

Where Does the Modern Period of Jewish History Begin?

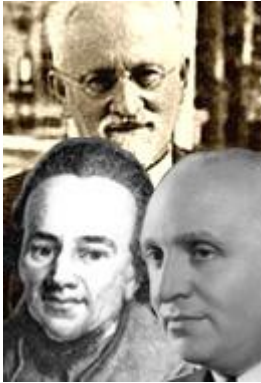
By Michael A. Meyer

Michael A. Meyer is professor of Jewish history at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati.

This paper was originally delivered as a lecture at Spertus College in Chicago.

First published in Judaism Vol. 24 No. 3 (Summer 1975) pp. 329-338, here taken from Jewish Ideas Daily, 18 February 2013,

<http://www.jewishideasdaily.com/5770/features/where-does-the-modern-period-of-jewish-history-begin/> .



What marks the beginning of modern Jewish history?

The advent of Moses Mendelssohn? The French Revolution? The migration of Judah the Pious to Palestine in 1700? The Sabbatian explosion in the seventeenth century? These were some of the answers offered by the great Jewish historians of the 19th and 20th centuries. In his classic 1975 Judaism article, *When Does the Modern Period of Jewish History Begin?*, Michael Meyer argued that there is no value in "setting a definite terminus for the beginning of modern Jewish history." This did not settle the question, but it made it impossible for anyone to address it without taking Meyer's views into account. — The Editors of JID

The endeavor to divide history into distinct and meaningful periods has met with so little success that contemporary historians have treated the subject with utmost caution. Grand theoretical speculations, such as the bold efforts of Hegel to assert clearly defined stages in the development of the human spirit, or of Marx to locate similar stages in the various forms of production, have all come to grief at the hands of empirical inquiry. Few historians today still believe that world history allows of any simple, precise division, let alone that any suggested plan is rooted in the very nature of reality. All-embracing schemes of periodization, nearly everyone now acknowledges, rests more on stipulation than on inference. Though a division of some kind is still considered necessary as an instrument for understanding turning points and transitions in history, each proposal is generally recognized as merely provisional, subject to correction not only by new evidence, but, also, by the lengthened perspective gained in the passage of time.¹

For Jewish history, periodization is fraught with all of the methodological difficulties that attend the division of world history. Scattered among the nations, the Jews have participated to varying degrees in simultaneous and successive foreign civilizations while at the same time carrying on their own heritage. The very diversity and uniqueness of their Diaspora experience have militated against any agreement on its division. Though the major Jewish historians have all had to utilize some system of periodization to organize their material, they have differed vastly in the schemes which they have employed. In part, methodological considerations have determined this divergence of systems, but, to no small degree, religious and ideological motivations have played a role as well. Nowhere is the operation of both factors more apparent and instructive than with regard to the problem of setting the threshold of the modern period in Jewish history. In fact, tracing the various theories regarding the onset of Jewish modernity reflects with amazing clarity both the course of Jewish historical thinking and the shifting conceptions of Jewish existence that have characterized the last hundred and fifty years.

The first Jewish scholar since Josephus to undertake a comprehensive history of the Jews was Isaac Marcus Jost, a German Jew who wrote a nine-volume *History of the Israelites* that was published from 1820 to 1828. Jost grew up in the period when German Jewry was given its first measure of civil equality. Responding to this new situation, a considerable segment of the community had come to see in the changed political attitude a sharp break with the past or even to perceive the messianic prospect of full Jewish participation in the political and cultural life of Europe. Although by the time when Jost began to write his history, the post-Napoleonic reaction had cast serious doubts on the realization of that hope, he remained of the opinion that an unalterable process had been set in motion, and, as a loyal Prussian, he chose to see its origins in Prussia. Jost, therefore, designated 1740 as the beginning of modern Jewish history, since, in that year, Frederick the Great ascended the Prussian throne. He realized, of course, that Frederick's policy had, if anything, been more restrictive toward the Jews than were the regulations of the monarchs who had preceded him. But, even as late as 1846, Jost still claimed that the enlightened despot had awakened a spirit which strides over the ghetto walls and glances into the dismal apartments of the Jewish streets . . . , it declares liberty to the oppressed, and this one word, even before its content is grasped and appreciated, arouses the soul to glad hope and the yearning for a better life.²

Since Jost was writing for German gentiles as well as for Jews, he doubtless wanted to link the turning point of the modern age in Jewish history with the monarch who had brought Prussia to a position of power in Europe. At the same time, he tried to make his Jewish readers appreciative of what they owed to the Prussian state. It was, he thought, in response to this new enlightened spirit emanating from Frederick that the fundamental transformations in the Jewish community which generated modernity came about: the decline of unquestioned rabbinic authority, the shift from a corporate entity to a religious denomination, and the increasing participation by Jews in German cultural and political life. With the origin of these changes in Prussia, Jost saw the beginning of a new epoch for all Jewry, one which he termed "the age of spiritual liberation." Jewish writers contemporary with Jost shared his sense of living in a new and hopeful time both for Europe and for the Jews. That was certainly true of the young Leopold Zunz and his circle when they laid the foundations of the scientific study of Judaism, declaring that the time had come to render account of a past that was now closed and determining to use their scholarly tools to further the process of political and cultural integration. When Nahman Krochmal, the profound Galician Jewish philosopher and historian, divided Jewish history into successive cycles of growth, blossoming, and decay, he chose to conclude the most recent period of decline with the Cossack persecutions of the mid-17th century. His own age, by implication, represented a new period of germination, the first stage of a fresh cycle.³

The best-known of the 19th-century Jewish historians, Heinrich Graetz, did not, however, fully share the earlier messianic enthusiasm. A severe moral critic of modern European culture,⁴ he set the Redemption far into the future. But, like Jost, he, too, thought that the most significant break in recent Jewish history had occurred in the preceding century. Because of his predilection for the internal intellectual history of the Jews, and his ascription of the dominant role in historical change to prominent individuals, Graetz assigned the beginning of the modern period of Jewish history to the appearance of Moses Mendelssohn. In the biography of this first significant figure to link Judaism with modern Europe;an culture, Graetz found what he called "a model for the history of the Jews in modern times, for their upward striving from lowliness and contempt to greatness and self-consciousness."⁵

Graetz's selection of Moses Mendelssohn as the turning point met severe challenge a generation later at the hands of Eastern Europe's most significant Jewish historian, Simon Dubnow. For him, Graetz's selection was questionable on three grounds. First, it was—no less than Jost's view—distinctly Germano-centric. Beginning with Mendelssohn, Graetz had gone on to devote two-thirds of his last volume to tracing developments in Germany—supposedly set in motion by Mendelssohn—while paying scant attention to the vastly larger Jewish settlement in Eastern Europe. Second, Graetz's emphasis on the role of individuals and of intellectual processes in history was out of keeping with the positivist approach that had meanwhile come to dominate European historiography and had influenced Dubnow. Finally, Dubnow simply could not see in Mendelssohn a model for the modern period. The Jewish philosopher's cherished goal of acculturation ran directly counter to Dubnow's autonomist ideology, which advocated separate, highly independent, communal entities within the frameworks of non-Jewish states. Dubnow favored political integration within the larger society but, at the same time, argued for cultural separatism. It is, therefore, not surprising that in his own writing he should have linked Jewish modernity to political, rather than cultural, transformation. In his *World History of the Jewish People*, which appeared in the 1920s, it is the French Revolution, the period when the Jews first gained citizenship, and not the beginning of the Haskalah, the Jewish enlightenment, which serves as the watershed.⁶

More recently, the majority of Jewish historians have preferred to fix the boundary line about a century or more before the French Revolution. They have chosen the earlier threshold for a variety of reasons. The most blatantly ideological justification for such an earlier *terminus a quo* is that which was given by Ben Zion Dinur, who died just recently after a productive and influential career as professor of Jewish history at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem. As an ardent Zionist, Dinur could not resist selecting the first evidence for a movement of return to the Land as the beginning of the modern period of Jewish history. What acculturation had been for Graetz and emancipation for Dubnow, Zionism became for Dinur. One might have expected him, therefore, to select a very late date, perhaps the appearance of the first Zionist classic, Moses Hess's *Rome and Jerusalem*, in 1862, or the formation of the Hibat Zion movement and the agricultural settlement which it fostered in the 1880s, or even the publication of Herzl's *The Jewish State* in 1896. Instead, however, Dinur chose the year 1700, for in that year, Rabbi Judah the Pious led some one thousand Jews to Palestine. For Dinur, this symbolic event (the immigration was actually a failure) was portentous for the future. It represented the beginnings of a rebellion against the *galut* and the endeavor to seek Israel's national salvation in its own land.⁷ Dinur's theory effectively eliminates Diaspora Jewish modernity from the basic structure of Jewish history. Its commonly accepted characteristics are not determinative of an age. Although Dinur does recognize the relative significance of Jewish emancipation and acculturation, these are essentially conceived as forces making for Jewish national dissolution and as foils—albeit necessary—for the primary process, which is the rebuilding of the Jewish nation in Palestine. Unlike Diaspora Jewish historians, Dinur placed a definite and final terminus on this modern period. It concluded in November, 1947 with the United Nations resolution to establish a Jewish state and with the declaration of its coming into existence the following spring. The modern era, thus, lasted almost exactly 250 years, and the birth of the State of Israel brought it to an end. With 1948 this final stage of Diaspora Jewish history has definitely reached its climax. For the last generation, Jewish history has been essentially post-modern, the history of the people in its land, with that portion which remains on the Diaspora periphery playing, at best, a secondary role.

Gershom Scholem's revisionism has been much less obviously ideological, but he, too, has had a specific purpose in view. He has devoted much of his life to establishing the central significance of the kabbalah, not merely as a byroad of Jewish history, as Graetz insisted, but as a main highway. Scholem has shown that the kabbalistically influenced, Sabbatian, pseudo-messianic movement of the 17th century had an enormous influence in its time, and he has tried to raise its significance even further by arguing that it made possible Jewish modernity. The unorthodox theses of the radical Sabbatians, their ideological doctrines, as well as their attitude toward practice, Scholem has argued, shattered the world of traditional Judaism beyond repair. Once these messianists ceased to be "believers," they could no longer return to contemporary rabbinic Judaism. Instead, "when the flame of their faith finally flickered out, they soon reappeared as leaders of Reform Judaism, secular intellectuals, or simply complete and indifferent skeptics."⁸ Scholem would thus not only regard the Jewish history of the late 16th and early 17th centuries as dominated by kabbalism and pseudo-messianism, but would make even the anti-mystical Judaism of 19th-century Western Europe ironically, embarrassingly—and unconvincingly—an outgrowth of it.

Other Jewish historians have shared Scholem's preference for the 17th century but have argued for the determinative significance of factors other than mysticism and messianism. Shmuel Ettinger, currently professor of modern Jewish history at The Hebrew University, has developed the theory that the emergence of the centralized absolutistic state was the most crucial factor in initiating the changes that differentiated modern Jewish existence from previous forms. The new state was no longer willing to tolerate separate corporate entities with their own structures of law and authority. The resulting deprivation of Jewish communal autonomy spurred the integration of the Jews into European society and resulted in the intellectual response of the Haskalah.⁹ But, for Ettinger, the process of cultural and political integration, set in motion by the development of the centralized state, was characteristic of modern Jewish history only during the first of two stages. Beginning with the resurgence of anti-Semitism in the 1880s, a reversal took place which resulted in the success of Jewish nationalism and the creation of the Jewish state. For Ettinger, as for Dinur, the establishment of the state constitutes the climax of modern Jewish history.¹⁰ Finally, we may consider the view of Salo Baron, the dean of Jewish historians in America. It, too, focuses on the 17th century, except that for Baron no single factor is determinative: The Jewish Emancipation era has often been dated from the formal pronouncements of Jewish equality of rights by the French Revolution, or somewhat more obliquely, by the American Constitution. However, departing from this purely legalistic approach, I have long felt that the underlying more decisive socioeconomic and cultural transformations accompanying the rise of modern capitalism, the rapid growth of Western populations, the international migrations, the after-effects of Humanism, the Reformation, and the progress of modern science, long antedated these formal constitutional fiat. While such developments can never be so precisely dated as legal enactments, treaties, wars, or biographies of leading personalities, the mid-seventeenth century may indeed be considered the major turning point in both world and Jewish history.¹¹ Baron's enumeration of such a variety of causes leaves little room for criticizing the selection of a particular feature to the exclusion or relative diminution of others. But his direct linkage of Jewish modernity with phenomena of world history which had only limited, indirect, or delayed effect upon the Jews raises serious doubts; the general transformations which he lists here—important as they were for general history—had little modernizing influence on any considerable segment of the Jews in Europe in the 17th century. No less subject to dispute is his willingness to set a single watershed at a distinct point in time—and even to declare in the title of the later volumes of his *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* that the "Late Middle Ages" of the Jews stretches specifically from 1200 to 1650.

Of course, neither Baron nor any Jewish historian, from Jost down to the present, has regarded the exact line of demarcation which he chose as more than symbolic. All were far too aware of the gradual passing of one age into another to assume that such precise boundaries could be anything other than instrumental or suggestive. Yet, the fact that they have selected a particular year or, at least, a limited period of time during which, they argue, the chief characteristics of modern Jewish history made their appearance, itself raises a number of serious questions which have yet to be resolved.

Perhaps the most basic question concerns the principal causes and characteristics of modernity. It seems most unlikely that agreement here will be achieved, not only because of the continued effect of ideology, but, also, because economic, social and intellectual influences will continue to be weighted as variously by Jewish historians as they are by their colleagues in general history. At present, Jewish scholars span the entire gamut—from Marxist economic determinism to an idealism which largely ignores the relevance of societal change. In particular, it is by no means resolved whether the Jewish Enlightenment and Emancipation were primarily a response to the rise of capitalist modes of production, to the need for more efficient government, or to a more favorable social attitude emanating from a growing class of liberal intellectuals. Nor is there agreement whether what is basic for Jewish history is demography (and, hence, the change in the migration pattern from west-to-east to east-to-west in the 17th century would loom as a decisive event), or community structure and cohesion, or the intellectual and emotional world of the individual Jew.

But even if there could be agreement on the characteristics determinative of the modern period, difference of opinion would remain as to when they emerged. Even if economic, political, and cultural integration be taken together as representative of Jewish modernity, the question as to when they became constitutive must still be settled. The proponents of a boundary line in the 17th or early 18th century have pointed to widespread evidence of the decline of rabbinic authority, the pursuit of secular education, and the disregard of traditional Jewish norms in Central Europe decades or more before the appearance of Moses Mendelssohn.¹² Their critics have held that such manifestations of dissolution, taken in historical context, really do not indicate a break at all. They are simply aberrant phenomena in a society which is still basically intact. Even where Jewish laws were violated, the violation was not yet justified by an appeal to values drawn from outside the Jewish community.¹³ But in admitting a seedtime for Jewish modernity which precedes its initial boundary, the critics, in turn, are forced to assume the difficult task of determining at which point the heretofore exceptional or deviant instances become normative.

The issue is further complicated by the differentiation that must be made, even by non-Marxists, between the various classes within the Jewish communities. Jacob Toury, of Tel Aviv University, has argued that the integration of the Jews into German society proceeded much more rapidly among the wealthiest and the poorest classes of Jews, while the lower middle class remained impervious to outside influences for a relatively much longer period.¹⁴ While, increasingly, during the 18th century, both economically successful Jewish merchants and destitute Jewish vagrants mingled freely with their gentile counterparts and adopted some of their values, the bulk of the German Jews still retained their traditional norms.

Even more significant than the qualification by social class is the one necessitated by geographical differentiation. During the 18th century, Eastern and Western (including Central) European Jewries came to differ enormously. Although the sociologist and historian, Jacob Katz, has attempted to argue the simultaneous emergence of modernity among Ashkenazic Jews through

Hasidism in the East and through Haskalah in the West, he was forced to admit that Hasidism did no more than “distort” the framework of the traditional Jewish society while the Haskalah actually shattered it.¹⁵ However much Hasidism challenged some of the norms of rabbinic Judaism, it surely did not create the characteristics of Jewish modernity. On the contrary, it soon became the most vociferous opponent of Jewish enlightenment.

If integration, on various levels, into non-Jewish society be taken as the basic criterion of the modern period, then the determination of a watershed for Eastern Europe in either the 17th or 18th century is very hard to justify. A much better argument could be made for a turning point in the mid-19th century during the relatively liberal reign of Alexander II or even as late as the Bolshevik Revolution. As for the Jewish communities of the Orient and North Africa, with the exception of a small upper class, there seems to have been relatively little interruption of their mode of Jewish existence until they were exposed to their Ashkenazi brethren in the State of Israel. These Eastern communities have been the stepchildren of Jewish historiography, virtually ignored in textbooks and lecture courses until their aliyah in the 1950s. As their descendants now gradually make their way into Jewish scholarship, especially in Israel, they will doubtless try to diminish the weight given to European developments, just as Dubnow had sought to reduce the excessive emphasis which Graetz had given to the Jews of Germany, in favor of Poland and Russia. Periodizations of the modern age which are exclusively Europe-centered may become subject, therefore, to considerable challenge in the next generation.

With all of these difficulties, is there any value in setting a definite terminus for the beginning of modern Jewish history? I would argue that there is not, unless stimulating discussion with some new theory be itself a value. Any endeavor to mark a borderline which will be meaningful for all Jewries and embrace the origin or rise to normative status of all—or even most—of the characteristics of Jewish life as it presently exists seems to me bound to fail. Yet, one must begin somewhere in relating the Jewish history of most recent times. In practice it is, therefore, probably best to begin with the 17th century where, according to nearly all views today, many of the elements that become constitutive of later Jewish life first made their appearance to any degree. But the conventionality of so doing must be fully realized. For, looking further backward, it is possible to attest certain apparently modern developments in some form even in earlier centuries, just as some scholars have tried to dismantle the Renaissance by carrying its various elements back to the Middle Ages.¹⁶ Surely, the Golden Age of Jewish life in Islamic Spain and certain of the communities of 16th-century Italy possess significant characteristics of modernity when held up against 18th-century Poland. On the other hand, there remains a vast difference between the degree of modernity in evidence before the mid-18th century and that apparent thereafter. One can neither ignore the seeds of later development by suggesting a 17th-century “traditional society” little touched by change until a century later, nor, contrariwise, suggest that modernity has arrived along with its first harbingers.

What the Jewish historian can legitimately do—and must do—is to set the forces of continuity (which are never absent) against those of change and to analyze their relative progress and interaction. For most recent times, this means tracing a transformation of Jewish life that proceeded gradually, and sometimes fitfully, from West to East, from class to class, and in which various constituent elements—economic, social, and intellectual—underwent differing degrees of change. The scholar may find crucial points of development which he can legitimately regard as watersheds for a *particular* Jewry, but their limited importance must always be borne in mind. Rather than being concerned with the impossible task of determining the precise bounds of a single “modern period” for all Jewries, it would be best to focus on the process of

*modernization*¹⁷ in its various aspects, tracing it from one area of Jewish settlement to another and trying to determine its dynamics. (To what extent, for example, does it operate by diffusion and to what extent is it explainable by an internal dialectic within each Jewry?)

Finally, there remains the question of the differing perspective between Jewish historians in Israel and in the Diaspora. If the modern period, or the process of modernization, is defined in whole or in part by Jewish life led as a minority group participating in a non-Jewish society and subjected to the ambiguities and ambivalences of that situation, then the establishment of the State of Israel—as Dinur has asserted—has put an end to such Jewish modernity, at least for the Jews in Israel. In fact, the entire Zionist movement can then be seen as essentially post-modern, a reaction spurred by anti-Semitism to the integration favored by the Haskalah. But if Diaspora Jews are essentially living the heritage of the Jewish enlightenment while Israelis draw sustenance from the roots of Zionism, then we have the anomalous situation where Diaspora Jewry today lives in one period of Jewish history while Israeli Jewry lives in another. From the Israeli viewpoint, this suggestion that the Diaspora remains mired in an earlier period while Jewish history has marched on to its next stage is strangely reminiscent of Lessing's, Hegel's, and, later, Toynbee's viewpoint on the failure of the Jews to advance along with the history of the world. According to its Zionist variation, Diaspora Jews have stubbornly refused to make the called-for dialectical transition from Haskalah to Jewish nationalism.

For the future of Diaspora Jewish existence, such a conception must be as unacceptable on ideological grounds, as it is for historiography on account of its serious distortion of demographic realities. Yet there is no avoiding the obvious fact that many—though by no means all—of the commonly accepted characteristics of Jewish modernity do not apply to the State of Israel. Those which result from minority status are notably absent. Thus, there is a basic bifurcation that necessarily exists between that portion of the Jewish people which lives exposed to the complexly interacting forces of assimilation and anti-Semitism and the other portion which enjoys a high degree of political independence and the ability to shape education and culture. In order to employ a single concept of modernization which will embrace developments leading simultaneously toward today's Diaspora Jewry and toward Jewish existence in the State of Israel it is, therefore, necessary to include within it both the forces that have operated in the direction of integration into non-Jewish society and those equally modernizing influences—such as a modern separatist nationalism drawn largely from European models—that have driven in the direction of disengagement. Jewish nationalism must be seen not as post-modern, but as part of the modernization process itself.

A single concept is possible, moreover, because the division created by the opposing forces has not become complete. Although the integrative pattern still dominates Diaspora existence today, elements of Jewish national identity are noticeably present as well. By the same token, Israeli society is so influenced by the cultural and intellectual currents of the West that it hardly makes sense to declare that its center of gravity lies within a specifically Jewish sphere like that of pre-modern Jewish communities. If, therefore, modernization (which results in modernity) were conceived in terms of novel elements of both integrative and disjunctive character, it could meaningfully be used to characterize a basic process which has led to both of the forms of Jewish existence today, that of the Diaspora and that of the State. The conceptual unity of Jewish history would thus be preserved, even down to the present.

1. See George H. Nadel, "Periodization," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Science* (New York, 1968), XI, pp. 581-81.
2. *Neuere Geschichte der Israeliten* (Berlin, 1846), I, p. 7.
3. *Kitvei Rabbi Nahman Krochmal*, ed. Simon Rawidowicz (Berlin, 1924), p. 112.
4. See his anonymously published *Briefwechsel einer englischen Dame über Judentum und Semitismus* (Stuttgart, 1883).
5. *Geschichte der Juden* (Leipzig, 1870), XI, p. 3.
6. In this view, as he himself acknowledged, Dubnow was anticipated by Martin Philipponson, *Neueste Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes*, 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1907-11). From a Marxist perspective it was later adopted by Raphael Mahler, *Divrei Yemei Yisrael* (Merhavia, 1969), p. 22.
7. *Israel and the Diaspora* (Philadelphia, 1969), pp. 79-161.
8. *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York, 1971), pp. 125-26, 140-41.
9. *Toldot Am Yisrael Mi-Yemei Ha-absolutism ad Lehakamat Medinat Yisrael* (Jerusalem, 1968), p. 2.
10. *Toldot Am Yisrael Ba et Hahadashah* (Tel Aviv, 1969).
11. *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York, 1965), IX, p. v.
12. E.g., Azriel Shohet, *Im Hilufei Tekufot* (Jerusalem, 1960).
13. See Baruk hMevorah's review of Shohet's book in *Kiryat Sefer*, XXXVII (1961-62) 150-55.
14. "Neuhebraische Veroffenthungen zur Geschichte der Juden im deutschen Lebenskreise," *Bulletin des Leo Baeck Instituts* IV (1961) 67-73.
15. *Tradition and Crisis* (New York, 1961), pp. 227, 245. See the criticism of Shmuel Ettinger on the original Hebrew edition in *Kiryat Sefer*XXXV (1959-60) 12-18.
16. Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948).
17. Cf., Richard Bendix, "Tradition and Modernity Reconsidered," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* IX (1967) 292-346.