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## JEWS REFIGURING JUDAISM

**Joshua Holo:** Welcome to the College Commons Podcast. Passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Jack H. Skirball Campus in Los Angeles and your host.

**Joshua Holo:** Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast where I look forward to sharing with you a conversation with Todd Endelman and Zvi Gitelman who are the co-editors of The Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilizations, Volume 8: Crisis and Creativity Between World Wars 1918-1939. Todd M. Endelman is Professor Emeritus of history and Judaic studies at the University of Michigan. He was educated at the University of California, Berkeley and Harvard University. He's the author of many books, most recently, Leaving the Jewish Fold: Conversion and Radical Assimilation in Modern Jewish History, which came out in 2015 and which was a finalist for the National Jewish Book Prize. Zvi Gitelman is professor Emeritus of political science and Preston R. Tisch Professor Emeritus of Judaic studies at the University of Michigan. He has written or edited 18 books, the most recent of which is the edited volume, The New Jewish Diaspora: Russian speaking Immigrants in the United States, Israel and Germany, which came out from Rutgers in 2016. Professors Endelman and Gitelman, thank you so much for joining us.

**Zvi Gitelman:** You're welcome.

**Todd Endelman:** I'm pleased to be here.

**Joshua Holo:** I would like to begin the conversation among the three of us by laying out the broad message or arc of the story between the world wars that you lay out in your introduction to volume 8 of The Posen Library. The picture you were you're painting is one of tremendous hardship and particular challenges in Eastern Europe and particular burgeoning opportunities in the new world. Can you each give us your take on that big canvas on which we're going to discuss some of the finer details of the Jewish experience in the interwar period?

**Todd Endelman:** This is Todd. I'd be happy to start. I think you've got the essence of our argument there that it's tendency in Jewish history to go back and look it at as a terrible narrative of suffering, discrimination and persecution. And what we try to emphasize is that it's neither necessarily good nor bad, that it was a very mixed picture. For example, economic prosperity was not the lot of most Jews in the United States or in other Western countries in the interwar years. Nonetheless, there was some social mobility. And the kind of persecution that Jews faced in Poland were... Continuing

impoverishment was the record. That wasn't the case. So different parts of the Jewish world were experiencing different things. But what's more important to just understand is that even in a period that could be seen as rather bleak and dark in terms of legal status, of active persecution, of physical threats, even in this kind of world, Jews continued to be creative.

**Todd Endelman:** Zvi and I have both argued that Jews were... Produced more in terms of creative literature, philosophical and religious tracts, political speculation, in this period probably than any other period. This period is extraordinarily rich despite the physical threat. So the question is, what's the relationship then between physical threat, persecution, a rather disastrous political situation and creativity? And I don't wanna paint too rosy a picture, but simply to see that the connection might be that extreme situations or increasingly extreme situations forced Jews to think aloud, that is to write, to try to mobilize, to try to activate themselves because they need to find solutions, and extreme situations produce extreme reactions, creative, etcetera.

**Zvi Gitelman:** We have a tendency to look at this interwar period through the prism of what happened immediately after, namely, World War II and the Holocaust or Shoah. It's very difficult to avert one's gaze from that prism. Obviously, the people living at that period, with some exceptions, did not foresee what would happen between 1939 and 1945. And yet, as the Shoah approached, some felt a sense, not only of persecution and difficulty, but of impending catastrophe. However, as Todd just pointed out, the perspectives varied by country. And I would add, not only by country, but within countries according to social class, religious persuasion, and even according to changes in regime. I would say that in the 1920s the Jews of the Soviet Union, who numbered about 2 1/2 million at that point, experienced more accessibility to education and vocational opportunities in the 1920s than did their American counterpart. So in 1927, for example, 13% of all students in Soviet institutions of higher education were Jews, even though Jews were less than 2% of the Soviet population.

**Zvi Gitelman:** This is at a time when numerous universities, professional schools and industries such as banking, engineering, the law, excluded Jews or limited the numbers of Jews in the democratic country of the United States of America. A decade later, by 1937, the Soviet regime had changed so that Jewish secular Yiddish-based culture, which had been promoted by that regime in the '20s, was obliterated more or less by the late 1930s. So for the Jews of Poland as well, between 1926 and 1935, there was one regime. After 1935 and President Pilsudski's death, it was a very different regime. Things changed radically in this very dynamic, short 20 years. If you look at our volume compared to other volumes, we cover a much shorter period of time, 20 years as opposed to centuries. And yet we took, what was it? 13,080 pages to do so, because it is a period of both crisis and creativity.

**Joshua Holo:** I would like now to break down with you some of the themes which have just emerged in this opening statement, so to speak, that we've just done the rounds on among the three of us. We made allusions, Zvi, you did, to the fact that there's an anachronistic tendency we have to cast the pall of World War II and the Holocaust backwards onto the period under discussion and in your volume and how that can

distort our understanding. Nevertheless, it is also true that this book, between 1918 and 1939, does cover the very, very early stages of mid-century European fascism and Nazism. So I'd like to ask you, Todd, to help us appreciate why we shouldn't retroject the holocaust onto this period, but at the same time appreciate Jewish reactions to what ended up in fact being the rise of Nazism.

**Todd Endelman:** Well, I think the important thing to remember is that you can't task anyone in the past with knowledge of something that they couldn't have had. But that said, the reactions of Jews across the world that we're dealing with, let's say about Eastern Europe, Western Europe, Central Europe, the United States, was remarkably different. And very frequently, what determined the reaction to Nazism was their past statement, their past political orientation, so that very frequently, those who were committed to what I would call an assimilation of stance, that is the belief that if Jews made themselves more like the surrounding population, they would be accepted. But for many of these people, 1933 meant, "Now we have to be even on better behavior. Now we have to conform even more. Now we have to rock the boat even less." And this was true in Europe, in Western Europe, to some extent even in Germany after 1933, where German Jews were quite happy to proclaim their patriotism. They wouldn't necessarily swear their allegiance to Hitler, but all the Jews who had served in the First World War in Germany, a considerable number, began to wear their medals.

**Todd Endelman:** In the United States, there was no immediate perception that this is going to end in a Holocaust. That would've would have been impossible. We have to remember to think that. I'll give you an example of the tendency not to realize the dangerous times. After the Nazis came to power, the Orthodox Rabbinical Seminary, not a Yeshiva, but an Orthodox Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin had to make the decision as to whether they would transfer themselves to Jerusalem. Now, you would've would have thought that would've would have been the easy solution, but because most of big the people associated with this Orthodox camp were anti-Zionist, there were real problems to doing it, and they didn't take that step, and as a consequence, many of them were unable eventually to escape. Their prior assumptions about the world, in this sense prevented them from grasping that they were in new territory, that the old rules did no longer apply. In general, the more one accepted the fact that Jews were a scorned minority, that there was no place for them in the world, more that such an individual would've would have seen the Nazi threat coming earlier.

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**Joshua Holo:** Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu), for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click "sign up" at [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu). Oh, and one more thing, help us out and rate us on iTunes, but whatever you do, do not give us five stars unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

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**Joshua Holo:** I want to launch into the next question by simply quoting as a centerpiece for the conversation even if we don't talk about it, a quote that you include in the volume for Mordecai Kaplan, in which he says the following from his tract toward a reconstruction of Judaism, which came out in 1927. He writes, "For the first time in its career, Judaism is challenged by the Jew more vigorously even than by the Gentile." And I wanna pose a question in this regard to Zvi specifically about the language battles among Zionists and non-Zionists and Jews of all stripes with respect to the primacy of Hebrew and Yiddish or versus Yiddish, and the motivations behind each camp for each language as just a locus for understanding this dynamic period of Jewish redefinition. Zvi?

**Zvi Gitelman:** This issue arises long before the interwar period. The Jewish attitude toward Yiddish was negative in both Western and Eastern Europe. In Western Europe, the German Jews, the Yekkes looked down their Semitic noses upon Yiddish as a bastard dialect of proper German. In Eastern Europe, the language was referred to by Jews as [foreign language], and not as Yiddish. With the emergence of modern literatures, the period of the Haskalah, which we got a bit later in Eastern Europe than it did in Western Europe, both Hebrew and Yiddish become systematized, grammars are developed, dictionaries are published, and belles-lettres are written and published. It's interesting that of the three great classics of Yiddish literature, beginning Mendele Moykher Sforim and then Sholem Aleichem, and Icchok Lejbusz Percec, Mendele and Percec wrote in both languages. The idea of bilingualism is of course strange to Americans, but it was rather widespread.

**Zvi Gitelman:** However, the languages began to rival each other because they had become politicized. Hebrew became associated with the Zionist Movement, and Yiddish mainly with the Bund, which was a Jewish Social Democratic movement, a very powerful one, anti-Communist, but also anti-Zionist, anti-clerical, if not anti-religious, and Yiddish became one of its fundamental platforms, so that the two languages became in a sense, rivals. What will be the language of the Jewish people at a time when romantic nationalism was sweeping the world and language was a very important component of any nation's identity? So, what do Jews do when they have such a decision to make? They call a conference. And they called the conference in 1908, which took place in the then Austro-Hungarian City of Czernowitz, today Chernivtsi in West Ukraine, to decide the issue. And they left the conference with those who are pledged to Yiddish still pledged to Yiddish, and those pledged to Hebrew still pledged to Hebrew.

**Zvi Gitelman:** So that rivalry continued, and as I say, it became politicized. The Hebrew associated with the Zionists, though there were some Yiddish advocates among the Zionists and Yiddish among the secularists. That also led to the establishment of separate school systems in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and other countries. In the Soviet Union however, ex-Bundists who had become communists persuaded the Soviet

Commissar of Enlightenment or Education, Anatoly Lunacharsky that Hebrew was the language of the class enemies, the language used by the bourgeoisie, which wanted to show off just as some people would use French or Latin to show their education, the language used by the clerical class, rabbis,   azzānim, [Hebrew] and so on, whereas Yiddish was the language of the [Hebrew] massen, of the toiling masses, of the ordinary worker.

**Zvi Gitelman:** Therefore, Hebrew became the only language that I know of that could not be taught or studied in the Soviet Union. This was at the urging of Yiddishist former Bundists, now communists, who persuaded the Communist Party as a whole and made Hebrew a subversive language. You might say that precisely because of that, Hebrew became the underground language and the underground cause of people who in the '50s, '60s and especially in the '70s, emerged as Zionists in the USSR. That conflict between Hebrew and Yiddish carried on into the United States where we had a network of Yiddish schools, which no longer exists, networks of Hebrew-speaking schools. I attended a school where everything in Judaic studies was taught in Hebrew. That school like every other, practically every other so-called Hebrew-speaking school in the United States, no longer delivers instruction in Hebrew. So there's a great deal to be said about language, politics and social change.

**Joshua Holo:** Todd, there were other dimensions to the ongoing debates in the Jewish world about Jewish self-definition beyond language. Can you share some of those dimensions with us and their stakes?

**Todd Endelman:** So the first point would be that one's self-definitions as a Jew dependent, of course, on how one defined the Jews as a group. If one thought of them as a collective body, that is say, as more than simply a group of people with the same religious views, if one thought of them as a people, an ethnic group, a nation, or a race, then one would take a very collectivistic view of the Jewish group and that would affect one's definition. For example, if one thought that the Jews were simply a group of people bound together by their religious views, that was the vision of the Reform Movement initially, then one didn't think that there were any kind of, if you will, collective interests of the Jews. One wouldn't want Jewish political parties, one wouldn't want Jews to distinguish themselves in various ways from other people. On the other hand, let's say in Europe, if one took the view that the Jews constituted a collective group, and that they differed from other people not simply by their religion, then one had the very different kind of politics and very different conclusions flowed from that. So there's always a connection.

**Todd Endelman:** Now, in the case of the Hebraists and the Yiddishists, both have accepted the fact that Jews had a collective historical cultural inheritance that marked them off from other people, whether they were believers or not. But there was always a relationship between politics, one's Jewish politics, and one's definition of the group as a whole, and one's sense of understanding of oneself as a Jew. For many Jewish communities in the '20s and '30s, for many of them, they were really pretty far removed from traditional life, and that many observers saw the real problem, as did Kaplan the time, as a threat to the Jews not being the external threats, but internal threats. In other

words, to put it colloquially, the Jews were their own worst enemies in the '20s, and certainly before 1933 because this was a period in which Jewish tradition was declining even in Eastern Europe, certainly in Western and Central Europe and in the United States.

**Todd Endelman:** And in places like Germany, for example, in the 1920s and the 1930s, German Jewry was already shrinking demographically, because Jews had no longer felt a particular attachment to Jewishness, or loyalty to the Jewish people, or bonds to the Jewish religion. Germany had extraordinarily high intermarriage rates and conversion rates. And what's amazing is that even after the Nazis came to power, Jews in Germany continued to convert in large numbers. Many people have projected, and it can only be a projection, hypothesize, that had Hitler never come to power, German Jewry was on the road to disappearing anyway.

**Zvi Gitelman:** The issue of who and what is a Jew did not arise in my view until the late 18th century, because it's at that point in France, in the United States and elsewhere that religion and ethnicity become separated, religion and the state become disaggregated. Historically, the Jews are, if not unique, at least unusual as an ethno-religious fusion, like for example, the Sikhs. And everyone before the late 1700s knew who a Jew was, what a Jew was, non-Jews knew it, and Jews knew it. And then the state, French and American and others, differentiated between nation and religion. As Todd pointed out, Reform Judaism originating in Germany and continuing its path in North America, said that Judaism is a religion, Jews are a religious group, and Jewishness is religion without ethnicity. Secularists argued the precise opposite. Jews are an ethnic group and they don't have anything to do with religion necessarily.

**Zvi Gitelman:** So what then makes a Jew if religion is factored out? Well, it's probably culture, and then we get into the debates that we talked about just before: Which culture? Which language? And what do you do with the religious elements of historic Jewish culture if you're not religious? And as Todd has written about extensively, some people, Jews included, believe that Jews were not a religion, primarily were not an ethnic group, but a race. We are still debating those terms 250 years later and we still have no consensus, neither in the self-proclaimed Jewish state, nor in the Jewish diaspora on the question of who and what is a Jew.

**Joshua Holo:** Svi, I'd like to ask you our final question. Give us some sense of aspects of the adversarial position of secularism versus religious religiosity in the broader debate or conversation about defining what is Judaism from the period in the book.

**Todd Endelman:** Unfortunately, and I speak as an Orthodox Jew, more or less, secular Judaism is pretty much dead outside of Israel. Secular Jews used to have a platform which included language, culture, education, the arts, theater and so on, a network of schools, as I mentioned, in many countries. Those no longer exist. There is no secularism today as an ideology, except that among very, very few people. And American Jews particularly are challenged by that, because as they drop away from traditional Jewish practice, and as Todd mentioned, this was happening among German Jewry, I might say, I might add that it happened among Hungarian Jews where the rate

of intermarriage was going up, where they had abandoned any Jewish language. This has happened in the United States, but in a fit of absent-mindedness, without ideology, without substitution.

**Todd Endelman:** I had the impression after 1967 that a kind of form of civic Jewishness had emerged: Jewish community centers, Jewish political activism, Jewish support for Israel. And then, of course, you get the 1990... Was it? National Jewish population survey, which shocks American Jewry into saying, "Wow! We're disappearing." And we continue to disappear because, for example, for the 350,000 or so Soviet Jews who immigrated to the United States, there's no alternative, no viable alternative to religion, whether it be Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, whatever, to being Jewish, and they are secular. And they would love to be Jewish, most of them. How can they do that in America?

**Todd Endelman:** At the same time, the divisions within the so-called religious camp have been radicalized, so whereas some elements of religious Judaism have become less attached to Torah and Mitzvot, others have moved in the opposite direction, especially in Israel, thereby sharpening the tensions not only between religious and non-religious Jews, but especially among religious Jews. The biggest fights are always within the family. So the absence of a viable secular Jewishness is a serious problem in today's world, except in Israel, where you have language, territory, culture, calendar, foods, music, and all the appurtenances of what we would call a nation or an ethnic group.

**Joshua Holo:** I wanna thank Todd Endelman and Svi Gitelman for this far-reaching and incisive and important conversation. Thank you so much for your time. It was really a pleasure.

**Zvi Gitelman:** Thank you.

**Todd Endelman:** Thank you.

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