

A General Assembly of German Israelites (1893)

Abstract

In the 1890s, antisemitism was on the rise in Europe. The Dreyfus Affair of 1898 highlighted the discrimination and hatred faced by Jews in France. After their formal emancipation in 1848, German Jews had successfully entered into various social, economic, and professional spheres. As the century drew to a close, however, the economic displacement resulting from industrialization combined with a period of economic depression to spark anti-Jewish hostility. The following editorial in *Die Zeitung des Judenthums* called for an assembly of German Jews to combat the growing antisemitism. This assembly, which first met in 1893, prefigured the founding of the *Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens* [Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith], the most important institution of Jewish political activism in Wilhelmine Germany.

Source

The history of the suffering of our tribe and our faith is age-old and always remains the same; the forms under which it manifests itself, however, change according to the general cultural conditions of the respective nations. One can say that every century gives birth to a different form of Jewish persecution [*Judenhetze*], and it truly requires an indestructible faith in the unconquerable power of humanity's capacity for moral development not to despair in the end. This faith has maintained us Israelites in the midst of the terrible storms that have befallen us over the course of the millennia, and this belief in the moral progress of the entire human race, this truly inalienable legacy of our tribe, will surely also help us overcome the misery of the difficult time in which we are living. It would be unworthy of our glorious – and, admittedly, tear-soaked – history to despair faint-heartedly. Israel's paths are heavy with tears: that is simply the way it is. But our consolation lies in the history of our development, in the certainty that we have already prevailed against forces very different from the motley rabble of modern Jew-baiters. For us, too, it has been written: "And the gates of Hell, that is, of evil, will not overcome you, Israel."

Of course, the sight that the present holds for us is, needless to say, a very painful one, and the insults to which our community of faith is exposed, especially at present in Germany, are so very hurtful – the more hurtful [they are], the more strongly developed our general sense of honor [grows], [as does] our awareness of belonging to the total culture of the age. From the days of Moses Mendelssohn and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing down to our time, German Israelites have shown a quest to participate to an ever greater extent in the development of German intellectual life. Like nowhere else in the world, this kind of mutually enriching interaction has taken place precisely in Germany. It is no coincidence that the rebirth of the Science of Judaism occurred in Germany. The critical method of the German mind landed in Jewish heads like an explosive spark, and it is because of this that the modern Science of Judaism must be traced back to the roots of German criticism in general. On the other hand, and in equal measure, it is no mere coincidence that it is precisely in those areas of human endeavor in which the German spirit shows its noblest development, namely in the poetic and in the musical [original text illegible] that [original text illegible]. It is simply the case that a profound fusion of these two elements, kindred spirits by birth, has taken place. It almost seemed as though the spirit dwelling in the German Israelites was awaiting release from a spell, in order to immediately merge with the kindred German spirit, to fuse with it. There is no other example in our entire history, not even in Spain. A spiritual fusion of the two elements, one comparable to that which has taken place in Germany for nearly a century and a half, did not occur there. Of course, it would far exceed the bounds of a newspaper article to explore this thought in greater detail. Let this allusion therefore suffice. Excepting all of the noise coming from a

large number of anti-Semitic heroes of the day, it is and remains an indisputable truth of the psychology of nations that German and Jewish ways of thinking and feeling are related on the deepest level. Who knows whether the true reason behind the antipathy may not be found in this very abundance of commonalities. Perhaps the law of repulsion governing like poles also holds true in the moral world.

Be that as it may. The painful insult that the current movement presents, and must present, to us German Israelites lies in the fact that we know that we are of *one* spirit with the German people, while also realizing that some nevertheless seek to erect a wall of separation and push us back before the time of Moses Mendelssohn. For that, and nothing else, is the goal of our bitter enemies. They want to rob us of our share of the cultural life of the German people, which they begrudge us even more than the supposedly immense treasures of a few great Jewish capitalists and merchants. But we will not let them rob us of this our share in the indestructible German idealism! It is true that German idealism is showing a few worrisome blind spots at the moment. But that will pass, and when it glows again in its clarity and brightness, which encompasses the whole world, the nocturnal ghost of Jew-baiting in Germany will also come to an end.

We must not remain inactive, however, with regard to this process of development; we must not simply wait out the time with folded arms. Rather, it is our duty to take up the fight against the enemy with all legitimate means. If we do that, we fulfill a duty not only toward ourselves, but also toward the general public. For the fight that our enemies have forced upon us is a fight to assert a right that was finally won after unspeakable exertions: namely, the right of civic equality among the believers of all religions! This right is a precious possession of the entire German people, not only the German Israelites. This right must remain inalienable, untouchable. And our task in this difficult time is to ensure that this is so. Thus, by investing our moral and intellectual powers in asserting a right that has been won, we simultaneously take up the fight for the right as such. In so doing we fulfill one of the very first commandments of general ethics.

We believe that there cannot be the least bit of doubt about this. Opinions, however, diverge on the means by which this battle should be waged. Some have suggested that it is necessary to provide for a representation of specifically Jewish interests in the parliaments of the individual states, that is, chiefly in Prussia and in the German Reichstag. [Original text illegible] that is the worst thing that could happen. The constitution knows only representatives of the people as a whole, and none whatsoever of any kind of special interests. Through this kind of interest representation, we would considerably diminish the moral force of our position within the generality. This entire struggle is not about Jewish interests so much as about legal interests, namely legal interests of the highest order. Of course, we Israelites participate in the assertion of these interests more fully than all other citizens of the state. All those members of our parliaments whose passion for partisanship has not clouded their sense of the law are the natural representatives of our Israelite interests, to the extent that these interests pertain to citizenship, and to the extent that the same appear threatened by the machinations of our enemies.

However, in addition to the rights of citizenship, whose diminishment is the purpose of the efforts of various parties, we Israelites also have other interests that concern us merely as members of a sharply articulated religious community. We ourselves must stand up to assert *those* rights. Here, no one else can – or should – act on our behalf. Here, we must stand up for ourselves and step openly before the German people and tell them who we are in the midst of the German national community and what meaning we should have, and what we are willing and entitled to demand. In public assemblies, into which we Israelites send our deputies, we should declare the nature of the conditions within the Israelite religious community of Germany. Such accounts presented by knowledgeable and unbiased men will invariably give rise to all kinds of reform proposals, whose implementation must then be left to further general assemblies.

It is our opinion that the leading men among the Israelites of Germany should not hesitate to undertake

the preliminary work necessary for such a general assembly. It is high time that the indifference or resignation that has already taken hold of many circles within our religious community be replaced by a refreshing desire for action, a liberating work for the threatened totality. The way things are with us, even members who have fallen away from our religious community are involved in our struggles, and it is vain self-delusion to wish to deny this.

May our words find a loud resonance in all the hearts of our German Israelites! May it be granted us to hear, this very year, of the deliberations of the first general assembly of German Israelites. Truly we do not lack for suitable men to speak important words at such an assembly. Can there be any doubt that serious words worthy of being taken to heart, proclaimed from such an eminent place, will not also be willingly received into the hearts and minds of our fellow Israelites? Such a meeting, however, will undoubtedly exert a positive influence not only on the German Israelites, but also on the entire German people. That is why we once again call upon our men in Israel: gather together and proclaim to the entire people what we are in Germany, and what we wish to be and continue to be.

Source: Dr. J. Kastan, "Eine Generalversammlung deutscher Israeliten," *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums*, March 31, 1893, pp. 148-49.

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