



## Germans into Jews: Remaking the Jewish Social Body in Weimar Germany

Sharon Gillerman, Stanford University Press, 2009

**G**ermans into Jews turns to an often overlooked and misunderstood period of German and Jewish history – the years between the world wars. While it has been assumed that the Jewish community in Germany was in decline during the Weimar Republic, Sharon Gillerman demonstrates that Weimar Jews sought to rejuvenate and reconfigure their community, as a means of both strengthening the German nation and creating a more expansive and autonomous Jewish entity within the German state. These ambitious projects to increase fertility, expand welfare, and strengthen the family transcended the ideological and religious divisions that have traditionally characterized Jewish communal life. Integrating Jewish history, German history, gender history, and social history, this book highlights the experimental and contingent nature of efforts by Weimar Jews to reassert a new Jewish particularism while simultaneously reinforcing Jews’ commitment to Germanness.

In 1929, four years before Hitler would assume the chancellorship of Germany, Siddy Wronsky, a founding figure in German social

work and leading Jewish social reformer, warned her co-religionists of the impending catastrophe facing German Jewry. In her opening remarks at a conference on Jewish population policy, her words bore a prophetic tone, warning of the increasingly acute “danger of extermination or atrophy of those already born and yet unborn.” Rather than predicting the extermination of the Jews at the hands of a genocidal regime, however, Wronsky aimed at drawing attention to the wounds of the Jewish social body inflicted by the twin processes of modernization and assimilation and the broader social and economic crises of the Weimar Republic. Wronsky urged Jewish leaders to tend the Jewish population as the body of a people, whose “life-germ” was mortally threatened by the “unhealthy” social, political, and economic conditions of the postwar era. ...

While Wronsky approached the task of improving the Jewish population as a Zionist, Weimar Jews held competing visions for potential social remedies as well as the ultimate appearance of a reinvigorated Jewish community. Would a revitalized Jewish entity in Germany resemble a densely textured ethnic component of the German nation or its own nation? Would it embody an expansion of Liberal Jewish religious values or create an altogether new kind of Jew? For their part, non-orthodox and non-Zionist Liberal Jews regularly employed such terms as *Gemeinschaft*, which, by the 1920s, already implied a community bound by organic ties. Moving away from a notion of the Jewish collectivity defined strictly in the liberal sense of an assemblage of autonomous individual citizens, Liberal Jews increasingly invoked the notions of the community in its totality (*Gesamtheit*, *Volksganze*) bound by fate (*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*). By contrast, but in some respects parallel to Liberal

Jews, Zionists tended to refer to their ideal Jewish community in terms that directly paralleled the German national ideal of “national community” (*Volksgemeinschaft*) or “national body” (*Volkskörper*).

Though differences between Zionist and non-Zionist visions of the Jewish future certainly remained, these new articulations of community nevertheless bore a surprising degree of similarity. To capture this commonality, I use the term social body to include the variety of visions Jews held for a new kind of community that bound the individual body in dynamic relation with a larger social one. Through organic metaphors, reformers across the religious divide understood a society that functioned as a social organism, with needs and interests that extended well beyond those of the atomized individual. Equally important, they linked the health of the individual body with that of the Jewish community. Thus, in contrast to what one historian of Weimar Jews has labeled the “divisive landscape of German Jewry,” the notion of a Jewish social body calls attention to a heretofore neglected dimension of German Jewish self-perception: that among a degree of ideological disunity, there existed an overarching unity of intent not merely to relieve social distress but to reorder Jewish society and manage it as a coherent whole.

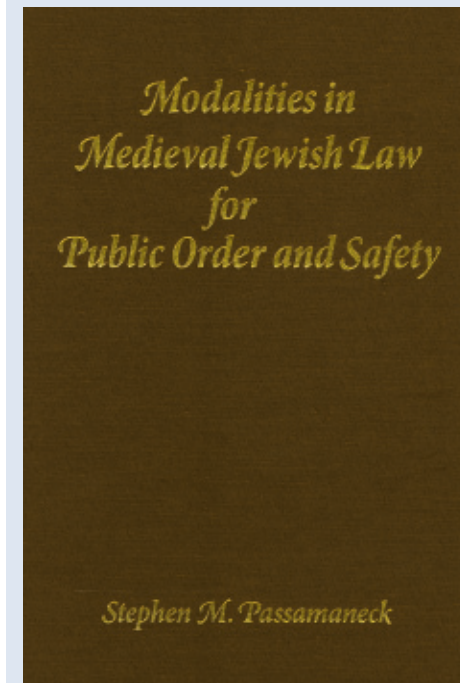
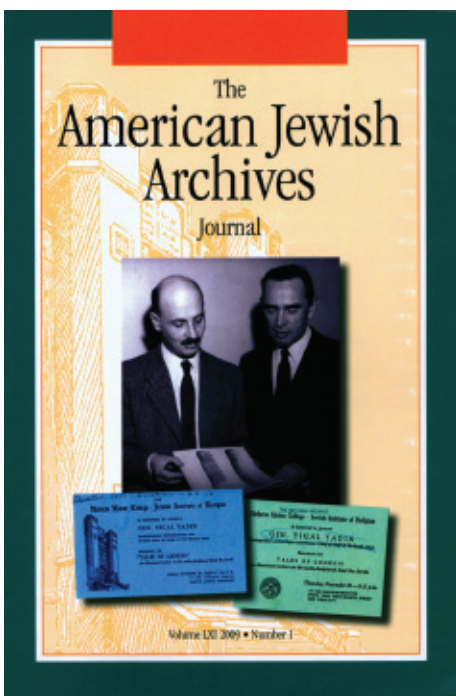
The idea of a Jewish social body that was subject to intervention and treatment was taken directly from social and medical discourses about the health of the nation. Against this background, this book shows how Jews, many of whom had gained knowledge and expertise as professionals in the fields of social welfare and medicine, mobilized discourses devised to strengthen the German nation on behalf of the Jewish community. What is particularly striking in this



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regard is that social reformers' impulse for a new expression of Jewish particularism did not depend on the surrender of their Germanness. Instead, through a dialectical dynamic of Jewish assimilation, Weimar Jews forged a new notion of Jewish difference out of the raw materials of German culture. Thus, rather than viewing assimilation as an appropriation of external elements to some kind of essential Jewish culture, Jews also expressed their uniqueness "in an idiom always acquired from their environment," as Amos Funkenstein has argued. Like other Germans, Jews who worked in the social and medical professions viewed the strengthening of the family, the attempt to increase reproduction, the need for expanding welfare, and the rehabilitation of orphaned and delinquent youth as a crucial means of redeeming the German nation and restoring its national spirit. But in this process, self-identified Jews, who were deeply rooted in non-Jewish middle-class German society and culture and saw themselves as fully "German," utilized the ideas and methods of contemporary social politics as a means of significantly expanding the scope, authority, and distinctiveness of the Jewish community. Thus, we see in this period not only the evolution of "Germans into Nazis," to use Peter Fritzsche's notable formulation, but a simultaneous development of Germans into Jews. ■



### Modalities in Medieval Jewish Law for Public Order and Safety

Stephen M. Passamanek,  
HUC Annual, 2009

In his introduction, Dr. Stephen Passamanek writes: "The history of medieval Jewry presents one inescapable fact: the Jews were a people apart. No matter where or when we find a Jewish community in the Middle Ages, it was an 'alien' enclave in a host society which was sometimes cordial to it and sometimes not. Jews were a foreign element which managed its own communal affairs, creating religious, educational, and charitable institutions, mechanisms for collection and disbursement of taxes to the host

government, and various systems for internal governance and the administration of justice. The Jews governed themselves and dispensed justice in so far as possible according to *halakhab*, their ancient internal legal system. This legal system was the subject of devoted and loving study and careful enhancement over the centuries by skillful interpretation, by mixture of local customs and by local ordinances, which helped the system keep pace with changing circumstances.... This inquiry has exposed some of the less exalted or inspiring episodes of medieval Jewish history. Some of what was done, or was proposed to be done, was cruel and inhuman by modern standards. Some of it does not rise to a modern standard of legality, but the medieval world did not run according to our rules, and necessity overrode moral idealism from time to time even among the most sensitive, learned, and pious of our ancestors. The rabbis well understood that they were to pursue justice, but justice was justice for the greater good of the people as a whole, not necessarily for the individual. Doubtless we would not often do as they did. Yet they are by no means to be faulted or derogated for their defense of their standards of public order, safety, and, indeed, decency."

The volume includes chapters on punitive modalities, preventive and coercive modalities, and protective modalities, as well as appendixes on "A Plea for Calm," "The Arresting Officer," and "Human Rights and *Kavod Habriut*" and a comprehensive bibliography. ■

### The American Jewish Archives Journal, Vol. LXI, No. 1 (2009)

Devoted to the topic of Reform Judaism and the Dead Sea Scrolls, this volume of the *AJA Journal* features a fascinating article by Dr. Jason Kalman, Assistant Professor of Classical Hebrew Texts and Interpretation, HUC-JIR/Cincinnati, on HUC-JIR's involvement with Dead Sea Scroll scholarship and a documentary analysis of two sermons

on the Dead Sea Scrolls by JIR alumnus Rabbi Harold I. Saperstein, introduced by HUC-JIR alumnus and principal of Leo Baeck College, Dr. Marc Saperstein, and annotated by Dr. Kalman. The issue also includes an interesting article on Reform Judaism's reception of the Dead Sea Scrolls by Professor Richard A. Freund, University of Hartford. The online version of the journal can be accessed at: [www.americanjewisharchives.org/journal](http://www.americanjewisharchives.org/journal) ■