in which a social cohort resituated itself outside of an exclusively Jewish world. In this approach, Katz consciously drew upon Hans Weil's work on the origins of *Bildung*, adapting the key notion of a *Geistelite* to the late-eighteenth-century Jewish context.³⁷ Similar to Weil's argument in the case of German *Aufklärer*, Katz was intent on identifying the social conditions in which a Jewish *Geistelite* emerged.³⁸

The challenge for Katz was to identify the point of "synthesis of Jewishness and the *Zeitgeist*." It was at that point that a "neutral society" or "third sphere" (as he later called it) took rise.³⁹ Unlike the historian Selma Stern, whose work he admired and quoted amply, Katz did not believe that this point was reached in the person of the early-eighteenth-century Court Jew, Jud Süß. Rather, it came in the midst of a broad structural change in German society. Katz's sociological perspective led him to focus on a number of developments marking this structural change: first, a previously closed host group demonstrated a new openness to share its way of life and thought; and second, a recipient group was prepared to embrace this new way of life and thought, including language, dress, and food.⁴⁰ These developments were accompanied by a more or less coherent ideology of change that reached fruition in the *Haskalah* movement. In Katz's scheme, this mix of structural and ideological change was reached in the late eighteenth century, when a Jewish social cohort was at last able to find its way into a non-Jewish cultural universe. Emblematic of this moment were figures such as Gottsched Gumpertz, Markus Herz, Moses Mendelssohn, Naphtali Herz Wessely, and David Friedlander. In a telling illustration of the new social world that this cohort now inhabited, Katz quoted Mendelssohn's salutation in a letter to Herder: "Moses the Man writes to Herder the Man, not the Jew to his Superintendent."⁴¹

37. *Die Entstehung der Judenassimilation*, p. 32.

38. Katz held that, among historians of his day, Selma Stern shared his appreciation of Jewish assimilation as a "slow process," especially in her *Der preußische Staat und die Juden* (Berlin: 1925). See *Die Entstehung der Judenassimilation*, pp. 12–13, 25.

39. *Die Entstehung der Judenassimilation*, p. 27. For a discussion of the "third sphere" that mediated between established Jewish and Christian spheres, see Katz, *Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages*, translated by B. D. Cooperman (New York: 1993), p. 222.

40. *Die Entstehung der Judenassimilation*, p. 8.

41. *Die Entstehung der Judenassimilation*, p. 50.

Despite this citation, Katz had little enthusiasm for Mendelssohn. At one point, he suggested that Mendelssohn's view of Judaism paved "the theoretical ground for the renunciation of the religious law."⁴² It may well be that Katz's antipathy for Mendelssohn was exacerbated in the period in which he wrote his dissertation—at the advent of the Nazi reign, in which the Mendelssohnian vision of cultural ecumenism seemed so defeated. Or it may simply be that Katz objected to the overemphasis of previous historians in depicting Mendelssohn as a great prophet of change rather than as a representative figure at the crossroad of structural and ideological change in Jewish history. This latter idea is advanced in the closing chapters of *Tradition and Crisis*, first published in 1957, where Katz again links his vision of historical change to the convergence of social and ideological forces. In that seminal work, Katz affirms that the crystallization of a Jewish intellectual/spiritual elite around Enlightenment principles signaled the culmination of an important social transformation. No longer did Jew and Gentile interact with one another purely on a utilitarian basis. The new values of "enlightenment came to serve as a basis for social grouping" such that Jew could meet Gentile as an equal in intellectual conversation.⁴³ Katz would later elaborate on, and somewhat modify, this thesis in *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of the Jewish Emancipation* (1973), which offers a book-length treatment of the Jewish *Geistelite*.⁴⁴

The focus on the mix of social and ideological factors also shaped Katz's intriguing study of Jewish-Christian relations in medieval Europe: *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (1961). There, he repeatedly highlighted the tension and inevitable reconciliation between long-standing halakhic norms and dynamic social conditions. Although others have noted Katz's innovative use of rabbinic sources in these studies, it is important to emphasize a different point here: namely, Katz's persistent quest to identify the nexus between social change and ideological warrant—or in the particular case at hand, between "law and practice."⁴⁵ In a more general sense, we may say that this commit-

42. *Die Entstehung der Judenassimilation*, p. 68.

43. Katz, *Tradition and Crisis*, p. 221.

44. Katz, *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation* (Cambridge: 1973). It is in this work that Katz modifies his notion of a "neutral society" to that of a "semi-neutral" society. *Ibid.*, pp. 50–54, 231.

45. Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (New York: 1961), pp. 28–30. See *Out of the Ghetto*, as well as two studies that explore the historical dynamism of halakhah: *The "Shabbes Goy": A Study in Halakhic Flexibility* (Philadelphia: 1989), and the recent collec-

ment to embed ideas or ideology in a rich social context stands as a hallmark of Jacob Katz's scholarly approach—as well as an important shift away from many of his historiographical forebears, for whom ideas or laws stood sovereign over social activity.

III.

Jacob Katz did not possess the classical etiological impulse of the historian, who seeks to excavate the earliest-known traces of a later phenomenon. That is not to say that Katz was uninterested in origins. However, his excavations, in good sociological fashion, were lateral. Like Hans Weil, he sought to trace the point at which discrete social elites, armed with distinctive norms, overlapped; at that point, innovation and transformation occurred. Such an approach was largely unknown to previous students of Jewish history, even Simon Dubnow, who issued a call in 1925 for a “sociological corrective” of earlier *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.⁴⁶ As Katz would later observe, Dubnow fundamentally misunderstood sociological method as its foremost practitioner, Max Weber, had intended it. Dubnow's “organological” approach to the Jewish past, which assumed the indivisibility of the “national body,” was “an almost perfect barrier against the sociological approach.”⁴⁷

One of the main tasks of the sociologist or social historian, in Katz's view, was to mark the spot at which an individual is no longer a mere individual, but part of an incipient movement. It was this criterion that led him to minimize the import of Jud Süß and emphasize figures such as Markus Herz, Moses Mendelssohn, Naphtali Herz Wessely, and David Friedlander. These *Maskilim* represented an “open group” prepared to enter the social mainstream by surrendering a number of particularist features of traditional Jewish life, such as the use of the Yiddish language and the predominant focus on talmudic study.⁴⁸ In so doing, they symbolized a drift away from traditional communal life that was accentuated in the next generation, when German Jews moved further, though not totally, from the distinctive *Lebensformen* (social norms) of Judaism.⁴⁹

tion of studies, *Divine Law in Human Hands: Case Studies in Halakhic Flexibility* (Jerusalem: 1998).

46. Katz challenged Dubnow's use of the term “sociological” in “The Concept of Social History,” p. 189, n. 27.
47. “The Concept of Social History,” pp. 189–190, n. 27.
48. *Die Entstehung der Judenassimilation*, p. 8.
49. *Die Entstehung der Judenassimilation*, p. 7.

A later example of Katz's sociological, rather than etiological, search for origins can be seen in his well-known article from 1950 on the "forerunners of Zionism" (*mevasre ha-Ziyonut*). In contrast to previous scholars of Zionism, including the Jerusalem historian, Ben-Zion Dinur, Katz was not interested in exhuming vague and scattered allusions to Zion from centuries past.⁵⁰ Consistent with his method, he saw the emergence of Jewish nationalist sentiments as part of an incremental social process that commenced with the late-eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Whereas Mendelssohn and his contemporaries appear at the beginning of the quest for emancipation, the "forerunners of Zionism" appeared at the culmination.⁵¹ What distinguished these figures—Rabbi Yehudah Alkalai, Rabbi Z. H. Kalischer, and Moses Hess—from any other Jew who had ever conjured up the idea of a return to Zion was not their ideational similarity or occasional communication with one another, but a number of other properties: first, the "common marginal position" they held within their respective national and Jewish societies;⁵² and second, the impetus provided by this position not only to call for the return to Zion, but to search for an appropriate social vehicle to carry that idea forward.

Katz's attempts at clarifying the term "forerunners of Zion" were not altogether successful. It was not simple to make a convincing case for a cohesive social group of "forerunners" from the 1850s or 1860s, given their geographic dispersion and cultural diversity.⁵³ Nevertheless, Katz's interest in revisiting the idea of "forerunners" reflects his desire to move beyond a one-dimensional analysis of ideas to a more textured sociological reading of the origins of Jewish nationalism. This kind of reading, in turn, led him to grasp the tension-filled, dialectical nature of the social processes he was exploring. For instance, in the case of Jewish nationalism, Katz labored to show how the "forerunners" both accepted and rejected elements of the traditional,

50. See Katz's critique of previous scholars of Zionism's *Vorgeschichte* in "The Forerunners of Zion," translated and republished in *idem, Jewish Emancipation and Self-Emancipation* (Philadelphia: 1986), pp. 104–6.

51. See Katz's "The Forerunners of Zionism," pp. 110–11, as well as "The Jewish National Movement: A Sociological Analysis," also reprinted in *Jewish Emancipation and Self-Emancipation*, p. 99.

52. Katz, "The Forerunners of Zion," p. 115.

53. Yosef Salmon has noted that Katz modified his view of Kalischer's and Alkalai's role as "forerunners" in subsequent writings. See Salmon's essay on Katz's notion of Zionist precursors, "The Historical Imagination of Jacob Katz: On the Origins of Jewish Nationalism," *Jewish Social Studies* 5:3 (1999): 164.

divinely inspired view of a return to Zion.⁵⁴ And in the case of Jewish assimilation, he sought to demonstrate that the impulse toward social integration neither spelled the complete disappearance of Jewish ritual observance nor was absent in those who defined themselves as Orthodox or “Torah-true” Jews. It is a measure of Katz’s intellectual range and openness that he wrote with great insight about the opposing ends of the spectrum of modern Jewish identity, the assimilationist and Orthodox, and yet confounded conventional assumptions regarding both.

His ability and urge to do so may well extend back to his encounter in Frankfurt with two distinct universes—the sociological circles dominated by assimilated Jews and the neo-Orthodox community inspired by Samson Raphael Hirsch. An illuminating reminder of Katz’s mediation between these two worlds comes in an early review he wrote of a book entitled *Heimkehr ins Judentum*. Written by the Frankfurt-born Simon Schwab, later to become an important rabbinic presence in the Breuer community of Washington Heights, this book represents a youthful turn away from the Hirschian ideal of *Torah im derekh erez*. Rather than seek to accommodate secular learning to Torah-true Judaism, Schwab argued that the Hirschian principle was no longer valid. In its time, that principle was “a necessary evil, halakhically speaking, a הוראת שעה (a temporary decree).”⁵⁵ Now, however, the force of acculturation was so powerful as to require its renunciation, and concomitantly, a return back (*Heimkehr*) to an insular Jewish world dominated by “Lernen.” Personifying this “return” himself, Schwab had left the confines of the Frankfurt community to study in the Eastern European yeshivot of Telz and Mir.

Having travelled in an opposite geographic and cultural direction, Jacob Katz found Schwab’s proposal to be little more than “dilettantism” (*Dilettantismus*).⁵⁶ Writing in the journal of the Breuer community, *Nachalath Z’wi*, Katz offered a spirited defense of the principle of *Torah im derekh erez*. But in doing so, he expounded a notion that resonated beyond the confines of that limited circle. Not only was it naïve to assume that modern Judaism, Orthodoxy included, could remain insulated from the cultural currents swirling around it. But the entire history of Judaism was full of—indeed, animated by—encounters with the surrounding Gentile culture.⁵⁷ To cease contact with this culture, as Simon Schwab seemed to advocate, was a form of atavism.

54. “The Forerunners of Zion,” p. 111.

55. “Umkehr oder Rückkehr,” *Nachalath Z’wi* 5 (1935): 92.

56. “Umkehr oder Rückkehr,” p. 96.

57. This is an adumbration of Gerson Cohen’s more unabashed position in *The*

Katz's harsh view of Schwab was rooted in his strong personal conviction that confrontation with a modern secular world and adherence to Jewish ritual commandments were not mutually exclusive. At the same time, Katz's vision of Orthodoxy as a product of modernity—no less than assimilation—developed into a firm commitment to integrate the study of “traditionalist” currents into modern Jewish history.⁵⁸ Although Katz readily acceded that secularization “affected the role played by religion generally,” it did not “succeed in ousting religion nor in effacing the particular characteristics” of Judaism. On the contrary, it altered the visage of traditional Judaism to the point of creating new denominational camps, including Orthodoxy.⁵⁹ Hirschian Judaism, with its unapologetic allegiance to secular study, was one result of that reconfiguration. But so too were other forms of Orthodoxy, which, though far less open to secular study, still defined themselves in response to modern cultural and intellectual norms—as Katz showed in his highly empathic study of the Hatam Sofer.⁶⁰

Through such insights, Jacob Katz came to understand that tradition and modernity need not be seen as polar opposites. Rather, they inhabited an historical continuum full of dialectical inversions.⁶¹ Katz's own appreciation

Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History (Commencement Address/Hebrew Teachers College), (Brookline, Mass.: 1966).

58. For a prominent example of this trend, see *Ha-halakhah be-metsar: mikhsholim 'al derekh ha-ortodoksyah be-hithavutah* (Jerusalem: 1992).
59. See Katz's 1968 essay, “Judaism and Christianity against the Background of Modern Secularism,” reprinted in *Emancipation and Assimilation*, p. 125. Katz's student, Mordechai Breuer, offered an extended elaboration of this vision of Orthodoxy in *Modernity within Tradition: The Social History of Orthodox Jewry in Imperial Germany*, translated by Elizabeth Petuchowski (New York: 1992).
60. In this study, Katz argued that the “Hatam Sofer did not negate the value of engagement in ‘external wisdom’ (secular studies),” but drew the line at the point of philosophical inquiry. See “Towards a Biography of the Hatam Sofer,” in *Divine Law in Human Hands*, p. 432. This point is further illustrated by Katz's student, Michael Silber, in his discussion of the descendents of the Hatam Sofer among Hungarian Ultra-Orthodox. Ultra-Orthodoxy, as Silber understands it, is “not an unchanged and unchanging remnant of pre-modern, traditional Jewish society, but as much a child of modernity and change as any of its ‘modern’ rivals.” See Michael K. Silber, “The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy: The Invention of a Tradition,” in Jack Wertheimer, ed., *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era* (New York: 1992), p. 24.
61. For a sense of this continuum, see Katz's distinction between traditional and modern societies in his 1960 article, “*Hevrah mesortit ve-hevrah modernit*,” reprinted in Katz's *Le'umiyut yehudit* (Jerusalem: 1983), pp. 155–66.

of this dialectical quality is evident in the titles of some of his most important monographs: *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, *Tradition and Crisis*, and *Jewish Emancipation and Self-Emancipation*.

What emerges from these books is the sense that historical change occurred less in time than space. That is, change did not result from the sequential supplanting of one event by another, but from a series of subtle social encounters within a given milieu. Even when Katz illumined these encounters through use of ideal typical models, they did not become mere swatches of stasis. His penchant for the dialectical would not permit this.

The novelty of Katz's sociological sensibility makes understandable his exclusion from the Hebrew University for a decade and a half (until 1949). For his outlook stood in sharp contrast to—even represented a critique of—the archive-based historiography of the University's Jewish historians, Yitzhak Baer and Ben-Zion Dinur.⁶² Given the forcefulness and consistency with which Katz presented his views, it is no surprise that two of the major disciples of Baer and Dinur in Jerusalem, Shmuel Ettinger and Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, felt compelled to defend the legacy of their masters by attacking the bold methodological tack taken by Katz in *Tradition and Crisis*.

And yet, over time, Katz's persistence, as well as the shifting winds of historical study, led to a new situation. He eventually gained acceptance in the Hebrew University, assuming important administrative posts and cultivating disciples within and without. In his wake, Katz's students have made important contributions to the study of "traditionalism" and Orthodoxy, as well as assimilation, in modern Jewish history.⁶³ Moreover, Katz's views of Jewish-Christian encounters in medieval times paved the way for studies of intercommunal relations that did not rest on theological animus.⁶⁴ Likewise, his pioneering use of halakhic sources considerably expanded the canvas of Jewish history, adding important and neglected dimensions to the perspective of his predecessors.⁶⁵

62. See Myers, *Re-inventing the Jewish Past*, pp. 109–50.

63. Among the prominent students of Katz who have contributed to clarification of these terms are Jacob Toury, Mordechai Breuer, Immanuel Etkes, Israel Bartal, Michael Silber, David Ellenson, and Haym Soloveitchik.

64. I am thinking here primarily of Yisrael Yuval, whose controversial article on Jewish attitudes of vengeance and their absorption by medieval Christians, acknowledged Katz's *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* as "the most comprehensive and important study of Jewish attitudes towards Christianity." See Yuval, "Hanakam vaha-kelalah, ha-dat vaha-'alilah," *Zion* 58 (1993): 33, n. 1.

65. For an early appreciation of Katz's use of Halakhic sources, see Isadore Twersky's review in *Jewish Social Studies* (old series) 21 (1959), especially pp.

Few if any of Katz's disciples have replicated the sweep of his historical reconstruction. For that matter, few possessed the intimate familiarity with two discrete bodies of knowledge that enabled such a sweep. Effortlessly moving between the sea of the Talmud and the currents of modern European history, Katz ultimately completed a task that seemed at odds with his formative scholarly calling. That is, his early training prompted him to reject the narrative reductionism of previous Jewish historians. But he ended up producing a thickly textured *narrative* of Jewish social history that extended from the medieval period (*Exclusiveness and Tolerance*) through the early modern (*Tradition and Crisis*) to the modern (*Out of the Ghetto* and *From Prejudice to Destruction*).

This narrative reconstruction constitutes a unique—and ironic—achievement in twentieth-century Jewish historiography. In light of the marginal methodological and institutional position he occupied at the outset of his career, it is no small wonder that Katz became, by the end of his life, the most venerated Jewish historian of his age. Curiously, at both points in time, the historical discipline was facing a crisis of faith—in interwar Europe, as well as in late-twentieth-century Israel. In the first instance, Katz joined other young intellectuals in challenging the hegemony of historicism; in the latter, Katz sought to beat back the advances of “post-Zionist” scholars who questioned the conceptual foundations of Israeli historiography. In both cases, Katz proved to be an energetic, self-reflective, and often contrarian scholar. In fact, we might profitably conclude by calling Jacob Katz a conservative revolutionary—not in the same sense as the Weimar intellectuals who sought a third way between the paths of socialism and fascism.⁶⁶ Rather, it was Katz's constant mediation between the poles of tradition and modernity, as well as of assimilation and Orthodoxy, that calls this term to mind. Likewise, it was his early rejection of the tenets of “liberal Jewish historiography,” paired with his implementation of a bold new methodological regime for the study of the Jewish past, that merits this designation. And it is this dual legacy that ensures Katz a prized place in the annals of twentieth-century Jewish scholarship.

249–51. Katz's student, Haym Soloveitchik, elaborated on Katz's use of these sources in “Can Halakhic Texts Talk History?” *AJS Review* 3 (1978): 52–196 and *Shu"t ke-makor histori* (Jerusalem: 1990).

66. On the conservative revolutionaries, see Roger Woods, *The Conservative Revolution in the Weimar Republic* (New York: 1996).