

## The Debate on the Essence of Judaism and German Jewry at the Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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This essay focuses on the debate over the essence of Judaism, *das Wesen des Judentums*, in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Germany. In the late 19th century, German Jews were at a turning point. On the one hand, the process of emancipation that had begun a century earlier seemed successful, if slow; on the other, the tide of anti-Semitism showed no signs of abating. Against this persistent hostility, German Jews decided to found defensive institutions, a move they had long resisted out of concern that any assertion of Jewish separation from German society would cause a further increase of anti-Semitism. The most prominent of these protective institutions was the *Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens* (CV, the Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith). Although the CV began with a defensive posture, it understood itself as a liberal, secular, and non-political organization, since it did not want to articulate any separation between Jews and Germans. Its early policy, “mission indoors” and “apologetics outdoors,” revealed both its ambivalence and its ideological weakness; it asked its members to be better German citizens and told the German people that the Jews were not harmful to society. Its main activity was legal support of members vexed by anti-Semitic prejudice. It soon became clear that the CV was too weakly responding to anti-Semitic forces. A stronger policy was demanded, and the self-consciousness of Jewishness intensified.

It was in this context that German rabbis and intellectuals began to discuss what Judaism was and what it should be. Adolf von Harnack, a liberal Protestant theologian, was a major inspiration for this debate, as he insisted that Judaism had nothing to do with the Gospel, the essence of Christianity, and rejected the prevalent academic tendency to emphasize the Jewishness of Jesus. Liberal rabbis and intellectuals were shocked, since they had thought that liberal Jews and Protestants could walk together, at least in the academic sphere, by means of a historical and objective methodology. The influence of Harnack's views inspired many Jews to resist anti-Semitic Christian efforts to define the essence of Judaism.

The essay analyzes the argument of the young liberal rabbi and future CV leader Leo Baeck and the counterarguments of Isaak Breuer, an Orthodox Jewish intellectual; Jakob Fromer, an eastern European Jew; and Ahad Haam, a Jewish nationalist. This analysis demonstrates the change of the tone among liberal German Jews, who now sought and expressed their Jewish identity, intensifying the tension between being German and being Jewish.