

PAAJR at Inception: Novelty, Growth, and Birth Pangs in the Post—World War I Era

DAVID N. MYERS
University of California, Los Angeles

The ten years between the first organizational meeting of the American Academy for Jewish Research on June 15, 1920, and the appearance of the *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* in 1930 were consequential ones in the history of the field of Jewish studies. Of course, they were consequential years in global history, too. The devastating effects of the recently concluded Great War, as Paul Fussell and Jay Winter have shown, altered the psyche, memory, and literary imagination of the Western world.¹ There was a deep sense that humanity had fallen into an abyss from which it might not emerge. At the same time, there were glimmers of hope, even messianic in nature, that a new enlightened world order could emerge, as the new Weimar Republic seemed to augur.

In more mundane terms, World War I's end led to the redrawing of maps, as once-mighty empires were carved up into successor states

in Europe and the Middle East. With the boundary lines between new countries still porous, the pace of population movement hastened, including for thousands of Jews who made their way from the chaotic war zones of eastern Europe to what seemed at the time to be safe havens and new educational opportunities in central Europe.

An important effect of this movement, as the Hebrew poet Ḥayim Nahman Bialik noted, was that “distant relatives happened onto the same inn.”² German and eastern European Jews met in Germany and Austria in this postwar era not only as foils who affirmed each group’s one-dimensional stereotype of the other, but now, for the first time, as partners in the work of cultural reconstruction that was so urgently needed. Buoyed by an almost frenetic commitment to affirm life after so much death, the meeting of *yekkes* and *yidn* yielded an efflorescence of literary activity in German, Hebrew, and Yiddish.³ It also inaugurated a Golden Age in Jewish studies, marked by the emergence of innovative new journals and institutions, though also tempered by the Great Inflation of 1923 and the Great Depression of 1929.

It was in this same era of renewal following destruction that the American Academy of Jewish Research took rise. The Academy’s officers—president Louis Ginzberg, vice president Gotthard Deutsch, secretary Henry Malter, and treasurer Jacob Lautenbach—were all European-born and German-trained scholars who had jobs where Jewish studies scholars found employment in this period in the United States: at rabbinical seminars such as the Hebrew Union College and Jewish Theological Seminary or at a Jewish college such as Dropsie in Philadelphia. As the Academy’s declared mission made clear, the officers sought to raise the level of scholarly research in the field to that found in Europe. This was a heavy lift, given that the United States was not yet the fertile ground for critical Jewish studies that Europe had been for a century. The inauguration of the AAJR marked an aspiration that, to a great extent, has been realized beyond the wildest dreams of its founders. In many regards, Jewish studies in America represents the pinnacle of intellectual and institutional success in the field.

That said, the Academy idea went unrealized for the better part of the first decade, a function, one might surmise, of competing Jewish communal agendas, economic instability, and insufficient funding. It was only in December 1929 that the AAJR was formally incorporated. In contrast to its present incarnation, membership in the organization was not limited to scholars, but rather was open to three other groups desired for their potential for financial support: patrons, contributing members, and members. (It is curious to see, even at this early stage, how important the role of individual – and overwhelmingly Jewish – donors was to an important institution in the field.)

One of the key expenses that the Academy was to incur was the third of its six goals from 1920: “the issuance of publications.” This aim would reach its earliest state of fruition with the inaugural volume of the *Proceedings of the American Academy for Research (PAAJR)* in 1930.

Where does the journal fit within the story of Jewish studies publications – and within the larger history of the institutional growth of the field? In seeking to address these connected queries, I will situate the early *PAAJR* in two contextual circles: first, at a midway point in the two-hundred-year history of modern Jewish studies; and second, within the world of Jewish studies in the immediate post-World War I period marked by a frenetic pace of activity.

Marx’s Address: Recalling Zunz

Toward the end of his address on December 26, 1928, which was published in the first volume of the journal, acting AAJR president Alexander Marx recalled that “some years ago a small number of American Jewish scholars, recognizing the great need of such cooperative work, banded together and founded the Academy for Jewish Research.”⁴ Marx, the German-born scholar and librarian at the Jewish Theological Seminary, was filling in during the 1928–1929 academic year for Louis Ginzberg, who was a visiting professor at the nascent Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In his talk, Marx laid out his view of what work the field of Jewish studies

must undertake at this juncture in the United States. He began by noting with admiration and longing the kind of state-sponsored research in the humanities that was common in Europe. In particular, he called to mind the “great European academies,” principally German and French, that supported major collaborative scholarly projects such as the *Histoire littéraire de la France* and the *Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum*.⁵

That kind of collaborative work constituted the ideal in European scholarship, but was not the norm in world of Jewish studies that Marx knew. Jewish studies scholars all too often worked in isolation, without coordination, and even in an abject economic state. Marx recalled the case of Raphael Nathan Rabinovicz (1835–1888), the Russian Jewish scholar who embarked on a critical edition of the Babylonian Talmud in 1867, eventually producing fifteen volumes of *Dikduke Soferim: Variæ lectiones in Mischnam et in Talmud Babylonicum* – although he had to labor for twenty years as a traveling bookdealer in order to find the funds to publish the series. Marx saw this as a sad and revealing reflection of the state of Jewish studies.⁶

The challenge at hand was stark. Unlike the European academies, he noted, “no adequate body of this kind has Jewish literature as its province.” The role that an academy for Jewish research in America must play was to lift Jewish studies out of the middle ages – or the state of affairs that obtained in classical studies in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This required a new series of critical editions of the Bible, Midrash, and Talmud, “as well as of all the branches of science and literature which have come down to us from our rich past.”⁷ Work of this sort should be carried out according to the highest scholarly standards without succumbing to an excess of regard for earlier editions. Key to this task was a high-quality journal that could model, critique, preview, and promote the kind of scholarly labor that needed to be done.

In several important regards, Marx’s call evokes the founding programmatic essay of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement

in Germany more than a century early, Leopold Zunz's "Etwas über die rabbinische Literatur." Writing in 1818, Zunz sought to elevate the critical study of Jewish texts to the highest European levels, especially since now, he wrote, "we have access to tools greater than those available to scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries."⁸ In related fashion, Zunz believed it essential to undertake wide-ranging research into every sphere of postbiblical Jewish literature, but that such work must rest on "good preliminary works" that included "critical editions of manuscripts, good translations, accurate reference works, biographies and the like."⁹

It is curious that Alexander Marx felt the same need to promote "good preliminary works" in 1928 that Leopold Zunz had in 1818. Hadn't the field of Jewish studies progressed from Zunz's starting point during the past century? In one sense, the field had grown exponentially in terms of the numbers of university-trained scholars and periodicals devoted to it. There were also a new quasi-academic institution, the modern rabbinical seminary, that arose in the mid-nineteenth century to employ serious researchers. But there wasn't yet a broad ethos of scholarly collaboration in the United States; that kind of spirit depended, Marx insisted, on "a large number of members and patrons."¹⁰ Nor had America yet come into its own as a self-standing center of Jewish studies scholarship. But the times were changing, both in terms of the spirit of collaboration and the stature of America in the field of Jewish studies.

PAAJR in the Institutional Marketplace of Postwar Jewish Studies

The first article published in the *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* was an evaluation of Isaak Markus Jost, the early nineteenth-century Jewish historian, by Salo Wittmayer Baron. Here Baron gave expression to his long-standing interest in the history of Jewish historiography, comparing Jost to leading Jewish as well as non-Jewish figures in Germany of his day. The issue also included another article focused on the nineteenth century: Israel Davidson's

analysis of the study of medieval Hebrew poetry in that period. Also included in this first volume were Louis Finkelstein's discussion of the origins of the synagogue in antiquity and Isaac Husik's treatment of "the last of the medieval Jewish philosophers," Joseph Albo.

The article by Baron was symbolically significant, coming when it did. He himself was a recent arrival to the United States, having moved from Vienna to New York to begin teaching at the newly established Jewish Institute of Religion in New York in 1927. Three years later, in 1930, Baron took up the Nathan Miller Chair in Jewish History, Culture, and Institutions, which was the first endowed position in Jewish history at an American university. Five years before that, in 1925, another fellow of the Academy, Harry Austryn Wolfson, was named to the Lucius Littauer Chair at Harvard in the field of Hebrew literature.

These two appointments marked a key source of validation for Jewish studies in the United States, anticipating the major expansion of the field in colleges and universities at the end of the century. At the same time, these appointments belonged to a broader synchronic history of institutional growth in Jewish studies in the postwar period. To wit, between 1919 and 1925, three major new scholarly institutions were established, each of which reflected a dual set of aims: on one hand, the need to collaborate more robustly in the wake of the war's destruction; and on the other, the opportunity to innovate and forge new intellectual and scholarly pathways.

The first of these institutions was the Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, which was established in Berlin in 1919.¹¹ The Akademie was originally conceived by Franz Rosenzweig, in concert with his mentor Hermann Cohen, as a site where academic and communal interests would be seamlessly blended. That idea ultimately did not gain sufficient support among potential backers in Berlin. So Rosenzweig transported the idea to Frankfurt and founded there his famed Lehrhaus. Thereafter, the Akademie was reimagined as a site of pure research by its founding director, the distinguished classical historian Eugen

Täubler. One of Täubler's first aspirations, which echoes a key aim of both Zunz and Marx, was to create a sweeping *Bibliotheca Judaica*, a compendium of critical editions of all major Jewish texts up to the eighteenth century. This monumental project proved to be beyond the capacity of the new institution. But the Akademie did set up three sections – Talmudic, Philological, and Historical – with teams of outstanding young researchers (e.g., Selma Stern, Fritz [Yitzhak] Baer, Simon Rawidowicz, Chanoch Albeck) – that engaged in collaborative projects, including the production of critical editions and collected writings of leading thinkers such as Moses Mendelssohn and Hermann Cohen. It is no doubt this collaborative impulse to generate scholarly building blocks that prompted Alexander Marx in his address in *PAAJR* to notice that the Akademie in Berlin “is doing very important work in different branches.”¹²

The second institution to take rise in this period was YIVO, the Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut (Yiddish Scientific Institute), which sought to contest the hegemony of Germany (and the German language) in Jewish studies and to allow a place for the growth of research in and about the Yiddish language. The scholar and activist Nokhem Shtif provided a key impetus for this initiative with his 1924 essay, “Vegn a yidishn akademishn institut” (On a Yiddish academic institute). The essay prompted eastern European Jewish intellectuals and scholars such as Elias Tcherikower, Jacob Lestschinsky, and Max Weinreich to begin to assemble in various locations after the war, principally Vilna, where YIVO made its first institutional home, and Berlin, where the organization's founding conference was held in early August 1925. Similar to the Akademie, YIVO was organized into different sections: Philological, Historical, Economic/Statistical, and Pedagogical. The sections both published scholarly journals and designed large-scale collaborative projects for teams of researchers. A key feature of YIVO's work was its reliance on the work of *zamlers*, amateur collectors of oral and material records of the Jewish people of eastern Europe.¹³

If YIVO and its focus on the material dimensions of eastern European Jewish culture served to counter the more intellectual-historical and German-centered orientation of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the new Yiddish institution also served as an ideological foil to a third center to take rise in this period: the Hebrew University, which formally opened on April 1, 1925.¹⁴ The ideal of creating a national university for the Jewish people in the Hebrew language emerged in the early years of the Zionist movement. But that goal actually stood at odds with another model that had considerable traction among supporters and potential faculty in the 1920s: that of a pure research institute based on the model of European examples such as the Pasteur Institute in France.¹⁵ Accordingly, in its first phase of development, the Hebrew University consisted of research institutes, including the Institute of Jewish Studies, which actually opened in December 1924, before the formal inauguration of the larger university. The institute attracted a cohort of renowned European-born scholars as permanent faculty, such as Gershom Scholem, Jacob Nahum Epstein, Shalom Albeck, Joseph Klausner, Benzion Dinaburg (Dinur), and later Yitzhak (formerly Fritz) Baer. It also drew a roster of well-known scholarly visitors in the late 1920s, including charter fellows of the AAJR such as Louis Ginzburg, Jacob Mann, and Max Margolis.

The three new postwar institutions—the Akademie, YIVO, and the Hebrew University—represented three distinct strands of postwar scholarly culture, operating in three different languages with three distinct cultural ideologies undergirding them (roughly put, German integrationist, Yiddishist/Diasporist, and Hebraist/Zionist). The competition between them created a kind of marketplace of competing institutional models and scholarly ideas. With its emergence, the American Academy for Jewish Research now entered this marketplace, seeking to find its footing as an American upstart with a large number of European-born scholars and with eyes on the model of European research institutes and academies.

A Periodical Renaissance in the Twenties

Alongside the new institutions of research, the postwar age witnessed an efflorescence in Jewish publishing, with books, newspapers, and journals appearing at an astonishing pace. The thirty-five-page inventory of periodicals that appeared in the *Jüdisches Lexikon* included hundreds of new journals and newspapers founded in the 1920s around the world. In Germany alone, there were ninety or so, with seventeen in Yiddish! This was but one sign of the veritable Jewish cultural renaissance underway in Weimar Germany, as Michael Brenner has described it.¹⁶

Among the new entries was a raft of scholarly organs, including that of the Akademie, the *Korrespondenzblatt des Vereins zur Gründung und Erhaltung einer Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*. The *Korrespondenzblatt* contained reports on the institution's operations, including its financial condition and sources of support, followed by concise articles, mainly by Akademie staff members, on their research in progress. This journal, which first appeared in 1919, joined a number of scholarly publications of older vintage, including the *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*, founded by Zacharias Frankel in 1851, and the *Mitteilungen des Gesamtarchivs der deutschen Juden*, established by Eugen Täubler in 1908.

There were a number of important scholarly publications in languages other than German that emerged in Germany in this period. Even before the first meeting of the Historical Section of YIVO in Berlin in 1925, a group of eastern European Jewish activists and scholars transported from Kiev to Berlin a large trove of documents relating to the devastating pogroms in the late stages and after the First World War in Ukraine. Under the guidance of historian Elias Tcherikower, they established the Ostjüdisches Historisches Archiv, which in 1923 published an important collection of documents in Russian and Yiddish related to the first stage of the pogroms.¹⁷ In the same year, a new journal spearheaded by the poet Hayim Nahman Bialik appeared in Berlin, called *Devir*,

which sought to accomplish a major ideological goal: to overcome the “sin of language” by forging a wide-ranging scholarly idiom in Hebrew rather than German.¹⁸ In an interesting mea culpa, the German scholar Ismar Elbogen, one of the three editors of the journal, declared that “only in it [Hebrew] can the proper expression for the development of each and every discipline and science be found; and only through its aid can a natural connection to living Judaism be found.”¹⁹

While scholars and authors writing in Yiddish and Hebrew found an uncommonly receptive home in Weimar Berlin, there were even larger centers of cultural activity in these languages elsewhere in this period. Yiddish flourished in many settings across the globe, from New York to Buenos Aires to Johannesburg, but Poland was by far the largest, with hundreds of publications appearing in Yiddish in the 1920s. Even before the establishment of YIVO in Vilna, new scholarly journals began to be published in the 1920s, led by the pioneering *Yidishe filologye* in 1924. With the founding of YIVO a year later, a new era of scholarship in Yiddish commenced. In October 1925, the YIVO newsletter *Yedies fun yidishn visnshaft-lekhn institut* started to appear, with frequency varying year by year. Each of the scholarly sections of YIVO assembled around it a cohort of researchers who generated journals in their field. The Historical Section, for example, put out three volumes of *Historishe shrift* (1929, 1937, 1939).²⁰ Meanwhile, two of the key figures in that section, Emanuel Ringelblum and Raphael Mahler, had founded a circle of junior scholars in Jewish history in Warsaw in 1923 known as the Yunger Historiker; the group put out a publication by that name from 1926–1929, which was followed by *Bleter far geshikhte*, which appeared from 1934 until 1938. Back in Vilna, YIVO created its flagship multidisciplinary journal, *YIVO bleter*, in 1931; it survived the later destruction of the extraordinarily vibrant Jewish culture in Vilna by reestablishing itself in New York in 1940.

As Yiddish letters and scholarship were passing through one of the most intense and exhilarating periods of Jewish cultural

production in the modern era – before the *khurbn*, or destruction, of the Holocaust – Hebrew periodical literature was also in the midst of a period of tremendous growth, especially in Palestine. The *Jüdisches Lexikon* inventory, which was not complete, listed some fifty new Jewish publications in Palestine between 1919 and 1929, almost of which were in Hebrew. They included the important bibliographic quarterly, *Kiryat sefer*, which the incipient National Library began to publish in April 1924. Shortly thereafter, when the new Hebrew University opened in April 1925, the library would be renamed the Jewish National and University Library. In that same year, the university's Institute for Jewish Studies began to publish *Yedi'ot ha-makhon le-madda'e ha-Yahadut*. This publication featured short articles, often inaugural addresses laying out the challenges of their respective subfields, by the Hebrew University's founding faculty in Jewish studies (for example, Gershom Scholem, Shmuel Klein, and Jacob Nahum Epstein). Four years later, in 1929, the university began to publish a general Jewish studies quarterly called *Tarbiz* that continues to exist to this day.

Independently of the university, the Palestine Historical and Ethnographic Society commenced a new journal in 1925 called *Zion*, devoted to the history of the land of Israel. Insofar as the scholarly talent present in Jewish Palestine at the time was affiliated with the Hebrew University, many of *Zion's* articles were written by professors such as Scholem, Klein, and Simcha Assaf from the university. This version of the journal appeared irregularly until 1933. Two years later, in 1935, the society produced a new series of *Zion* under the editorial control of two Hebrew University historians, Yitzhak Baer and Benzion Dinaburg (Dinur). The purview of this journal was expanded to cover the entire span of Jewish history. To establish this more transnational pattern, the editors included articles in the first volume on the history of Jews in Spain, Egypt, Iran, Poland, and Italy. *Zion* continues to appear until today and serves as one of the most important scholarly platforms in the field of Jewish history.

Conclusion

There are two noticeable features about the era in which the *PAAJR* began to be published. The first is the sheer volume and richness of Jewish cultural and intellectual activity of the day, including in the sphere of scholarly research, which at the time was often understood as an enterprise by and for Jews (in contrast to today's more ecumenical and open-bordered field). The second and related feature is the ideological competition that often underlay Jewish scholarship in this era, particularly among researchers who wrote in Hebrew and Yiddish, who were often affiliated with the Zionist and Yiddish nationalist movements. There was indeed a *Sprachenkampf*, or battle of languages, involving Hebrew and Yiddish, but also German, that played out in Palestine from at least 1913, when a new institution, the Technikum, was established in Haifa.²¹ What would be the language of instruction for Jewish students in the country? Or more germane to the interests of this article, what would be the language of scholarship? Early supporters of the Technikum believed that only German could serve the task, but severe opposition and protest from indignant Hebrew activists decided the battle on behalf of that language. Battles of this sort were hardly restricted to Palestine. Jewish activists in eastern Europe fervently demanded that Yiddish be recognized as the Jewish national language and be considered a serious scientific language on a European level.

As noted above, all of this linguistic and ideological competition made for an intense marketplace into which the *AAJR* and its journal entered. The Academy's founding Fellows were European-born scholars who knew well of developments in other locales and languages. They wrote for scholarly journals in Europe and Palestine.

And yet, the *PAAJR* had its own particular American mission to fulfill. It was to compete in the marketplace of the day by creating in a Jewish studies scholarly voice in the English language that met the highest standards. It was not alone in this task. The *Jewish Quarterly Review*, established in England in 1889, had moved to

Dropsie College in 1910 at the initiative of its president, Cyrus Adler, who later served as one of five founding honorary members of the AAJR. *JQR* was an early indication of the importance of English and the United States for the future of the field. Emerging two decades later in 1930, the *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research* served as yet another indication of the future ascendance of the United States as a major world center of Jewish studies. At the same time, it made its own signal contribution to one of the most robust periods of scholarly growth in modern Jewish studies – a period marked by new opportunity and a spirit of innovation, as well as by the grave economic and political challenges brought on in the post-World War I era.

Notes

- 1 See Fussell's classic *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), and Jay M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).
- 2 David N. Myers, "'Distant Relatives Happening onto the Same Inn': The Meeting of East and West as Literary Theme and Cultural Ideal," *Jewish Social Studies* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 5–100.
- 3 Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).
- 4 Alexander Marx, "Address of Acting President Alexander Marx, December 26, 1928," *PAAJR* 1 (1928–1930): 6.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *Ibid.*, 4–5.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Leopold Zunz, "Etwas über die rabbinische Literatur," in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Gerschel, 1875), 5–6, translated as "On Rabbinic Literature," in *The Jew in the Modern World*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 247.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Marx, "Address," 6.

- 11 See the *Korrespondenzblatt des Vereins zur Gründung und Erhaltung einer Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* 1 (1920), as well as D. N. Myers, "The Fall and Rise of Jewish Historicism: The Evolution of the Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 63 (1992): 107–44.
- 12 Marx, "Address," 5.
- 13 On the origins and early growth of YIVO, see Cecile E. Kuznitz, *YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture: Scholarship for the Yiddish Nation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- 14 See the comprehensive volumes on the history of the Hebrew University, *Toldot ha- 'universitah ha- 'ivrit bi-Yerushalayim* from 1997 (edited by Shaul Katz and Michael), and Hagit Lavsky (2005 and 2009), published by the Magnes Press in Jerusalem.
- 15 See David N. Myers, *Re-inventing the Jewish Past: European Jewish Intellectuals and the Zionist Return to History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 47.
- 16 See the wide-ranging but not exhaustive entry "Jüdische Presse," in *Jüdische Lexikon: Ein enzyklopädisches Handbuch des jüdischen Wissens* (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1930), Band IV/1, xxii–xxiv. For the number of Yiddish journals in Berlin, see Delphine Bechtel, "Les revues modernistes yiddish à Berlin et à Varsovie: La quête d'une nouvelle Jérusalem?," *Études germaniques* 46, no. 2 (April–June 1991): 161–77. See also Brenner, *Renaissance of Jewish Culture*.
- 17 See Tcherikower's edition, with an introduction by Simon Dubnow, *Antisemitism un pogromen in Ukraine, 1917–1918* (Berlin: Mizreḥ-Yidishn hištorishn arkhiy, 1923). See also Efim Melamed, "'Immortalizing the Crime in History ...': The Activities of the Ostjüdisches Historisches Archiv (Kiev–Berlin–Paris, 1920–1940)," in *Russian Jewish Diaspora and European Culture*, ed. P. Wagstaff, J. Schulte, and O. Tabachnikova (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 373–86.
- 18 *Devir* 1 (1923): xii.
- 19 *Devir* 2 (1923): 15.
- 20 See Cecile Kuznitz's entry "YIVO" in the online *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, at <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/YIVO> on 1 July 2019.
- 21 On the language battles in Palestine, see, for example, Yael Chaver, *What Must Be Forgotten: The Survival of Yiddish in Zionist Palestine* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 17, as well as the entry "Sprachenstreit" in *Enzyklopädie jüdischer Geschichte und Kultur*, ed. Dan Diner (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2011–), 5:555–57.