

Ludwig Philippson, “Pamphlets and Polemics,” *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums* (May 7, 1842)

Abstract

The article excerpted here engages a significant pamphlet war in the development of nineteenth-century German-Jewish religious life. The occasion was the so-called second Hamburg Temple Dispute, over the introduction of a revised prayer book in the Hamburg Temple in 1841 (a first round of debate had surrounded the founding of the Hamburg Temple Association in 1817–1818). The debate is significant in part because it involved several of the principal figures in the diversification of German and European Jewish communities into different theological and liturgical directions. Abraham Geiger (1810–1874) was one of the founding figures of Reform Judaism, while Zacharias Frankel (1801–1875) pursued a middle path between Reform and Orthodox traditions that would eventually coalesce into Conservative Judaism. The strongest opponent of the new prayer book was Isaac Bernays, rabbi of the Hamburg Jewish community; the Gotthold Salomon referred to in the article was the preacher of the Hamburg Temple itself. Both Geiger and Frankel had been among those solicited by the Hamburg Temple Association to offer opinions on the new prayer book, and then went on to publish their views. Geiger, a Breslau (Wrocław) rabbi, argued that, if anything, the prayer book had not gone far enough in its revisions, whereas Frankel, a Dresden rabbi, felt that it had gone too far (while conceding that it at least represented an attempt to improve the existing prayer book); both Geiger and Frankel rejected the opposing view that no revisions were permissible. Ludwig Philippson (1811–1889) himself, a rabbi in Magdeburg, is best known as the founding editor of the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums* (from 1837), the most successful German-language newspaper for Jewish affairs in the period. Philippson, too, steered a middle course between Reform and Orthodox tendencies, though in a different way than Frankel. Debates about the nature of the messiah, the balance of Hebrew and German in the service, the role of music and song, and the derivation of certain terms or practices from Sephardic and Ashkenazic traditions all featured in the Hamburg Temple Dispute as in the broader discussions surrounding Jewish religious life in the nineteenth century.

Source

Magdeburg, April 22nd. Received. (Pamphlets and Polemics)

[...]

The Hamburg Temple Dispute. A Question of Time, by Dr. A. Geiger, Breslau, 1842. *Letter to Dr. Z. Frankel*, by Dr. G. Salomon. Hamburg, 1842. Both of these important recently published brochures address the dispute over the new prayer books for the temple. Dr. Geiger and Dr. Frankel were among those asked by the Temple Association to provide an expert report on the Hakham's *Shema*. Dr. Geiger proceeded openly, simply rejecting the *Shema* in his “expert report” but then published the abovementioned brochure, in which he offers a critique of the prayer book from his own point of view. Not so Dr. Frankel, who combined report and critique in one, first forbidding the publication of his text and then publishing it all at once in *Der Orient*. Apart from the latter circumstance, which has no significance as such, one needs to ask: What would have been the outcome if the two experts had expressed their criticism, their specific and general misgivings about the prayer book, at the same time? A confusion of which the general public, which is so deeply involved in the matter, would never have made sense. This is the case to such a degree that Dr. Frankel's report, in particular, is claimed by every party, and that the temple claims the disapproval of the *Shema*, and the Hakhamites the critique of the prayer book as a sign of

victory. And yet this latter must greatly displease Dr. Frankel, since none of the experts have condemned the “outmoded statute” as fully as he does, so that he calls into question not the reform itself but rather how far the reform has gone.

In his pamphlet, Dr. Geiger portrays the temple as lagging behind itself, and thus as inconsistent. We believe that the text printed in no. 16 demonstrates the incorrectness of his premise that the temple is an outgrowth solely of the freest self-determination, whereby his individual objections can also be left to themselves. To be sure, it is an error on his part if he wishes to stamp the temple as a theological faculty, a house of God as an academy of Jewish theological studies—this was never part of the intended conditions of its existence. But he commits a sin, yes, a sin that we do not wish to share with him when he manages to attack the lives of the temple’s preachers, which are filled with blessed works, as fruitless and unsuccessful because they do not strictly devote their time to the higher scholarly formation of Jewish theology. As if at the time when they began their work, they did not have far more important things to do than engage in abstract scholarship! As if in those days the current of Jewish life was not already being diverted towards science! No, do not let the young be so ungrateful towards those on whose shoulders they stand: in the end, one would become sick of working. Does Geiger not sense that behind us are youths who, guided by such examples, will also look askance at our work because our works are also just the beginning of science! The writer of those lines could not boast of a positive reception on the part of the temple preachers— immediately following his first appearance, he was quite ill-used by one of them. He nevertheless managed to regain the proper perspective, and “this insures after all that the trees do not grow into the sky.” Let us learn not to overestimate our own powers, to respect the achievements of others—and to get along! This notwithstanding, Geiger’s text will remain important for the history of prayer reform, and nobody wishing to undertake a thorough and consistent treatment of the subject will be able to ignore it.

Frankel’s report offers more fundamental criticisms of the prayer book. With the evidence that the temple’s rites are not shaped freely and unconditionally, with respect to both the principle of transaction and the outward conditions of its origins and perpetuation, Geiger’s objection falters with regard to the temple itself. Frankel, however, attacks the manner of the reform to the degree that it lacks *Gemüthlichkeit*, has removed much that Jewish listeners have held dear since their youth, and viewed from this standpoint he rejects many alterations, for example the adoption of Sephardic rather than Ashkenazi piyyutim etc. In the pamphlet in question, Dr. Salomon, a master of polemic, speaks out against them and, without abandoning the bounds of good manners and decency, speaks harsh truths to Dr. Frankel. Please permit us a few remarks of our own. This is and cannot be the place to go into detail. We intend before the end of this year to complete **a history of the reform of Jewish worship and its results thus far**, and that is where the individual points of dispute over specific prayer formulas belong. Let us keep to the general. Any reform has something alien about it at first, which is initially uncomfortable in comparison to that which is customary. The touchstone of reform from the perspective of what is comfortable and homey is whether this discomfort disappears after several attempts, and a feeling of familiarity and acceptance arises, leading to higher satisfaction. Now Dr. Frankel has judged an existing institution to be uncomfortable, and, as a consequence, we also have the right to draw comparisons with other existing institutions. What may be said in favor of the temple is that it has *actually* instituted reform, while all others offer *ideas* alone. If one enters the temple in Hamburg or the synagogue in Dresden, a visitor accustomed only to the old ways will at first feel out of place in both. He who is used to speaking and conversing with his God out loud must remain silent in Dresden; everything he has to say is said for him by an old Hasan and an often weak choir; he, who is used to moving about freely in his synagogue must remain still and immobile; the curiosity about how the sale of *mitzvot* will turn out ceases to apply; he enjoys the honor of a *mi sheberach* and if it is not his name being called, then not. If he is a rigid friend of the old ways, he will reject Dresden and Hamburg; if he is a friend of reform, of a fervent lifting of the spirit, he will soon be bored by the services in Dresden, which offer him no solid substitute for his participation in prayers, for his uninhibitedness, etc., in his manner of speaking he will

say “this is neither fish nor flesh”; to remain silent for hours or wordlessly to move one’s lips, and to *listen* only—is torment. Matters are different in the temple in Hamburg; frequent responses, an uplifting song, a comprehensible, stirring prayer, an *excellent* sermon, these are the ingredients which, if he is at all capable of being uplifted, must excite him and stir his soul. One must not take the Leipzig temple as a yardstick here. The hustle and bustle of Leipzig during the fairs, the lack of means make Leipzig a pale imitation.—Dr. Frankel will forgive us these parallels; he evokes them himself, and his candor permits all others to do the same. To be sure, he may say that the service in Dresden is also not yet complete and ideal, and we appreciate the achievement of the Dresden synagogue, too, and have sufficiently acknowledged it in the pages of the *Allg. Zeit. des Judenthums*, but he is all the more constrained to leave the achievements of others unassailed and to be happy that the paths have been laid, which are so few, and such short stretches of which have been trodden. Salomon’s open letter takes up Dr. Frankel’s assertions and submissions with great vividness, much wit and ingenuity, and seeks to disarm his opponent in a compelling manner. But it is so much all of a piece that it is not advisable to pick out individual elements but rather to leave it to those interested in the matter to read it in its entirety. There is no doubt that Dr. Salomon has done his cause a new service. But it is equally certain that nothing substantial can come of these particular discussions. Instead, they do more to confuse than to clarify matters for the wider public.

Source: Ludwig Philippson, “Pamphlets and Polemics,” *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums*, vol. VI, no. 19 (May 7, 1842), pp. 281–83.

Translation: Pamela Selwyn

Recommended Citation: Ludwig Philippson, “Pamphlets and Polemics,” *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums* (May 7, 1842), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-vormaerz-to-prussian-dominance-1815-1866/ghdi:document-5009>> [August 23, 2025].