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## A Vision Come True

### Abraham Geiger and the Training of Rabbis and Cantors for Europe

More than twenty years ago, Louis Jacobs (1920–2006) stated in a landmark article entitled *Jewish Theology Today* that, regrettably, “there is no department of Jewish theology, as there is of Christian, at any university.”<sup>1</sup> The opening of the School of Jewish Theology at the University of Potsdam (Germany) on November 19, 2013, has rendered this statement invalid. Earlier that year, the Union of Progressive Jews in Germany and Masorti Germany (associated with the Conservative stream of Judaism) signed a contract with the University of Potsdam to establish the school as a fully-fledged department of Jewish theology. Backed by the Federal State of Brandenburg, the University of Potsdam offers undergraduate programs as well as Master-level programs in Jewish theology which can lead to ordination by the liberal Abraham Geiger College or the conservative Zacharias Frankel College. Rabbinical training at both seminaries is monitored by the General Rabbinical Conference of the Central Council of Jews in Germany (ARK) which, together with the rabbinical seminaries, sets academic standards for rabbis and cantors ‘made in Germany.’

What appears to be a mere bureaucratic act is, in fact, a historic milestone in the development of European rabbinical training. Similar to the theological options open to pastors, imams, and priests, Jewish theology will finally become a regular academic subject in Germany, thus eligible to receive financial support from the state.

## It Began with the Enlightenment: Abraham Geiger and Academic Rabbinical Training

The beginnings of modern education for rabbis and cantors and an academic approach to Jewish theology are closely linked to the career of Rabbi Abraham Geiger (1810–1874). To honor Geiger’s illustrious career and crucial leadership qualities, Germany’s first post-War rabbinical seminary now carries his name. More than a century after Geiger began his struggle to Reform Judaism, Leo Baeck

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1 Louis Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology*, 1973, p. 1.

explained his achievements: “The past was discovered and with it the essence of the present was won; a new generation that was conscious again of its Judaism was gradually created.”<sup>2</sup>

By Geiger’s time, *de jure* civil emancipation had already been granted to Jews in Central Europe. This, however, came at the cost of subordinating rabbinical legal authority to the law of the land; the process of which transformed rabbis into a kind of civil servant. This acquiescence of power may have begun as early as 1820 when Ruben Samuel Gumpertz (1769–1851), a banker and one of Berlin’s community elders, made it clear to the state authorities that after relinquishing all judicial authority, the rabbi was nothing more than a “guardian of the kosher” and thus could not be compared to Christian clergy. Challenging the assessment that the rabbi was essentially a ritual practice specialist, Abraham Geiger pursued the goals he inherited from his mentor Leopold Zunz (1794–1886), the Renaissance man of Jewish studies, namely, – “to fashion out of Judaism a new and freshly animated Jewry.”

In 1835, Geiger published the first volume of his periodical *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift für jüdische Theologie* (‘Academic Journal for Jewish Theology’). In his opening essay, Geiger charged rabbis with the duty to fuse “the inherited with the demands of the present.” Rabbis would have to become representatives of Jewish theology. In 1838, Geiger championed an alliance of theologians and community rabbis. He was forced to separate the two roles in light of the absence of academic rabbinical education in his time and the impossibility of imagining academic excellence being linked to practical community service – something we take for granted nowadays.

Geiger argued that establishment of a Jewish theological faculty would be the litmus test of *de facto* Jewish emancipation. Geiger developed a detailed curriculum for just such an institution in 1870 and was fortuitous to live to see its implementation in 1872 when the Academy for the Science of Judaism (*Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*) in Berlin was founded shortly before his death in 1874. While over time rabbinical studies at the Academy laid down a substantial academic foundation for rabbis, education for Jewish cantors remained academically undeveloped for a long time. A first attempt towards incorporating cantorial studies into the academy was made by Moritz Deutsch who founded a short lived cantorial seminary adjacent to the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau in 1856. Although there had been some cantorial instruction at the teacher training seminary at Große Hamburger Strasse in Berlin, no educational institution had specialized in systematic training of cantors since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Despite all efforts to the contrary, a substantive debate

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<sup>2</sup> Leo Baeck, *Judentum*, in: *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*<sup>2</sup> 3, Tübingen 1929, 488.

on a reform of cantorial education did not emerge. Ironically, it was not until 1936, in the shadow of National Socialism, that a cantorial school was finally founded. The Jewish Private Music School Hollaender was actually a conservatoire, and was called *Beth Chasanim* ('Cantors' House'). There, for the first time, students not only received instruction in liturgical music for the synagogue but they also studied general music theory as well as Jewish history and tradition. The institution did not last however, having arisen against the backdrop of the rise of Nazism in Germany. *Beth Chasanim* only operated until 1939. In 1942, the Nazis also closed the Berlin Academy for the Science of Judaism and most of the faculty and students perished during the Holocaust. Abraham Geiger's demand for equality for rabbinical training in Germany was reduced to a mere historical footnote.

## A Vision Come True: the Abraham Geiger College

Since then, Germany has experienced a renaissance of Jewish life, epitomized by the founding of the Abraham Geiger College in 1999 - a rabbinical seminary that has taken Geiger's vision to heart. In 2013, the Zacharias Frankel College for Conservative (*Masorti*) rabbis was added to the Potsdam endeavor. These developments run parallel to some orthodox non-academic rabbinical training facilities supported by the Ronald Lauder Foundation.



**Fig. 1:** Former German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle with Rabbi Students of the AGK (right). Foto: Tobias Barniske

The first class of Abraham Geiger College began its studies in 2001, the same year Abraham Geiger College became part of the University of Potsdam. Another landmark was the College's admittance to the European Union for Progressive Judaism (EUPJ) during the EUPJ's Biennial in 2001 in Barcelona. The first rabbinical ordination conducted by the Abraham Geiger College – in fact the first ordination of rabbis in Germany after the Holocaust – took place in Dresden in 2006.

In 2007 the Abraham Geiger College opened a cantorial school to train male and female cantors for German and European Jewish communities. Following final evaluation by the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) in 2010, the Abraham Geiger College became a fully-accredited ordaining institution, making its graduates eligible for membership in the CCAR, as well as in the General Rabbinical Conference (ARK).

The Abraham Geiger College itself is a non-for-profit organization and registered charity. Headed by a president and a rector, it is supported by the Leo Baeck Foundation and is an incorporated foundation under the Civil Code, as per the Foundation Law for the Federal State of Brandenburg (*Stiftungsgesetz für das Land Brandenburg*, or *StiftGBbg*) of 20 April 2004. The Leo Baeck Foundation seeks both to expand and strengthen European Jewry and create an interfaith dialogue. These objectives are specifically pursued through procurement of funding for the Abraham Geiger College (and the Zacharias Frankel College) in Potsdam to assist it in carrying out its enlightened public-spirited missions. The foundation also grants fellowships and promotes interfaith projects and activities. The Abraham Geiger College is overseen by the Board of Trustees of the Leo Baeck Foundation.

In addition to the Leo Baeck Foundation's backing and supervisory role, the Abraham Geiger College also draws funding from private and public sources including the Federal German Government, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany, the Federal State of Brandenburg, and the Central Council of Jews in Germany. Furthermore, rabbinical and cantorial studies are indirectly funded by the State of Brandenburg: Academic work takes place at the state-accredited University of Potsdam where Professor Admiel Kosman, academic director of the Abraham Geiger College, holds a chair for Talmud Studies. As a publicly-funded national institution entrusted with training non-orthodox rabbis and cantors, the finances of the Abraham Geiger College are monitored by the government:

As of the 2013 summer semester, twenty-eight students are currently enrolled at the Abraham Geiger College: seventeen students (eleven men, six women) in the rabbinical studies program, and eleven students (six men, five women) in the cantorial studies program. The student body hails from a host of countries – including Argentina, Germany, France, FSU, Hungary, Israel, Norway, Poland,

Serbia, South Africa, and Sweden, forging truly multilingual learning community. Some students speak four and even five languages fluently.

At present, rabbinical and cantorial studies are integrated into the extensive curriculum of the Jewish theology department at the University of Potsdam and are embedded in the broader university context. Studies at the College lead to a Bachelor of Arts degree upon completion of the cantorial studies program, or a Master's in Jewish theology at the University of Potsdam. Fluent Hebrew is a prerequisite. As part of their program, rabbinical and cantorial students spend one year of their studies in Jerusalem to further improve their language skills and develop high-level abilities in textual study.

An essential pillar of rabbinical and cantorial education at the Abraham Geiger College is community work or work as part of socially responsible internships. Based on the concept of practical 'hands-on' education, the curriculum stipulates that students will be placed in the community (preferably in bigger German communities and abroad) in the first year of studies; from the second year on, rabbinical and cantorial students may, if they have the personal qualification and maturity, engage in community work independently. As a rule of thumb, students travel six to ten times per year to a weekend at their placement community. Among other roles in the community, they are entitled to lead synagogue services and/or hold religious education classes for children and adults.



**Fig. 2:** Ordained Rabbi students of the AGK in 2011: Yuri Kadnykow, Antje Yael Deusel und Jonas Simon (from left). Foto: Tobias Barniske

A faculty of male and female rabbis and cantors from all over Europe supports the students' development with ongoing evaluation in each of the various segments of their training. Each student is assigned a mentor. Graduates are also asked to

participate in a post-ordination program, which offers graduates counselling and mentoring during their first two years after ordination.

Abraham Geiger College charges no tuition fees to its students, as university education is free in Germany. Moreover, thanks to the support of the YES Fund of the Women of Reform Judaism, the Rabbinic Training Fund of the European Union for Progressive Judaism, and the Ernst Ludwig Ehrlich Scholarship Foundation, our students are able to cover their living expenses through grants and scholarships provided by our partners.

## Equality at Last: The Founding of the School of Jewish Theology

The opening of the School of Jewish Theology at the University of Potsdam in the 2013 winter semester, has brought Abraham Geiger's vision to life – students of the rabbinical and cantorial programs can now study within the Bachelor of Arts program in the new theological department. The School of Jewish Theology consists of ten chairs. The faculty members conduct research and teach all the major areas of Jewish theology: Bible, Jewish Law, Rabbinic studies, liturgy, religious education, and vocational training, Jewish philosophy, Jewish history, and Jewish music.

In May of 2013, the World Union for Progressive Judaism in Jerusalem noted the achievement of Abraham Geiger College in a resolution that applauded Germany and the State of Brandenburg for this significant step – finally granting Judaism equal status with Christianity and Islam. As Rabbi Louis Jacob observed in 1973, Jewish theology differs from other branches of Jewish learning in that its practitioners are personally committed to the truth they are seeking to explore. It is possible, for instance, to study Jewish history in a completely detached frame of mind. The historian of Jewish ideas or the Jewish people or Jewish institutions need have no wish to express Jewish values in his own life.

A distinguished Jewish leader of today, Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, dean of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University's Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, welcomed the fact that Abraham Geiger College and the new *Masorti* training branch of the Zacharias Frankel College have developed a joint academic program in Potsdam: As a *Masorti*/Conservative Rabbinical School, the Zacharias Frankel College is dedicated to the philosophy, principles and values as inspired by Louis Jacobs, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Mordecai Kaplan, David Lieber, and other great modern visionaries. It builds on the thinking of positive historic Judaism and German founding fathers such as Leo Baeck and Zacharias Frankel.

The Zacharias Frankel College, therefore, relates the great German tradition of positive-historical Judaism to current global Jewish life. It assumes that Judaism in Europe and other parts outside of North America will continue to flourish and that rabbis are needed who will stand at its center.<sup>3</sup> With Abraham Geiger College, Zacharias Frankel College, and the School of Jewish Theology at the University of Potsdam, Germany now offers a unique international academic training center for rabbis and cantors, a program dedicated to strengthening the ‘European voice’ in world Jewry.

## References

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<sup>3</sup> Homolka, in: *Jewish Voice for Germany*, July 9, 2013, p. 23.