



# Why is America Different?



*The Price and Promise of Jewish Emancipation*

Paul Mendes-Flohr

How exceptional is the experience of Jews in the United States? Or to use the phrase John Winthrop borrowed from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, how singularly do American Jews inhabit our "city upon a hill" and how has our dwelling there altered our sense of who we are?

"God Bless America, land that I love, my home sweet home." That song was composed during the First World War by Irving Berlin (born Israel Beilin), a Jewish immigrant from Czarist Russia. "God Bless America" was, as the great songwriter put it, "not just a song but an expression of my feeling toward the country to which I owe what I have and what I am." Berlin's hymn would not only ring out as

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personal testimony. It would also become a second national anthem of the United States. In the words of one commentator, “it captured the best of who we are and the dreams that shape our dreams.”

To understand our present realities, it’s worth reflecting on the origin of those dreams. The Jews of the United States were never legally emancipated. No special legislation was ever enacted granting them citizenship. No debates were ever held in the halls of Congress questioning the Jews’ eligibility to enjoy what the Declaration of Independence of July 4, 1776, called the “unalienable rights [to] life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Their right to citizenship, to note another key phrase from this founding document of American democracy, was “self-evident.” They enjoyed liberty by right rather than by sufferance. They thus found in America fertile ground for what Ralph Dahrendorf has felicitously called “applied Enlightenment.”

In Europe, by contrast, the emancipation of Jews entailed a protracted struggle lasting more than a century. Legislation entitling Jews to civic parity was enacted only to be later repealed or qualified. The accompanying debates regarding the Jews’ legal status took place in the legislatures and in public squares. The Jewish Question engaged both the rabble and the best minds of Europe.

The usual explanation for this contrast is that prejudice against the Jews and Judaism remained endemic to European culture, that the age-long contempt of the Jews proved to be doggedly resilient and adapted itself to the modern temper by donning the attire of secular discourse against the Jews and their emancipation. The inadequacy of this explanation, however, is immediately highlighted by the fact that the founding fathers of the United States were themselves not utterly free of bias towards the Jews.

#### TO BIGOTRY NO SANCTION, TO PERSECUTION NO ASSISTANCE

The reluctance to grant the Jews of Europe equal rights hinged instead on a given conception of “civil society.” The notion of civil society, introduced by the visionaries of modern liberal democracy, marked an informally defined social space that was separate from and independent of the state. To secure a measure of civil tranquility, the state should set itself apart from religious matters. The resulting separation of politics and religion, as well as the increasing disinterest of the state in controlling private, individual conscience, would thus, so

it was envisioned, contribute to a new political formation known as “civil society.” This ideal became a pivotal trope of liberal democratic thought, implicitly consecrated in the various American bills of rights, and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. The ideal of civil society emerged as a neutral domain wherein the distinctions of power, wealth, religious affiliation, and ethnic origin would be irrelevant to one’s membership therein—the realm of the individual *qua* human being. The German Enlightenment philosopher J.G. Herder envisaged a “time when no one in Europe will ask any longer, who is a Jew and who is a Christian.” Alas, this was a chimerical vision.

American civil society—in which cultural and ethnic distinctions did not disqualify one from membership—flourished due to the disestablishment of any Church as the religion of the state. That inclusion of Jews within that society was, indeed, “self-evident,” is poignantly illustrated in an exchange between the Sephardic Jewish community of Newport, Rhode Island and George Washington, shortly after his inauguration as the first president of the republic. In a message dispatched to President Washington in August 1790, welcoming him upon his visit to Newport, Congregation *Yeshuat Yisrael* noted:

Deprived as we have hitherto been of the invaluable rights of free citizens, we now, with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty Disposer of all events, behold a government, erected by the majesty of the people, a government which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance, but generously affording to all liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship, deeming everyone, of whatever nation, tongue, or language, equal parts of the great governmental machine!

In reply, George Washington gratefully acknowledged the salutations extended to him, and remarked:

The citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy, a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support....May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit

and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants, while everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig-tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.’

This succinct exchange served to articulate the nascent republic’s conception of civil society as an inclusive, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural social fabric. To be sure, there were—as there still are—many rough edges in American civil society. Old and new prejudices infected not only inter-communal attitudes but also at times left its stamp on legislation, for instance, the acts of Congress in the 1920s restricting the mass immigration, particularly of Jews. According to a report the Department of State submitted to the House of Representatives, Jews “are of the usual ghetto type.... They are filthy, un-American and often dangerous in their habits.” But once Jews, like other minorities, reached the shores of America, they were despite the prevailing antipathies towards them included in the country’s civil religion.

In sum, unlike their brethren in Europe, the Jews of the United States did not have to mount a drawn-out struggle for emancipation. In Europe, the eligibility of Jews for citizenship was hotly contested. Even Revolutionary France balked when it came to granting Jews citizenship. In America, their right to citizenship was, as George Washington pointedly noted, beyond the question of tolerance.

### NOT AS JEWS, BUT AS FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS

The nexus between the Jews’ inclusion in civil society and their acquisition of citizenship in Europe became particularly manifest when the term “emancipation” was adopted by the proponents of Jewish civic parity. Although historians generally use the term to characterize the process of removing the legal restrictions and social disabilities faced by Jews and their concomitant recognition as equal citizens, emancipation was first employed for the Jewish cause only in 1828. As if by osmosis, the term was employed by the advocates of Jewish citizenship as reports began to flood the European press about the great debate of 1828 in England concerning the admission of Catholics to Parliament. In a magisterial study of the origins of the term “Jewish Emancipation,” the historian Jacob Katz observed: “As the Catholic aspiration had long since been called the ‘Catholic Emancipation,’ it was most natural that a sequel—Jewish Emancipation—began to be discussed. In these years the term was also increasingly used for the

cause of other disinherited members of society: workers, women, and the black slaves in the Americas. Already in 1828, the poet Heinrich Heine exclaimed, “What is the great task of our age? It is emancipation. Not only of the Irish, the Greeks, the Jews of Frankfurt, the blacks of the West Indies and similarly oppressed peoples, but of the entire world.”

The term emancipation lent the cause for Jewish civil and political rights a unique emotional appeal and moral force. It comes as no surprise, then, that the opponents of Jewish emancipation deemed it

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to be an emotionally loaded term that distorted the real issue at hand. Far from lending the cause of Jewish civil rights and equality a compelling power, the term Jewish Emancipation thus served to sharpen and deepen the controversy that the cause aroused. The

German novelist and dramatist Karl Gutzkow recorded in his journal that “the emancipation of the Jews has become such a volatile issue, that one can hardly mention it without immediately finding oneself embroiled in controversy.”

The most revealing debate about Jewish emancipation was conducted in 1843 between two disciples of Hegel: Bruno Bauer and the then twenty-five-year-old Karl Marx. Bauer shot the first salvo. In an essay starkly entitled, “Die Judenfrage,” Bauer opposed Jewish emancipation because it was an ultimately meaningless demand, for civil society of Germany was still bound to a Christian, bourgeois basis, and was thus hardly neutral. To his mind, for Jews to seek emancipation into a Christian society and state was patently absurd, an absurdity compounded by the fact that the Jews manifested no genuine readiness to emancipate themselves from their misanthropic, particularistic religion:

The emancipation of the Jews in a thoroughgoing, successful, safe manner will only be possible when they are emancipated not as Jews, that is as forever alien to the Christians, but as human beings who are no longer separated from their fellow men by barriers which they wrongly consider to be all-important.

In fact, Bauer argued, the advocates of Jewish emancipation misunderstand that there is only one true emancipation, and that is the universal emancipation of humanity from all that is divisive. They fail to realize that “the problem of emancipation is a general problem, it is *the* problem of our age. Not only the Jews, but we, also, want to be emancipated.” In this struggle for universal emancipation, he coldly concluded, Jewish emancipation is simply beside the point.

The young Marx defended the cause of Jewish emancipation; not because of ancestral pride (which, given the rhetorical thrust of his argument in his essay “Zur Judenfrage,” he seems to have lacked utterly). Rather he was prompted by philosophical and political considerations alone. Behind Bauer’s denial of the Jewish petition for civil equality, Marx detected a deliberate confounding of political and human emancipation. The quest for political emancipation presupposed that the society and state that would grant the desired rights were rife with inherent contradictions—not only between secular claims and abiding religious loyalties, but between those who possess wealth and power and those who do not.

Marx proceeded to elaborate his argument on behalf of Jewish emancipation in a manner that Jews have ever since found profoundly problematic. It was not their religion that distinguished the Jews, according to Marx, but rather their singular devotion to commerce and capital. Being a commercial people par excellence, he contended, the Jews were eminently eligible to participate in bourgeois, capitalist society.

What is the real basis of the Jewish religion? Practical need, egotism....Practical need, egotism, is the principle of bourgeois society and emerges in pure form as soon as bourgeois society has given birth to the political state. The god of practical need and egotism is money....Hence, Judaism reaches its climax in the perfection of bourgeois society.

For Marx, then, it was patently contradictory that bourgeois society should withhold civic emancipation from the Jews, who after all are but the pristine representatives of the essence of that society.

Needless to say, Jews were not particularly comforted by Marx’s endorsement of their cause. In fact, the Bauer-Marx debate raised the specter that their appeal for emancipation would be turned against them. Emancipation was henceforth understood to be twofold: the political emancipation of the Jews, and their emancipation from

Judaism, or at least what was held to be its morally deficient aspects. No wonder many Jews viewed emancipation as a Trojan horse, which hid in its bowels insidious forces bent on depriving Jewry of its cultural dignity and self-esteem.

Certainly, when the gates of the ghetto were eventually torn down, Jews streamed out to take their place in the modern world. They did so with unbridled energy, resourcefulness, and creativity, duly making their mark in virtually every aspect of European commerce, politics, science, and culture. Few would deny that emancipation enhanced the vocational and economic dignity of the Jews, and generally their quality of life. But from the internal Jewish perspective, emancipation—or rather the terms of emancipation—exact a price that has yet to be adequately assessed. It required Jewish self-reformation—acculturation and assimilation—as a condition for Jewish integration into the fabric of the modern world. Jewish emancipation required Jewish assimilation. In the pithy description of my Hebrew University colleague Zwi Werblowsky, “European Jewry did not enter modern European society in a long process of endogenous growth but plunged into it as the ghetto walls were being breached, with a bang, though not without prolonged whimpers.”

#### HALTING AND FALTERING: JEWISH EMANCIPATION IN EUROPE

Liberal proponents of emancipation often urged Jews to assist them by reducing the national and cultural profile of Judaism. What this recommendation—or rather demand—suggests, of course, is that Europe was by and large ill prepared to include the Jews as bearers of a distinctive national and religious culture within its civil society. Or to express it in more contemporary terms, the overriding conception of civil society in Europe was hardly pluralistic or multicultural. To quote Count Clermont-Tonnerre’s declaration to the French National Assembly in 1789, “Jews should be denied everything as a nation but granted everything as individuals.”

Even so, the emancipation of European Jewry did proceed, albeit in a gradual, piecemeal, and meandering, manner. The pattern and pace of that emancipation varied. Where a liberal conception of civil society held sway, Jews (as individuals) were more readily granted civil and political rights, although not always without hesitation. This was the case in France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Italy. Where civil

society was dominated by a specific cultural or ethnic nationality, or some form of Christianity, the cause of emancipation fared less well. Despite the likes of Kant, Herder and Hegel, who consistently articulated a neutral, indeed, cosmopolitan conception of civil society, Germany preferred to regard itself as a *Völkstaat* with a distinctive ethnic and Christian orientation. Allegiance to other national and religious cultures put one beyond the parameters of German civil society. In Austria, a similar pattern held. Although the multi-cultural nature of the Hapsburg Empire served to sensitize some Austrians liberals to the need to affirm ethnic and cultural diversity, for others it reinforced the resolve to preserve the nation's cultural identity, which Jews were welcomed to adopt while jettisoning their own. Similar considerations guided Hungarian liberals, who unabashedly made their support for the emancipation of Jews conditional on their Magyarization—the demand that they “speak the language of Hungary and sing its songs, [so as] to cleave to the fatherland we have acquired for ourselves.” In neighboring Poland, liberals likewise connected their support for Jewish emancipation with their struggle to secure the political and cultural integrity of their country. Polish liberals assumed that with proper encouragement the country's Jews—the largest and most distinctively Jewish community in the Diaspora—would adopt Polish culture and identity and be emancipated as individuals.

Elsewhere in Europe, emancipation was imposed by international intervention—a process that only reinforced the view that the Jews were aliens. After more than seventy-five years of resisting international pressure, Switzerland finally yielded, and granted its Jews full emancipation in 1874. As they gained their independence from Ottoman tutelage, the Balkan countries, Greece, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia were also subjected to various dictates from the great powers, which culminated in the Congress of Berlin in 1878. Each of the Balkan states complied with their treaty obligations to guarantee equal rights to all their inhabitants, irrespective of religion or ethnic

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origin. Romania, however, soon reneged, and persisted in withholding civil rights from its more than 250,000 Jews; it was only after the First World War that the Jews of Rumania gained full equality. Russia was even more recalcitrant, its millions of Jews gaining emancipation only with the October Revolution of 1917 and the overthrow of the Tsarist regime. The Baltic states—Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—extended civil equality to the Jews only after the First World War.

#### A CONCLUDING CONTRAST

Because the American experiment began by throwing out European blueprints, American Jews never underwent a process of emancipation, never had to answer a Jewish Question. The story of Jewish emancipation must also narrate the political and racial antisemitism which emerged in response to the Jewish Question. For Jewish immigrants from Europe, the historian Oscar Handlin observed, “the Atlantic crossing was liberating.... Democracy became a way of life that reordered the Jewish communities.” Especially in the aftermath of the Second World War, how could the recently liberated fail to contrast American inclusivity with European catastrophe?

The anti-Semites' concerted efforts to resist or rescind Jewish emancipation culminated with the diabolic Nazi scheme to effect a “final solution” to the Jewish Question. But to judge emancipation from the anguished perspective of the Holocaust would surely be to court what the late George Mosse has called the fallacy of a *reductio ad Hitler*. (In his memoirs, Mosse gives a vivid account of his family, one of the wealthiest in Germany, and its religiosity as expressed through its philanthropic support of Jewish institutions and humanistic culture.) Nonetheless, our reflections cannot but be conducted in the dark shadows of that genocidal horror. If it does not alter our historical judgment, it certainly must hone and refine our moral sensitivity to the many ambiguities of the emancipation of European Jewry—and ultimately with the efforts of all disinherited groups that sought and still seek entry into modern society.

That distinctive legacy marks the present—not just in rhetoric but in fact. Jews arrived in a country grounded in individual liberty and tolerant democracy, a “city on a hill” that for all its political and cultural upheavals was unburdened by vestiges of state-sanctioned persecution; what is more, by means of a mutually reinforcing convergence

of Judaism and Americanism, they came to define themselves by the liberal principles that defined the society at large.

Let me conclude with the Hebrew Bible's suspicion of the city, the *polis*. Cain, a rogue and a murderer, is the founder of the city. After having slain his brother Abel, the Bible says, "Cain went out from the presence of the Lord and dwelt in the land of Nod on the east of Eden...and he built a city," the first city to blot the face of the world (Genesis 4:26). The biblical wariness of the city is further expressed in the portrayal of Babel as a metropolis whose power and material success led its citizens to self-deification. Yet this very wariness paradoxically makes for a culture that is truly dynamic and self-critical. American sociologist Daniel Bell cast this founding sensibility of biblical faith as defining the vocation of the post-traditional secularized Jew, paradoxically affirming life yet ever alert to the inequities of the city.

Today, at a time when many harbor growing doubts about the promises of America, some historical perspective is in order: in view of the anguished and tragically ill-fated struggle for Jewish emancipation in Europe, American Jews, spared that ordeal, can both avoid complacency and express a healthy mistrust of the city even as they join in a robust song of thanksgiving for their uniquely pluralistic and prosperous home and the unprecedented opportunities it still affords. ■

SANDRA VALABREGUE, "ILAN XVI" (DETAIL), 2018

