Introduction When Rabbis Became Novelists: The Emergence of Jewish Literature in Nineteenth-Century Germany

For many in the academy today, defining what Jewish literature is represents a difficult if not impossible undertaking. Does this term refer simply to literature written by Jews? Or does it include literature written about Jews? Is it limited to literature that is produced for a Jewish readership, or can it be literature that is read primarily by non-Jews? Does literature need to be written in a Jewish language such as Yiddish, Hebrew, or Ladino to qualify as Jewish literature, or can literature in English, French, or Arabic also be considered Jewish literature? If we consider that the terms "Jewish" and "literature" each mean different things to different groups of people at different times, determining what Jewish literature is may become even more a case of "defining the indefinable."[1] To be sure, many people would classify Sholem Aleichem, Philip Roth, and S. Y. Agnon as classic Jewish writers. What, though, about Franz Kafka? What about Marcel Proust? And perhaps most importantly, why do we need this category at all? What do we stand to gain from grouping disparate texts together under a rubric of Jewish literature that few of their authors would have used to categorize their works?

By beginning with these reflections, I want to underscore a difference between the academic world we inhabit today and a pivotal moment in the nineteenth century when something new called "Jewish literature" began to appear on the scene. Jews in Europe enjoyed reading fictional texts long before the ideals of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and internal Jewish reform efforts helped unleash those dramatic transformations in the structures of traditional Jewish life that Jewish historians typically identify with modernity. From the

sixteenth century on, Central and Eastern European Jewish culture favored Torah and Talmud study and privileged Hebrew literacy at the same time as it allowed for the development of a rich tradition of epics, romances, legends, fables, and chapbooks written in Yiddish, many of which survived well into the nineteenth century.[2] Long before the modern era, Yiddish literature had become a fixture in the Ashkenazi world, sanctioned reading material for women that was doubtlessly enjoyed by men as well, if only as a guilty pleasure acknowledged to occupy a lower cultural plane than the sacred texts men were commanded to study. For Jews in the German lands and many parts of the Austrian Empire in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, nevertheless, something new began to happen. Following the example of eighteenth-century Jewish pioneers such as Moses Mendelssohn and nineteenth-century government initiatives seeking to promote greater integration, Jews in large numbers began to give up Yiddish and adopt German as the preferred language of daily life.[3] During the nineteenth century, German Jews experienced an unprecedented level of social, geographical, and economic mobility. Surrounded by new opportunities, Jews began attending German-language schools, abandoning traditionally Jewish professions such as peddling and petty trading, and adopting the mores and behavioral norms of bourgeois culture. As Jews moved into new worlds and fashioned new identities for themselves as Germans, as Europeans, as members of the middle class, and as Jews, they encountered a rapidly expanding German-language book market, a dizzying world of lending libraries and book-traders supplying a quickly growing reading public with a seemingly constant source of newspapers, journals, novels, plays, and serialized fiction.

Moritz Daniel Oppenheim, the celebrated painter of nineteenth-century German Jewry, captured this dynamic in his 1866 painting *Sabbath-Ruhe* (Sabbath Rest), one of the twenty images in his frequently reprinted collection, *Bilder aus dem altjüdischen Familienleben* (Pictures of Traditional Jewish Family Life) (Figure 1). Oppenheim here portrays an elderly woman in a Jewish quarter hunched over what seems to be the *Tsene-rene*, the traditional Yiddish women's Bible. The woman sits next to her son and her young grandson, neither of whom is reading on the Sabbath, even though the young boy holds a book in his

Figure 1. Moritz Daniel Oppenheim, *Sabbath-Ruhe auf der Gasse*, 1866. Gift of the Oscar and Regina Gruss Charitable and Educational Foundation, Inc., 1999–86. Photo by John Parnell. Photo credit: The Jewish Museum, New York / Art Resource, NY.

arm, which judging by its bookmarks is a text he is studying. Inside the home at the edge of the image, however, something else is happening. A young woman sits alone, in fashionable dress, surrounded by an almost magical light as she is absorbed reading a small, modern-looking book. Oppenheim's portrait of the young woman is reminiscent of eighteenth-century paintings such as Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *A Young Girl Reading* (c. 1776) (Figure 2) and clearly evokes the huge popularity that novel-reading enjoyed from the eighteenth century on, particularly among women. As Leopold Stein, a leading reform rabbi, noted in the commentary that was often published along with Oppenheim's prints in the nineteenth century, the number on the door frame

fatefully sets the painting in 1789, the year of the French Revolution.[4] In the vision of the past created by this painting, Stein comments, the "modern age" comes to traditional Jewish life not from without but from within, through magical encounters with new forms of literature, through windows opened up by Jewish women's traditional penchant for reading in the vernacular.[5]

In the year of dramatic transformation that Oppenheim tries to capture in his painting, there would have been little doubt what our young woman was reading. Stein assumes that the young lady is reading German literature. Given the prominence of best-selling novels such as Sophie von La Roche's *Die Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* (The History of Lady Sternheim, 1771) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (The Sorrows of Young Werther, 1774) on the international book market in the late eighteenth century, this certainly seems plausible. Yet Oppenheim's portraits, with their visions of traditional Jewish families embodying middle-class virtues, are notorious for strategically blurring the world for which he painted and the lost world he sought to capture in his art (Figure 3).[6] In this sense, for its Jewish viewers in 1866 and afterward, *Sabbath-Ruhe* may have summoned up a different set of associations. Oppenheim himself claimed that the literary genre of the ghetto tale that Leopold Kompert did so much to popularize starting with his breakout volume *Aus dem Ghetto* (From the Ghetto, 1848) was one of the sources of inspiration for his idyllic portraits of traditional Jewish life.[7] By the time Oppenheim produced *Sabbath-Ruhe* and most of his other images of traditional Jewry in the 1860s, Kompert and other authors had produced numerous volumes of ghetto tales, and German Jews were doing much more than reading the same types of German and European literature that their non-Jewish neighbors were enjoying. In this period when Jews were rapidly ascending into the ranks of the middle classes, undertaking projects of religious modernization, and engaging with the secular world in ways their medieval ancestors could not have fathomed, Jews also launched their own form of secular culture: fiction written by Jews for Jews that, like Oppenheim's prints, also sought to navigate between tradition and modernity, between Jewish history and the German present, and between the fading walls of the ghetto and the promise of a new

Figure 2. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *A Young Girl Reading*, c. 1776. Gift of Mrs. Mellon Bruce in memory of her father, Andrew W. Mellon. Image courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

cultural identity as members of a German bourgeoisie. It is this literature that is the subject of this book.

The institution that made it possible for this literature to be so widely disseminated was the German-language Jewish press. By the 1860s, the German-Jewish press had mushroomed from its modest beginnings with David Fränkel and Joseph Wolf's journal *Sulamith* (1806–1848) into a diverse menu of options including newspapers, journals, yearbooks, and other print media, many of which appealed to readers across

Central and Eastern Europe, and some of which drew subscribers from North America and elsewhere.[8] Many periodicals, including *Sulamith*, had ceased publication by this time, but they had been quickly replaced by others, many of which did survive the test of time. By far the most prominent among these was the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* (Universal Jewish Newspaper), a newspaper launched in 1837 by Ludwig Philippson, a liberal rabbi and moderate reformer in the city of Magdeburg. Appearing biweekly or weekly, the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* continued publication until 1922, when it was absorbed by the paper of German Jewry's most significant organization, the Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens (Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith). Despite announcing on the cover page of every issue that it was a "non-partisan organ for all Jewish interests," Philippson's newspaper proved not to be everyone's cup of tea. By the mid-1860s, it had two major competitors among the increasingly vocal minority that came to characterize itself as orthodox. Samson Raphael Hirsch, the Frankfurt am Main rabbi who was the towering figure of German-Jewish orthodoxy, began editing *Jeschurun*, a monthly journal geared at "promoting Jewish spirit and Jewish life in the home, community and school," in 1854. In 1860, Marcus Lehmann, a rabbi in Mainz, founded *Der Israelit* as a "central organ for orthodox Judaism," creating a weekly (and sometimes biweekly) newspaper that absorbed *Jeschurun* in the 1880s and continued publication until it was shut down by the Nazis in 1938.

There were also competitors who targeted a similar audience as the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*, such as the Viennese *Kalendar und Jahrbuch für Israeliten* (Calendar and Yearbook for Israelites, 1842–1868), a Jewish almanac that Kompert coedited for some time, or the short-lived *Der Freitagabend, eine Familienschrift* (Friday Evening, A Family Journal), which Leopold Stein launched along with fellow reform rabbi Salomon Formstecher in 1859. Philippson himself, a tireless publicist, was also the force behind numerous other initiatives, including the *Jüdisches Volksblatt* (Jewish Popular Paper, 1853–1866), and the first major modern Jewish book club, the Institut zur Förderung der israelitischen Literatur (Institute for the Promotion of Israelite Literature). Administered by Philippson, Adolf Jellinek, and Isaac Jost, the Institut played

Figure 3. Moritz Daniel Oppenheim, *Das Laubhütten-Fest*, 1867. Gift of the Oscar and Regina Gruss Charitable and Educational Foundation, Inc., 1999–92. Photo by Richard Hori. Photo Credit: The Jewish Museum, New York / Art Resource, NY. Oppenheim's paintings of Jewish life often featured traditional Jewish families embodying middle-class virtues. In idylls of bourgeois family life such as *Das Laubhütten-Fest*, we find a prosperous family celebrating Sukkot as non-Jewish children watch with curiosity and admiration.

a pivotal role in making the Jewish book a staple of modern Jewish life, placing 200,000 copies of its fifty-five titles in libraries and private collections across Europe and the United States between 1855 and 1873.[9]

In the nineteenth century, the phrase "Jewish literature" was often a slippery one. At times it was still reserved for rabbinic commentary.