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Two Traditions of Seminary Scholarship

Tradition Renewed

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From left: Alexander Marx, Louis Finkelstein, and Saul Lieberman, ca. 1950.
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THE 1902 CHARTER that incorporated the reorganized Jewish Theological Seminary listed "the advancement of Jewish scholarship" as the fourth of the institution's six aims.[1] This marked a significant change from the original charter of 1886 which had made no mention of Jewish scholarship at all.[2] But it also hinted at some disagreement with Solomon Schechter, who believed that the advancement of scholarship should be the Seminary's foremost priority. His goal, expressed in a letter to Mayer Sulzberger back in 1900, was to see the Seminary transformed into "a centre of Jewish *Wissenschaft* pure and simple."[3]

Schechter's audacious vision reflected the growing appreciation for Jewish scholarship that developed in the United States late in the 19th century. What Cyrus Adler described as a "Jewish Renaissance" seemed to be underway, and writing in 1894, Adler ticked off some of its achievements, including "the establishment of Oriental and Hebrew professorships in all of our large universities"; the growth of Hebrew Union College's library in Cincinnati, the establishment of the Jewish Theological Seminary (1886), the Jewish Publication Society (1888), and the American Jewish Historical Society (1892); the scholarly achievements of such men as Alexander Kohut, Marcus Jastrow, Moses Mielziner, Richard Gottheil, Morris Jastrow, Charles Gross, and Charles Waldstein [Walston]; and "the turning toward literary and scientific pursuits of a considerable number of Russian immigrants." "Is it possible," Adler wondered, "that the intellectual activity of the Jew in relation to Jewish learning is shifting to the English speaking world?" "I think," he answered tentatively, "it is."[4]

To strengthen the spirit of Jewish learning in the United States, Adler, in a follow-up article, proposed the establishment of a "Jewish Academy of America," akin to many a learned society founded in his day, charged with responsibility to "collect a library," "publish scientific researches," "provide facilities for students,"

convene scholars together, and "have connected with it a staff of men who would themselves be constantly engaged in advancing Jewish science."[5] The idea was wildly premature in 1894 and nothing came of it, but the fact that it received a hearing at all offers some indication of the elevated status that Jewish scholarship was beginning to enjoy in some circles of the American Jewish community. Just half a dozen years later, Henrietta Szold (who mixed in these same circles), writing in the *American Jewish Year Book* of 1900, found "striking evidence that the desire for Jewish scholarship is real and widespread." Impressed by the ongoing effort to produce the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, by far the most ambitious scholarly project undertaken by American Jews to that time, she predicted "that in the not too distant future the United States will become a centre of Jewish scholarship."[6]

Actually, those eager to transform America into a center of Jewish scholarship faced substantial obstacles. Many other pressing problems (including the material needs of Jewish immigrants) competed for community attention. Besides, Jewish scholarship seemed to some lay leaders to be far too highbrow for American Jews. They sought to encourage elementary works and writings that appealed to "the popular taste." Recognizing that scholarship is expensive and often restricted to a "few choice spirits," even some of the trustees of the Jewish Theological Seminary thought to move cautiously. Rather than creating a great Jewish library, for example, they advocated a more modest one, kept within the bounds of an ordinary college library.[7]

Solomon Schechter, however, would have none of this. "The crown and climax of all learning is research," he announced in his 1902 inaugural address as Seminary president. "It is," he continued, "these fresh contributions and the opening of new sources, with the new currents they create, that keep the intellectual and the spiritual atmosphere in motion and impart to it life and vigor."[8] Judge Mayer Sulzberger heartily agreed, and early in 1904 he completed the gift of his own library to the Seminary with the "hope . . . that the Seminary may become the center for original work in the science of Judaism, to which end the acquisition of a great library is indispensable."[9]

Sulzberger had long cherished the goal of seeing his adopted land become a center of Jewish cultural life. This in large part accounts for his decision to collect rare Jewish books and manuscripts in the first place: "It was his idea. . .that the time was approaching when the need of such a library would be felt."[10] Now, with Solomon Schechter at the Seminary's helm and a promising group of young European-trained research scholars recruited to the faculty, he thought that time had arrived.

New York in the early years of the 20th century was home to the largest Jewish community in the world. In the United States as a whole, the Jewish population exceeded that of Germany, France, and the British Empire combined; only the Jewish communities in Russia and Austria-Hungary were larger. Europeans concerned

with the fate of world Jewry increasingly looked to America as the wave of the future. It was the major bright spot (along with Zion) in a world where anti-Semitism was growing and Russian Jewry lay imperiled.[11] So now it was up to Schechter to mold a seminary worthy of this great new American Jewish population center. The future of Jewish scholarship in the United States seemed to rest on his shoulders.

In committing the Seminary to *Wissenschaft*, Schechter drew on German canons of scholarship that had already made a substantial impact on American higher education. Columbia, Harvard, Michigan, and Wisconsin, as well as new universities such as Johns Hopkins (where Cyrus Adler had received his Ph.D.), Clark, and Chicago—all had come to emulate the German universities with their focus on rigorous scholarship as the ultimate gauge of academic excellence. *Wissenschaft*, the German word that characterized this rigorous scholarly methodology, literally means "science"; in this case it implied a commitment to accuracy, neutrality, and truth. As Peter Novick explains, the term also "signified a dedicated, sanctified pursuit . . . not just knowledge, but self-fulfillment; not practical knowledge, but knowledge of ultimate meanings."[12]

The pioneering German-Jewish scholar Leopold Zunz first applied these ideas to Judaism, and he is credited with coining the term *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in 1822. This set off a revolution in Jewish studies that transformed both its methodology and its scope. Traditionally, much of Jewish learning had been Judeocentric, "divorced from the rest of the world," "tied dogmatically to belief in an inviolable tradition and the authority of its representatives," and dialectical in method. *Wissenschaft*, by contrast, "recognized the interrelationship of all intellectual forces," "attempted to explore and explain the connections between Jewish and non-Jewish phenomena," considered itself independent, subject to free and unbiased critical analysis, and "demanded concreteness and a sense of actuality." Where traditional Jewish learning was a pious vocation, "a part of Jewish religiosity," *Wissenschaft* was a scholarly vocation, a field of knowledge.[13]

Ismar Schorsch has recently argued that "Wissenschaft furnished the tools to restore or remake a Judaism cut loose from its moorings by unimagined new knowledge, enemies and alternatives." *Wissenschaft*, he contends, was "a collective act of translation, a sustained effort to cast the history, literature and institutions of Judaism in Western categories." There was widespread hope, he observes, that Jewish scholarship would have profound social consequences: "Research would lead to respect and finally acceptance, setting Jews free."[14]

These goals were shared by the great rabbinical seminaries of Europe, including the Seminary's namesake, the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau, Berlin's Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, where Schechter himself had studied, and the (Hildesheimer) Rabbiner Seminar für das Orthodoxe Judentum

where both Israel Friedlaender and Alexander Marx had been pupils. As distinct from traditional *yeshivot*, these seminaries promised to train *modern* rabbis, equipping them with traditional Jewish learning, a thorough mastery of the vernacular, and facility in both secular and extra-talmudic Jewish subjects. Faculty members at these institutions boasted rabbinic learning, secular training, and earned doctorates from major secular universities. Their research was academically oriented: it employed scholarly methodologies, paid strict attention to history and philology, and was always staunchly committed to the pursuit of "truth."[15]

Such was the legacy to which Schechter and the newly reorganized Jewish Theological Seminary of America fell heir in 1902. In the decades that followed, the Seminary would itself become a major conduit for the transmission of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* to the United States and one of the world's foremost centers of Jewish studies. In the process, however, it developed two distinct traditions of Jewish scholarship. The first, an elite tradition that commanded the highest institutional esteem and won the primary allegiance of the majority of the Seminary faculty, focused on timeless *texts*—rabbinic texts, midrashic texts, *Genizah* texts, historical texts, and literary texts. Textual projects, including critical editions, translations, commentaries, and reference aids, chiefly occupied these scholars and resulted in the distinguished corpus of publications on which the Seminary's scholarly reputation primarily rests. The second, a more popularly oriented engaged tradition that commanded less institutional esteem and won the primary allegiance of only a minority among the faculty, focused on timely *issues*. It produced highly influential work aimed at the larger community, Jewish and non-Jewish, and sought to combat ignorance and to apply Jewish teachings to problems of general concern. As we shall see, the Seminary's two greatest leaders, Solomon Schechter and Louis Finkelstein, appreciated, embraced, and personally exemplified both traditions, recognizing the value (although certainly not the equality) of each. The rest of the faculty, however, tended to embrace one tradition only, viewing the other with distaste if not disdain.[16]

The great tradition of textual scholarship dominated the Seminary's research agenda in each era of its history. Within each generation, an exemplar, a widely respected and highly productive senior scholar—first, Solomon Schechter, then Levi Ginzberg, and then Saul Lieberman—set the scholarly tone which those seeking status within the institution tried to follow. Through publications and influence, these exemplars defined the character of the faculty's work and established models of elite scholarship that the majority of colleagues strove to emulate. Since each exemplar saw textual research as the ne plus ultra of scholarship, that became the institutional test of merit, the standard which those seeking recognition among the elite had to maintain.

At other rabbinical seminaries, textual scholarship played a less substantial role.