

Introduction

Jesus and the Jewish Question

No, they ain't makin' Jews like Jesus anymore,
We don't turn the other cheek the way they done before.
They ain't makin' Jews like Jesus anymore,
They ain't makin' carpenters who know what nails are for.
Well, the whole damn place was singin' as I strolled right out the door
"Lord, they ain't makin' Jews like Jesus anymore!"

—Kinky Friedman (1974)

From the end of the eighteenth century, Jewish proponents of modernization, enlightenment (Haskalah), and reform began to reject the traditionally negative Jewish views of Jesus in favor of increasingly sympathetic appraisals of him. This complex and intriguing trend in modern Jewish history has come to be known by scholars as the Jewish reclamation of Jesus. Typically, definitions of this reclamation are limited to Jewish scholarship on Jesus and Christian origins, ignoring the ubiquity of this trend within modern Jewish culture as a whole. However, since its origins in the Berlin Haskalah circle of Moses Mendelssohn in the 1780s, countless rabbis and theologians, philosophers and historians, intellectuals and activists, poets and artists, have attempted to reclaim Jesus as a Jew in a profusion of different ways. Throughout the modern era Jews have appropriated Jesus as a malleable cultural symbol—a figure who can serve as the paradigm for a variety of religious, political, and cultural ideologies and positions. In fact, Jesus became a central symbol in virtually *all* forms Jews created in striving for a modern Jewish culture.

Most Jewish movements and many Jewish intellectuals refigured Jesus to fit into their own creation of a modern Jewish culture and identity. This means that for different thinkers Jesus reflected the particular ideology of their movements, often serving as a model for such a vision of Jewishness; he could be viewed variously as a Reform rabbi, a fallen prophet, a suffering martyr, a tormented artist, a Jewish socialist

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revolutionary, or a Jewish nationalist. Jesus became a mirror through which Jewish thinkers could reflect their own particular ideological or spiritual vision; they could relate to Jesus on some level as a kindred spirit, proud or persecuted, nationalist or universalist, reformer or redeemer. As Jewish notions of self-understanding and self-definition changed and evolved, so too did Jewish perceptions of Jesus evolve to correspond to these new identities. In its essence, Jewish writing on Jesus tells us more about Jews than about Jesus. Thus, closely scrutinizing these multiple Jewish reclamations of Jesus provides us with a window onto how Jews have represented themselves in the modern world. By bringing together a variety of cultural sources this book seeks to explore the pervasiveness and centrality of the figure of Jesus to modern Jewish movements as diverse as Reform Judaism and Yiddish modernism.

Reclaiming the figure of Jesus functioned as an important part of modern Jews' attempts to secure a prominent place in Western civilization, to gain normalcy and even centrality in that civilization. Representing Jesus in a positive light served as a bridge between things Jewish and things Christian-Western and as a means of breaking down boundaries between the two. Embracing Jesus as a legitimate subject of Jewish discourse and cultural expression was a way of embracing the culture and civilization that had worshiped him as their Lord and Savior and at the same time persecuted Jews in his name. In this sense, Jewish intellectuals who were forging a new Jewish culture used the image of Jesus to simultaneously claim Western culture as their own and to show that Jesus was "just like they were." Differing images of Jesus often clashed with one another as these intellectuals seemed to be doing contradictory things—asserting their Jewishness while bringing themselves into Western culture. From the outset this process was beset with seemingly conflicting motives as the reclamation of Jesus has always involved Jews asserting his Jewishness and thus implicitly rejecting the Christian Jesus of Western culture. The Jesus that these Jews wrote about and portrayed was not the Christian Lord and Savior, but their ancient Jewish brother. Jewish writers have always disassociated the Jewish man, Jesus, from the Christian god, Christ, as they consistently tried to demonstrate the Jewish qualities of his life and teachings. This move effectively transferred ownership of the figure of Jesus, and

all of the cultural patrimony that flowed from him, to the Jews. Furthermore, this re-Judaization of Jesus also equipped these modern Jews with a potent weapon for critiquing a still predominantly intolerant Christian world as they asserted that the Christians had misunderstood Jesus' intrinsically Jewish teachings and "kidnapped" their ancient Jewish brother, who now had to be returned home.

By focusing on changing Jewish approaches to the figure of Jesus we can lay bare the process by which Jews created modern alternatives to traditional modes of Jewish identity, thought, and culture. In this sense, I argue that the "Jesus question"—how do modern Jews relate to the figure of Jesus?—is really a microcosm of the "Jewish question"—how do modern Jews define themselves in relation to the general non-Jewish environment? If we understand the "Jewish question" to encompass the difficult challenges posed by the Enlightenment and the emancipation of the Jews in Europe, such as their integration into modern European society and culture, and the search for new forms of Jewish identity, then we can look at the various stands on the "Jesus question" as strategies for negotiating these challenges. Thus, traditionalist Jews who rejected the changes wrought by modernity and chose to remain apart from non-Jewish culture typically maintained deeply entrenched negative views of Jesus and all symbols of Christian culture. On the other hand, those Jews who accepted the basic premise of participating in non-Jewish society and culture while forging new forms of Judaism and Jewishness often reenvisioned Jesus in more sympathetic terms as part of this process. The "Jesus question" is so entangled in the larger "Jewish question" precisely because of Jesus' dual status as a figure who simultaneously embodies the West and is associated with all that is not Jewish, while historically originating as a Jewish figure, a product of the first-century Palestinian Jewish world. This essential duality of Jesus makes him an ideal border figure whom Jews can embrace as part of their move toward things Christian, while rendering him meaningful only within a Jewish interpretive framework.

The phenomenon of Jews reclaiming Jesus as one of their own presents us with another way of understanding the process of Jewish modernization and integration into non-Jewish society. This modernization process has frequently been understood in terms of assimilation—the notion that the Jews transformed themselves and emulated

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their Christian neighbors in order to belong to “the West.”¹ Indeed, many of the thinkers and writers I will discuss in this book were accused by their more traditional opponents of “Christianizing” or “currying favor with the Gentiles” when they embraced aspects of Western (“Christian”) thought or culture. However, the Jewish reclamation of Jesus in all its various manifestations reveals a much more assertive and complex model of modernization and integration into non-Jewish culture, one best described as “transformative integration.”² Rather than simply adopting Western culture and its core narratives as their own, modern Jewish theologians, historians, and writers revised certain master narratives of European civilization, such as the story of Jesus and the origins of Christianity, in order to create their own counternarratives and competing interpretations.

These modern Jews also significantly revamped premodern Jewish perceptions of Jesus as part of this process. Traditionally, Jews had depicted Jesus in disparaging and unfavorable terms. From the early years of Christianity, when the religio-cultural conflict between Jews and Christians commenced and quickly expanded, Jews saw Jesus as a Jewish heretic and rebel who had incited the antagonism that now raged between the two communities. Although references to Jesus in the Talmud are scarce, those that exist unanimously portray him as a rebellious and deviant figure, a sorcerer and enticer (*mesit*) who is rightfully executed by the Jewish Sanhedrin (Sanhedrin 43a). The Talmud envisions Jesus as a clever rabbinic disciple who strays from the proper path, initiates an idolatrous religion, and ultimately pays for his transgressions against his people by suffering eternal punishment in a seething pit of excrement (Sanhedrin 107b, Gittin 56b–57a).³

In the Middle Ages, as relations between Jews and Christians worsened, and Jews increasingly became victims of anti-Jewish discrimination and persecution at the hands of Christians, the figure of Jesus became etched in the Jewish collective consciousness as the primary emblem of Christian antipathy. Popular texts such as the *Toldot Yeshu* (Life of Jesus), which presents a carnivalesque parody of the Christian gospels, circulated widely from as early as the fifth century, and helped to establish such negative images of Jesus in the Jewish folk imagination. These narratives portrayed Jesus as a *mamzer* (illegitimate child), a wily trickster and magician, who impudently challenged his rabbis

and led an insurrection against the Jewish establishment before being ultimately vanquished by the Jewish sages, led by Yehudah Ish Kariot (Judas Iscariot).⁴

As polemics and disputations between Christians and Jews continued to escalate throughout the Middle Ages, derisive images of Jesus proliferated in Jewish cultural discourse, by far outnumbering the few relatively tolerant portrayals that existed. Popular polemical anthologies such as the thirteenth-century *Nizzabon Yashan* (Old Polemic) systematically impugned Jesus' moral character in vulgar terms.⁵ A "semantics of hatred"⁶ developed in which Jews used puns and wordplay to express their disdain for Christianity's sacred figures and terms. Motivated by a combination of fear and contempt, Jews commonly refused to utter Jesus' name and he became known instead by such facetious designations and titles as *oto ha-ish* ("that man"), *ha-talui* ("the hanged one"), and *Yeshu ben Pandera* (which combines a corruption of the Hebrew name Yeshua with the surname Pandera and may have been an allusion to Jesus' illegitimate birth) and its Yiddish variant, *Yoyzl Pandrek* (a combination of the diminutive Yiddish name for Jesus—*Yoyzl*—with the surname *Pandrek*, a distortion of Pandera, meaning "Mr. Shit"). Legends and folk tales spread, depicting Jesus as a demonic bogeyman who was feared by Jewish children and mocked and despised by adults.⁷ By the close of the Middle Ages, Jesus and the religious symbols associated with him—the cross, the crucifixion, the Madonna, etc.—had become emblems of fear and repulsion in the minds and hearts of most traditional Jews; he represented all that was other, alien, and dangerous.

In light of this premodern tradition, we can see that with the onset of modernity in the Jewish world, such tremendous changes took place in Jewish cultural discourse that, by the end of the nineteenth century, numerous Jews viewed Jesus proudly as a devout rabbi and paragon of moral piety. There developed a widespread fascination with the figure of Jesus among European Jewish intellectuals, as the Jewish process of modernization involved a reevaluation—indeed a reclamation—of Jesus of Nazareth. In an ironic sense, this sort of positive appropriation of Jesus was more challenging to Christians' cultural claims on him than all of the premodern Jewish polemics disparaging Jesus. Thus, the Jewish reclamation of Jesus reflects a more aggressive approach by Jews to participating in Western thought and culture than is usually acknowledged,

and a far more complex engagement with non-Jewish cultural forms. If Roger Chartier's assertion that "the most pressing question inherent in cultural history today . . . is that of the different ways in which groups or individuals make use of, interpret and appropriate the intellectual motifs or cultural forms that they share with others,"⁸ is true, then to understand modern Jewish identity and culture, we need to examine Jewish appropriations of Jesus.

Throughout this book, I present examples of Jewish thinkers, historians, writers, and artists who share in the civilization of the West, not by mocking or mimicking it, but by appropriating, and thereby transforming, some of its key intellectual motifs and cultural forms. What this amounted to was, on the one hand, an attempt to insert Jews into the heart of modern Western civilization by claiming the West as Jewish, rather than merely assimilating into the West by erasing all signs of Jewishness. On the other hand, this process also played a central role in the creation of a uniquely modern and predominantly secular Jewish culture by generating revised images of Jesus that came to symbolize contemporary Jewish movements and ideologies. It is a subtle distinction between "insertion" and assimilation, and the line between the two is often blurred beyond recognition. However, I believe that it is crucial for a richer and more nuanced understanding of Jewish cultural history in the modern period that we attempt to uncover the tension between these two paths toward modernization.

Some of Homi Bhabha's ideas about minority cultural construction can be helpful in theorizing about the role of the Jewish reclamation of Jesus as part of the Jewish process of modernization and integration within (secularized) Christian culture in Europe and America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His notions of cultural hybridity and the importance of "in-between spaces" in carrying the burden of the "meaning of culture" are relevant and applicable to this trend. For Bhabha "in-between spaces" refer to a sort of no-man's-land of cultural space, which cannot be exclusively claimed by either the majority or the minority culture. He argues that "these in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself."⁹ For Jews in search of a new place—a redefined cultural space—within

Western-Christian culture, the creation of a Jewish Jesus represents such an “in-between space” that allowed them to elaborate a new strategy of communal selfhood, a new site of identity as part of this transformation and realignment of Jews and Jewish culture. Bhabha suggests that “the social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation.”¹⁰ For Jews, the Jewish reclamation of Jesus operated as an “articulation of difference”—a way to show how Jews are different than Christians while claiming not to be *too* different—that was simultaneously a product of cultural hybridity, while also legitimating the very process of cultural hybridity. Seeing the Jewish reclamation of Jesus as a practice of cultural hybridity and a new “strategy of selfhood” entails a more complicated understanding of modern Jewish identity, in which old models of “Jewish” and “Western” are transcended in order to create distinctly hybrid modern forms of identity and culture. In the following chapters I will uncover the myriad forms of this cultural hybrid: the Jewish Jesus.

In chapter 1, I begin with an overview of the “quest for the Jewish Jesus” in Western Europe and America from its origins with Moses Mendelssohn and the Berlin Haskalah to the “Jesus the Jew” trends in Jewish historiography and Reform theology, chiefly pioneered by Heinrich Graetz and Abraham Geiger. Whether they saw him as a rabbi, an Essene, or a prophet, these writers unanimously rejected the traditional Jewish view of Jesus as a rebellious heretic, and saw him as integrally related to Jews and Judaism. I attempt to contextualize these trends against the background of the “historical Jesus” movement in European Christian historiography in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In addition I see them as part of the process of the Enlightenment and the emancipation of European Jewry and the beginnings of modern Jewish historiography and the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (science of Judaism) movement. The assertion of the Jewishness of Jesus, which is the crux of Jewish historical writing on Jesus, functioned as an innovative form of anti-Christian polemics and criticism, as well as an important tool in the overall process of creating a modern Jewish identity, both individual and collective. As the Jews of the Haskalah, *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, and Reform movements redefined the essence and meaning of Judaism, Jewishness, and Jewish history for the modern age, they

also reconceptualized the place of Jesus within the world of Judaism in ways that conformed to and even bolstered such new definitions. The figure of Jesus thereby played an important role in their ideological reconstruction of the Jewish past. This chapter helps to establish the widespread nature of this modern Jewish appropriation of Jesus and examines the deeper cultural significance it possesses.

Against this background, I proceed to investigate the Jewish reclamation of Jesus undertaken by East European Jewish intellectuals, writers, and artists, as it is only within the context of the trend of reclaiming Jesus in Western Europe that we can understand the unfolding of the “Jesus question” in modern Yiddish and Hebrew literary and intellectual circles in the first few decades of the twentieth century. In chapter 2, I look at two raging debates within the Jewish intellectual community between 1909 and 1913, one in the Yiddish socialist press, and one primarily in the Hebrew Zionist press, which illustrate how profoundly the issue of Jesus was bound up with ideological self-definition for various circles of Jewish intellectuals. Both controversies involved some of the leading figures in the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia and literary world, Chaim Zhitlovsky and S. Ansky in the first instance, and Ahad Ha-Am and Yosef Chaim Brenner in the latter. The question of how far modern Jewish intellectuals could or should go in embracing Jesus and Christianity as part of the Jewish cultural renaissance they were seeking was at the center of both of these debates, as testing the boundaries of Jewishness often involved taking a stand on Jesus and Christianity.

In chapters 3, 4, and 5, I focus on images of Jesus, Christ-like figures, and Christian symbolism in modernist Yiddish literature and the visual arts by employing close readings of Yiddish texts and works of art. I situate this phenomenon within the broader context of the creation of a secular Jewish culture as these images serve as lenses through which to view some of the central tensions within modern secular Jewish culture and identity. The works I analyze here reflect the dichotomous conflicts that confronted Jewish modernists, such as the struggles between universal and particular, Jewish and Christian, traditional and modern, and religious and secular. The creation of Jewish literature and art with Jesus at its center was simultaneously an explicit act of cultural appropriation and a bold declaration of Jewish cultural autonomy. Embracing Jesus provided these writers and artists with a means of entering

into the Western canon and sharing the fruits of its creative treasures. Yet, it also allowed them to rebel against that canon by reclaiming Jesus in a way that separated him from Christianity and reinscribed him into Jewish history and culture. Using the figure of Jesus in such a manner also allowed these Jews to rebel against traditional elements within Jewish society in their attempt to imagine modern alternatives. The clusters of literary symbols and emblematic images that I explore represent important intellectual paradigms at the heart of modern, secular Jewish culture.

For such writers and artists as Sholem Asch, Uri Tsvi Grinberg, and Marc Chagall, refiguring Jesus as intrinsically Jewish and using Christological themes to express aspects of the modern Jewish experience were an integral part of creating a new and distinctive secular Jewish culture. Their rebellion against the theological-religious essence of Judaism included the creation of a Jewish Jesus that unhinged the figure of Jesus from his Christian theological moorings and allowed him to be part of an emerging secular Jewish cultural discourse. The Jewish writers and artists I examine in these three chapters were no longer solely interested in Jesus as a historical or theological figure; they became primarily fascinated with the image of the crucified Jesus for the symbolic meaning it could bring to their work as an emblem of martyrdom, failed redemption, tragedy, and suffering, both Jewish and universal. It was part of the modernist penchant for cultural hybridity and symbolic syncretism that was at the center of creating secular Jewish culture. However, in many ways, the central components of the reclamation of Jesus in the German Haskalah and Reform movements also permeated the portrayals of Jesus in Yiddish literature and the visual arts. For many Jewish writers and artists, the Jewish Jesus they created was a weapon against Christian anti-Semitism and cultural dominance; it served as a polemical thrust against Western-Christian culture by depicting Jesus as an inherently Jewish cultural symbol, and the Jews as the quintessential Christ-like victims of Christian violence and persecution.

I focus at length on the genres of literature and visual art because I am concerned with the creation of culture, and how the clusters of images, symbols, motifs, and themes employed in the creation of a modern, secular Jewish culture reflect the underlying ethos of that culture and mirror or convey its fundamental intellectual paradigms.

Since my focus is largely on the attraction to Jesus and Christian imagery among secular Jewish writers and artists, it is important to examine the modernist self-understanding and culture that they created. As part of explaining the appropriation of Christ-figures and Christian motifs, I will also examine the underlying poetics and cultural contours of Jewish modernism: the interest in cultural hybridity, in symbolic syncretism, and in blurring the boundaries between self and world, individual and community, Jew and Christian, traditional and modern, religious and secular, that formed such a large part of the Jewish modernists' identity and ideology. These Jewish writers and artists were constantly looking for new literary and visual symbols to represent the various crises and suffering that befell modern Jewry; they broke from explicitly theological responses to Jewish suffering, yet still utilized theological symbols, although these were totally divorced from their original religious context and framework. Poets and artists like Itzik Manger and Marc Chagall drew from rich storehouses of traditional symbols and images, tapping into the cultural consciousness of both Jews and Christians, in creating secular art and poetry that responded to uniquely modern problems.

My switch in focus from mainly German Jewish theologians and historians in the nineteenth century to Russian-Polish Jewish writers and artists in the twentieth century also reflects the shift away from theology as the defining essence of Jewish identity for East European Jewish intellectuals in favor of a cultural or secular nationalist self-definition. In particular, the literary and artistic concern with history and theology rests primarily in the realm of symbols, and, typically, the signification context of various traditional images and concepts is radically transformed by the modern artist and writer. For East European Jews at the beginning of the twentieth century especially, their relationship to traditional Jewish sources and theology was one of familiarity and rebellion; they were in a constant state of creative tension with these symbols and ideas, and frequently set out to subvert them. Subsequently, there often existed a strongly transgressive element in the use of Christ-figures and Christian themes among these Jewish literati and intellectuals. It has to be seen as part of their maverick stance as the avant-garde of the new Jewish culture; they dared to knock down boundaries and overturn taboos. Crossing borders and breaking down boundaries was

an integral part of the Jewish intellectual's quest for a modern Jewish identity and culture, especially in literature and the arts, and embracing the figure of Jesus was part of this radical transformation of Jewish culture.

I also explore how modern Jews have adopted the crucifixion as an appropriate archetype—theological, historical, literary, and visual—for representing Jewish suffering, both ancient and contemporary, culminating with the Holocaust. In chapter 4, I bring together significant trends in modern Jewish historiography, theology, literature, poetry, and art in an effort to demonstrate the evolution and widespread permutations of such Christological notions of the Jewish historical experience, what I call the “passion of Jewish History.” I elucidate how in these works Jesus’ Christian identity as a vicarious sacrifice is inverted and he is portrayed as being essentially a Jewish martyr, meaningful only within a Jewish context, and paradigmatic of Jewish experience. Whether by identifying the suffering Christ with the entire nation, or with the individual Jew, all of the profound meaning and significance traditionally associated by Christians with Christ and his passion became rendered as uniquely Jewish. The works I consider in this chapter often combine a palpable anti-Christian polemic, if not rage, with a desire to recognize Jesus as the emblematic Jewish martyr, and thereby frame Jewish suffering in traditionally Christian terms. These authors and artists saw the Jews as a “people of Christs” whose history embodies the passion typically associated with Jesus’ crucifixion. This chapter also explores some of the controversies elicited by this trend, as there were many Jews who reacted negatively to such an appropriation of the crucifixion as an emblem of Jewish martyrdom, especially during and after the Holocaust.

It must be stressed that the writers, artists, and intellectuals considered in this book often formed an avant-garde or constituted an intelligentsia; they typically removed themselves from popular Jewish attitudes and beliefs, as these were what they were rebelling against and often trying to transform. They formed an elite group within Jewish society to a certain extent, and consequentially, their ideals and ideas were not always adopted by the Jewish “masses.” This is especially the case with the Jewish modernist embrace of Jesus, as this phenomenon did not spread widely in the popular Jewish imagination where, partic-

ularly among East European Jews, negative views of Jesus and Christianity still persisted well into the twentieth century. In this respect, the phenomenon of Jews reclaiming Jesus was for the most part limited to the progressive, intellectual, religious, and literary elite segments of Jewish society. However, it must be added that much of the cultural fruit of this trend trickled down, as it were, to the general segments of Jewish society, for, it must be remembered, the dividing lines between elite and popular, and between high and low culture in Jewish society were not too firmly drawn. Many of the modernist artists and writers I examine, as well as public intellectuals like Chaim Zhitlovsky and S. Ansky, had wide followings, as their work frequently appeared in the popular Yiddish press. Therefore, I attempt to trace the reactions that these works provoked in intellectual circles, as well as the broader historical and cultural issues that are reflected in them, in an effort to establish both the ubiquity and the limitations of the Jewish reclamation of Jesus in modern Jewish culture.