



Nadia Malinovich. *French and Jewish: Culture and the Politics of Identity in Early-Twentieth Century France.* Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008. viii + 280 pp. \$49.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-904113-40-9.

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A Jewish Awakening in a French Key: Reassessing Public Jewishness in Post-Dreyfus France

The past twenty years have witnessed a major shift in the historiography of the Jews of modern France. Until relatively recently, the prevailing narrative remained one of a linear, steady path toward assimilation from the French Revolution to Vichy.[1] Following its emancipation, went the story, French Jewry insisted on the primacy of its French identity, reducing attachments to Jewishness, and redefining Judaism as confined to religious practice behind closed doors. Since the 1980s, however, numerous studies have told a more complex story: from the late eighteenth through the nineteenth century, various facets of France's Jewish community engaged in a complex struggle over how to integrate fully into the nation-state and maintain discernible ties to Jewish identity. They cast their ongoing links to Judaism in religious, cultural, political, or even racial terms.[2]

Nadia Malinovich's illuminating new study of Jewish cultural and intellectual life in France from 1900 to 1932 builds upon this recent scholarly turn. The book considerably complicates and enriches our understanding of French Jewry's path through the first few decades of the twentieth century. During this time, contends the author, a small but influential minority of French Jews took part in a self-proclaimed "awakening" that markedly shifted the contours of French Jewish life. Through most of the nineteenth century, organized French Jewry had framed Judaism as a "confession" and repeatedly underscored its compatibility with French universalism and

the duties of citizenship. By the early twentieth century, argues Malinovich, a series of factors gave a new generation a far greater urge to visibly explore and display its Jewish particularity. Her study highlights not only the divisions but also the frequent interplay between a variety of Jewish literary, cultural, and religious figures and groups who shared the conviction that it was only by creating new spaces for Jewish sociability that French Jewry would survive into the next generation (p. 11). The author's repeated comparisons between Jews in France and their co-religionists in Germany and the United States allow her to show how French Jewry's path at once followed and diverged from larger, transnational patterns.

Malinovich organizes her book both chronologically and thematically. Chapter 1 offers a skillful overview of the Franco-Judaism of the nineteenth century. It also seeks to reframe the importance of the Dreyfus Affair for French Jews. Previous scholarship focused substantially on the affair as a period of heightened anti-Semitism and on the manner in which its ultimately successful resolution reaffirmed the confidence of much of French Jewry in the republic. Malinovich notes that the affair produced numerous new social, cultural, and intellectual networks and journals, and brought the "Jewish question" as an issue to the center of French public life. In this way, it provided the spark for a French Jewish cultural awakening. The book's second chapter concentrates on close

readings of works by a small group of French Jewish literary and intellectual figures who, during the years preceding World War I, explored the question of Jewishness in the modern world in their writings. Malinovich contends that André Spire, Edmond Fleg, and other “first-wave” writers found themselves conflicted between their newfound interest in Jewish particularism and their ongoing devotion to the universal principles of the republic. Students of German Jewish history will find striking parallels between certain of these writers’ anti-assimilationist outbursts and those of contemporaries like Gershom Scholem. Yet rather than insist on a newly ethnic model of Jewish identity, argues the author, these French Jewish figures displayed “an obsession with dualism” that reflected ongoing attachment to the traditions of republican Judaism (p. 9). Still, their rethinking of the boundaries of French Jewish identity laid the groundwork for a more widespread awakening in the interwar period.

Chapter 3 focuses on three relatively neglected elements in the scholarship on prewar French Jewry: early Zionism, the birth of French Reform Judaism, and an attempted revival of traditional Judaism. Malinovich emphasizes the overlap between the individuals and themes associated with these movements. Each of these activists shared a desire to reconsider the meaning of Jewish identity in a modern, French context. Here and in subsequent chapters, the author reveals that, despite his absence from most works on modern Jewish history, the “Noahide” Aimé Pallière, a Catholic-born near-convert to Judaism, played a pivotal, ubiquitous role in French Jewish organizational life and ideological debate throughout the period. She also illustrates how, contrary to prior depictions of the period, French Zionism was neither entirely marginal at this time, nor exclusively a movement of immigrants from eastern Europe. In chapter 4, Malinovich focuses on World War I as an important transition point for French Jewry. Open displays of anti-Semitism declined; Jews’ widespread participation in the war effort made them appear more fully integrated than ever into the French nation. In the war’s aftermath, Jews had a newfound sense of relative security, and a fresh vocabulary of patriotic devotion, both of which proved crucial to exploring new forms of public Jewishness. The war accelerated the immigration of eastern European, and to a lesser extent, Ottoman Jews to France; it also galvanized international movements for a Jewish homeland and for Jewish minority rights. In this context, Malinovich emphasizes interactions and overlapping circles between certain native French and immigrant Jews in the 1920s, puncturing the bifurcated categories into

which historians have often placed members of the two groups.

The next four chapters constitute the heart of Malinovich’s account. In considerable detail, they chronicle and analyze the various forms taken by the post-World War I Jewish awakening in France. Chapter 5 looks at Jewish associations, particularly youth movements, as “new spaces for [Jewish] sociability” (p. 117). Like Germany and the United States, France saw numerous groups for young Jews emerge in the years following the war. Whereas, however, in the first two cases increasing obstacles to integration caused many young Jews to reject assimilation in favor of more visible forms of ethnic solidarity, in France, Jews “most often understood the new forms of Jewish community life and self-expression that they created to be a product of their integration into French society rather than a rejection of it” (p. 117). On a far wider scale than their predecessors, a new generation of French Jews organized events ranging from classes in Hebrew language and Jewish history, to sporting activities, to discussions of recent novels with Jewish themes and debates about the nature of modern Jewish identity.

In the 1920s, the new “Jewish public sphere” also extended to a thriving French Jewish press and arts scene, the major focal points of chapter 6. Here the author displays an impressive knowledge of the period’s rich variety of periodicals of Jewish tradition, culture, politics, literature, and scholarship. Many of these publications spoke both optimistically and critically about an ongoing Jewish revival or awakening in France. A broad spectrum of publications, Malinovich shows, already took a strong interest in Zionism. The prominence of Jewish artists in the *École de Paris*, and the emergence of widely varying Jewish musical groups added to the widespread interest in Jewish themes and Jewish identity. At the same time, the period witnessed considerable debate about the long-term efficacy of the new forms of Jewish expression. Those participating in France’s Jewish revival tended to define their new interest in Jewishness through individual cultural or intellectual exploration, rather than by way of communal religious practice. Malinovich demonstrates how, with considerable foresight, many French Jewish leaders questioned whether or not such articulations of Jewish identity could be successfully transmitted to the next generation.

As chapter 7 shows, the same concern permeated critiques of the vision of Jewishness found in many of the period’s novels on Jewish themes. The prodigious Jewish

literature in France between 1920 and 1932 raised questions of Jewish authenticity and particularity in the modern world. Many Jewish writers had come from eastern Europe, the Ottoman Empire, or North Africa to France and introduced their readers to an image of traditional Jewish life in their place of origin. Malinovich contends that while these depictions often exhibited a new degree of comfort and pride regarding Jewish ethnic difference, certain characters experienced Jewishness as an all-encompassing primal force over which they [had] little control (p. 191). Despite the generally positive reception of the genre in the Jewish press, certain critics wondered aloud if images such as the Jew as Oriental, frequently featured in these novels, might only reinforce contemporary anti-Semitic stereotypes.

Malinovich makes the issue of connections between French Jews and notions of the Orient central to her eighth and final chapter. Here she gives her greatest attention to Zionism as what she deems the most important influence on French Jewish discourse in the 1920s (p. 12). The author makes novel observations about affinities between the terms in which many French Jews cast their Zionism, and broader contemporary discourses about identity and belonging in France. Certain Jews compared Zionism to French regionalist movements, arguing that in both cases, ethnic particularities complemented, rather than contradicted French patriotic devotion. Others treated Zionism as part of a larger, left-wing universalist project giving new priority to minority rights. Malinovich gives particular attention to connections between the importance of French colonialism—and its liberal, humanist dimensions—and French Jewish discussions of Zionism. She notes the manner in which many Zionists described Jews, due to their simultaneously Oriental and Western qualities, as uniquely positioned to act as a bridge between East and West. In the context of the expanding French imperial presence in the Muslim world, many French supporters of Zionism thus presented the movement as working in concert with French national aspirations for greater influence in the Middle East. The chapter's final sections concentrate on competing approaches to the place of Zionism in changing notions of French identity. While some saw Zionism as a replacement for religious Judaism, more often Jewish leaders insisted on the crucial role of religion in any viable Jewish national awakening. The openness of many French Jewish leaders to such a combination reflected the manner in which ethno-cultural understandings of Jewish identity had gained currency in mainstream French Jewish thought by the early 1930s.

French and Jewish constitutes an original and valuable contribution to the understanding of Jewish history in a number of respects. Particularly with its repeated comparative discussions of Germany, the work shows convincingly that in the first decades of the twentieth century, French Jewry followed a path whose cultural revival and questioning of assimilation echoed those of its central European co-religionists, but whose sense of relative security and ongoing commitment to universalism reflected specificities of France. The wide lens of her examination illuminates anew the high degree of interaction between many native French Jews and immigrants from both eastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire. She demonstrates powerfully that interest in Zionism and Palestine played a more important role than previously estimated in the communal life and self-understanding of the era's French Jews. In addition, the work is refreshing in its skillful integration of the perspectives of advocates of Jewishness as religion, cultural attachment, literary theme, and social network into a single study. The book's emphasis on the non-religious form of many articulations of French Jewish awakening offers new fodder for the larger trajectory of Jewish identity in France. For instance, did the nineteenth-century transformation of Judaism in France into a largely private religion make ethno-cultural forms of Jewishness the most viable for public expression in the early twentieth century? That is, for the public identity of many Jews in France, did secularization in a sense pave the way for ethnicization? The issue merits further investigation.

For all of the ground that it covers, Malinovich's account falls short in two areas. First, readers would have benefited greatly if the author had offered a systematic discussion at the outset of what she means by the term "Jewishness," and of the various categories by which one might break down Jewish identification and revival in early twentieth-century France. Throughout the book, the absence of this clear analytical framework makes it harder to ascertain the character of numerous components of the Jewish cultural revival. The author compounds this confusion by inconsistently using the term "Judaism," employing it on several occasions to refer to forms of Jewish attachment in which religion's role was ambiguous or nonexistent. As for the second shortcoming, given the crucial importance of state policies and forms of political expression to the contours of French Jewish public identity, Malinovich's relative exclusion of politics from her study seems odd. Even a brief discussion of the degree to which French Jewish leaders and groups of the 1920s felt comfortable invoking their Jew-

ishness as a component or basis of their political orientation would have been helpful. This added dimension would have enabled the author to delineate more fully the reach and limitations of the newfound presence of Jewishness in the public sphere.

The author's inattention to political subjects may also help account for certain imprecisions that appear in the final chapter. Here she quickly asserts that "[s]upport for a Jewish homeland was integrated into a broader left-wing schema," apparently forgetting the French Communist Party's rocky relationship with Zionism that became openly confrontational by 1929 (p. 202). Meanwhile, the connection she draws between Zionism and contemporary French colonialism, while apt on the whole, takes a surprising turn. She does not account for her focus on depictions of Jews as a bridge between East and West, when contemporaneous French Jewish discourses about Zionists as pioneers bringing prosperity to Palestine seem more clearly consonant with larger French claims about colonial benevolence. Malinovich's highly questionable, explicit reliance upon Edward Said's *Orientalism* as her source for the distinct characteristics of French colonialism, and the absence from her footnotes and bibliography of most of the large extant historiography on the French colonial project, undermine her discussion in this section of the book.

Yet these quibbles remain relatively minor and reflect in part the ambitious scope of Malinovich's study and the important new questions it points to for future research.

On the whole, the book is well researched, persuasively argued, and thought-provoking. Scholars of the Jews of France and of modern Jewish history more broadly should read it with great interest for years to come.

Notes

[1]. One of the most influential and exemplary works in this vein remains Michael Marrus, *The Politics of Assimilation: A Study of the French Jewish Community at the Time of the Dreyfus Affair* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

[2]. Among the many works in this vein are Jay Berkovitz, *The Shaping of Jewish Identity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989); Michael Graetz, *The Jews in Nineteenth-Century France: From the French Revolution to the Alliance Israélite Universelle*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Lisa Moses Leff, *Sacred Bonds of Solidarity: The Rise of Jewish Internationalism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Ronald Schechter, *Obstinate Hebrews: Representations of Jews in France, 1715-1815* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and several essays by Phyllis Cohen Albert, e.g., "Ethnicity and Jewish Solidarity in Nineteenth-Century France," in *Mystics, Philosophers, and Politicians: Essays in Jewish Intellectual History in Honor of Alexander Altman*, ed. Jehuda Reinharz and Daniel Swetschinski (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

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