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Introduction

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In the wake of Nazism and the Holocaust, racial categories of thinking featured in Jewish historiography largely in the context of their contribution to exterminatory antisemitism. Jewish historians asked how anti-Jewish hostility, which in fin-de-siècle Europe targeted Jewish civil status and social integration, turned murderous within a few decades. They also began to ask whether racial constructions of the Jew were solely a post-emancipatory phenomenon, first taking hold in the last decades of the nineteenth century. When they reexamined earlier European views, they discovered that essentialist ways of thinking about Jews were common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, even if not couched in the language of the natural sciences. In the Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture in 1982, Yosef Yerushalmi went even further, showing that racial constructions of Jewishness underwrote hostility to *conversos* in early modern Spain and Portugal and urging historians to reexamine anti-Jewish discourse in medieval Europe from this perspective.[1]

George Mosse was the first historian to suggest that Jews as well employed the language of race. In an essay first published in 1967 ("The Influence of the Volkish Idea on German Jewry"),[2] long before the holy trinity of race, gender, and class rose to prominence in the academy, Mosse articulated the assumptions that inform the articles that appear in this issue. However, as he was writing barely twenty years after the end of the war, Mosse realized that the notion that Jews also employed notions of race was likely to be offensive to many readers. At the start he acknowledged the unlikely nature of the connection he was about to explore, noting that the very title of the article might strike some readers as "presumptuous." Why, after all, would Weimar Jewish intellectuals have embraced a way of thinking that "laid the groundwork for the Jewish catastrophe of our times" and that was, in German hands, thoroughly hostile to Jewish aspirations of all kinds? Mosse's answer was that Volkish ideas penetrated German Jewry because they were part and parcel of a common cultural vocabulary that Jews shared with other Germans. In this way, Mosse was the first to show, German

Jewish thinkers (Martin Buber most famously) came to share many of the preconceptions of a system of thinking that was simultaneously directed against them.

By the time John Efron and Mitchell Hart published their book-length studies on related themes in 1994 and 2000 respectively,[3] the idea that some early twentieth-century European Jews thought in racial terms was less shocking – although, as Hart acknowledges in his article in this issue, it is still discomforting to encounter Jews using ways of thinking now widely discredited and condemned. One reason their work seemed less shocking was that when their books appeared, the history of racial thinking in general was being written differently. No longer was racial thinking seen as a monopoly of right-wing racists – Nazis, segregationists, skinheads, and the like. In the years between the Mosse essay and the Efron and Hart books, historians were rewriting the history of race, showing that essentialist ways of thinking about race pre-dated the rise of "scientific racism" in the late-nineteenth century and that these ways of thinking were deeply embedded in western culture. What was once labeled marginal and aberrational came to be seen as conventional and pervasive, part of the common cultural inheritance of all kinds of social and cultural circles. Given the extent of Jewish cultural assimilation in the West, it now seems much less surprising that some early twentieth-century Jews also employed racial categories and tropes, both in defending and defining themselves. Jonathan Schorsch's contribution to this issue rests on the same historiographical assumption – because New Christians were truly immersed in Spanish and Portuguese society, living ostensibly as Christians, they shared conventional Iberian views about blacks and mulattos in the New World.

The recognition that Jews too thought in racial terms raises a further problem of interpretation and presentation. Put simply: if Jewish social scientists, novelists, intellectuals, and physicians employed racial categories, are they to be charged with helping to perpetuate a way of thinking that was ultimately harmful to Jewish security? Addressing this troubling conundrum in his essay in this issue, Mitchell Hart reminds us that there was no one uniform system of racial thinking but a multitude of systems. He points out that racial theory was not a fixed system but a fluid mix of ideas, so labile that it could be used to support other collective categories (people, nation, *Volk*, *Stamm*). He also stresses that there was no inevitable path from the belief in racial ideas to the Holocaust, "no one fixed and inevitable political or ideological implication." Matthew Hoffman's article on the Yiddishist Chaim

Zhitlovsky underscores this point. As Hoffman shows, Zhitlovsky used the language of race to conceptualize a secular Jewishness but in a way that had more in common with mystical-religious notions of essential Jewishness than with biological or anthropological notions of race. In general, it can be said, Jews who used racial terms were not hard-core biological determinists who denied the possibility of individual and collective transformation. As Lisa Moses Leff explains in her contribution, the language of race in mid-nineteenth century France was not a weapon of conservatives and reactionaries seeking to construct a racial hierarchy. "Describing Jews as a race," she writes, "evolved as part of a conversation between Jews and non-Jews in a common effort to build a republican nation-state in the French Revolutionary tradition." The historiographical challenge in writing about race is to avoid a blatantly "presentist" perspective, one that indiscriminately lumps together each and every usage of the words "race" and "racial," and instead to view them in the context in which they appeared.

One hallmark of recent work on Jewish uses of racial language, well illustrated in the articles in this issue, is that it asks what task or function racial themes performed in the mental economy of those Jews who used them. Hart emphasizes that its attraction to Jewish physicians and social scientists was that it was "the fruit of progressive science." Leff concludes that French Jewish leaders and publicists used race because it was a "safe" or "neutral" way to express their difference without having to harp on religious differences, which were a much more explosive source of conflict. In her article, Nadia Malinovich highlights another dimension of the "usefulness" of racial language. French Jews, she finds, adopted "a racialized self-understanding" because it allowed them "to articulate the intangible bonds of community" – bonds that they felt but were unable to articulate in religious or doctrinal terms. I would supplement this insight with the observation that the decline of religious belief and practice among western Jews in general and their inability to speak of their collective sentiments in national terms (as a consequence of the terms of emancipation) allowed them to embrace racial language. Race was emotionally satisfying because it encompassed feelings that remained after religious practice and belief had fallen away. These Jews had no way of knowing of how disastrous racial thinking would soon become and how destructively it would be deployed against them.

Notes

1. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Assimilation and Racial Anti-Semitism: The Iberian and the German Models*, The Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture, no. 26 (New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1982).
2. George L. Mosse, *Germans & Jews: The Right, the Left, and the Search for a "Third Force" in Pre-Nazi Germany*, Universal Library ed. (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1971), chap. 4.
3. John M. Efron, *Defenders of the Race: Jewish Doctors and Race Science in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Mitchell B. Hart, *Social Science and the Politics of Modern Jewish Identity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).