1997

Impression Management, Cultural Performance and Jewish Self-Presentation in Napoleonic France

Ronald Schechter
College of William and Mary, rbsche@wm.edu

Impression Management, Cultural Performance, and Jewish Self-Presentation in Napoleonic France

RONALD SCHECHTER
The College of William and Mary

The encounter between Napoleon and the Jews under his jurisdiction is not a new subject of historical inquiry. In particular, historians have discussed Napoleon's convocation of two special assemblies of Jews in 1806 and 1807. Each was designed to issue authoritative doctrinal rulings on the compatibility between Jewish law and civic virtue. Yet the historiographical analysis of these encounters has been limited largely to judgments in which Napoleon is either praised or criticized for his attitudes and policies toward the Jews,[1] and the Jews themselves are praised or criticized for their views and behavior in the special assemblies.[2] I do not wish to participate in the debate on whether Napoleon was "good" or "bad" for the Jews, or whether the Jews were right or wrong, sincere or insincere, in their cooperation with him. I would like to take what I see as the more interesting historiographical opportunity of viewing the Jewish assemblies as an example of minority self-presentation.

In recent years historians have come to appreciate the importance of self-presentation in the acquisition or exercise of power, but they have tended to concentrate on those persons or groups with a great deal of power, especially princes and élite social classes.[3] We know considerably less about the strategies of self-presentation employed by marginal groups concerned with improving their image. By paying closer attention to how such groups engaged in "impression management,"[4] historians can profitably combine the methodological approaches of the history of representation on the one hand and "history from below" on the other. In the following pages I will focus on the ceremonial surrounding the first of the two assemblies, often called the Assembly of Jewish Notables or simply Assembly of Notables, as a means of elucidating Jewish strategies of self-presentation. In particular I will concentrate on a festival that the Jews put on in honor of Napoleon's birthday on 15 August 1806.

In order to understand the significance of the Assembly of Notables some background on the "Jewish question" in Revolutionary France is necessary. Between 1789 and 1791 deputies to the Constituent Assembly frequently debated the question

of whether Jews could be citizens. As Gary Kates observed in an important article on these debates, the Jews were of great symbolic significance to the revolutionaries, who in turn used them to discuss larger and more pressing questions of citizenship.[5] Elsewhere in my own work I have tried to elaborate on this observation by showing that the Jews were especially useful for revolutionaries who were trying to conceptualize the notion of "regeneration."[6] In learned treatises from the 1780s and later in speeches to the Constituent Assembly, a number of French political thinkers treated the Jews implicitly as a test case to determine whether political and legal reform could lead to moral improvement, or, to put it more plainly, whether good laws could make good people. Since the Jews were universally regarded as morally corrupt—and the only point of disagreement on this issue concerned whether they were innately or circumstantially corrupt—envisaging their moral improvement or "regeneration" served to vindicate the conviction that all people could be improved by good laws.[7] As Mona Ozouf has observed, the main goal of the revolutionaries was the utopian project of creating "*l'homme régénéré*," or "the regenerated man,"[8] and in this respect the revolutionaries' preoccupation with the Jews and their regeneration appears less bizarre than at first sight.

Given the centrality of the Jews in the formation of ideas about moral regeneration, and given the centrality of the idea of regeneration to the Revolution, it is not surprising that the Jews were monitored in the years following the Constituent Assembly's decree abolishing their legal disabilities in September 1791. Would legal equality produce the desired moral improvement? By 1806, the abbé Grégoire, who had written a prize-winning treatise on the "physical, moral and political regeneration of the Jews" in 1787, was satisfied with the moral progress of the Jews, who, as he had cautioned in his first essay, would require at least two generations before completely losing their bad habits.[9] But others were less sanguine. Louis de Bonald, most notably, denied the feasibility of integrating the Jews into the French nation.[10] More immediately serious was the fact that Napoleon himself, though convinced that the Jews could be "regenerated," believed that the process of regeneration was unacceptably slow and that special measures were necessary to hasten it.

On 30 May 1806, after hearing complaints of Jewish usury from Christians in Strasbourg, Napoleon issued a decree in which he expressed his dissatisfaction with "certain Jews" in "several northern provinces" who "through the accumulation of the most immoderate interest put many farmers . . . in a state of great distress." He placed a one year moratorium on the repayment of loans to Jewish lenders. But in order to prevent Jewish usury in the future he thought it "urgent to reanimate among those who profess the Jewish religion . . . the sentiments of civic morality (*morale civile*) which unfortunately have expired among a large number of them due to the humiliation (*abaissement*) in which they have long languished." By blaming the deficient morality of the Jews on the "humiliation" of history, Napoleon was drawing on the standard regeneration argument made by advocates of civic

equality. He went on to call an assembly of "the best (*premiers*) among the Jews," to hear their council on "the means that they consider the most expedient to recall (*rappeler*) among their brothers the exercise of the arts and useful professions." He called on his prefects to draw up a list of 74 Jewish deputies chosen from among "the rabbis, proprietors and other Jews most distinguished by their probity and enlightenment (*lumières*)."[11]

In late July the deputies began their work in a meeting hall adjacent to the Hôtel de Ville. After electing officers and defining their functions, they were addressed by Louis-Mathieu Molé, Napoleon's *Maître de requêtes*. Molé reiterated the government's position on Jewish regeneration, which he concretized with a medical metaphor by stating that Napoleon's goal was "to suspend the progress of the disease," the disease being Jewish vice in general and usury in particular, and to hear the deputies' advice on "the means of curing it." He assured the deputies of Napoleon's "paternal regards," and reported that "His Majesty wants you to be Frenchmen," but he sternly warned them that they would "renounce that title" if they did not make themselves "worthy" of it.[12] Their task was to complete a "questionnaire" comprising twelve questions about Jewish law and its relationship to the obligations of citizenship.[13]

The answers to the twelve questions provided by the deputies, and later confirmed and elaborated upon in the purely rabbinical assembly of the Grand Sanhedrin, are worthy of their own discussion. Though I consider these answers elsewhere in my work, in particular through an analysis of their rhetoric, here I would like to consider what the Jews did beyond merely answering leading questions, and how they attempted to take control of the situation by staging a "cultural performance" in which they defended themselves against popular prejudices and moreover staked claims to equal rights in the newly conceived French "nation."[14] Though their "cultural performance" can be seen in many forms throughout the Napoleonic period, its most important elements can be seen in the birthday celebration of 15 August 1806.

The festivities began at 11 A.M., when the Jewish deputies, after holding an abbreviated session in their meeting hall, proceeded *en corps* to the principal Parisian synagogue in the rue Saint-Avoye. According to the official account of the festivities the audience included "Jewish and Christian spectators and distinguished citizens." The interior of the synagogue had been decorated with victory laurels, flowers, the monograms and arms of Napoleon and Josephine and the name of God. The ark containing the Torah was open, as on holy days, and an imperial eagle stood atop the altar. Upon the entry of the notables, an orchestra played the popular Grétry aria, whose symbolic meaning could not have been mistaken, "*Où peut-on être mieux qu'au sein de sa famille?*" For the next hour deputies made speeches recalling the history of Jewish suffering before the advent of Napoleon. Then at noon Rabbi Abraham Andrade of Bayonne led a choir in the singing of Hebrew songs that various deputies had composed in honor of the emperor's birthday.[15] At least six of

these songs were published separately in bilingual editions, so even though the audience could not have been expected to understand the Hebrew texts, published translations would have assisted them, either at the ceremony itself or afterwards.[16] These songs were followed by a Haydn symphony, during which three Jewish women collected alms to be distributed to "the poor of all religions." One of the women, the official account of the festivities reported, had two brothers in the army, one of whom was decorated with the "*étoile d'honneur,*" and the other of whom had been wounded at Austerlitz. The synagogue ceremony ended with the exit of the deputies in procession, though the festivities continued at various private banquets throughout the evening.[17]

Historians, both Jewish and non-Jewish, have criticized ceremonies such as the one just described as obsequious displays and base attempts at flattery.[18] Yet quite apart from the pointlessness of retrospective moralizing, these historians have overlooked the extent to which this sort of "cultural performance" was in fact highly self assertive. To begin with, by decorating the synagogue with the symbols of Napoleonic power, including victory laurels, the monograms of the emperor and empress, and the imperial eagle, the Jews asserted their own participation in the emperor's *dignitas* and charisma. Indeed, the government itself would later chasten the Jews for taking such liberties with imperial symbolism and, in 1809, prohibited the Central Consistory of French Israelites, the official organization of French Jewry, from using the imperial seal in its correspondence.[19] By including the sisters of Jewish soldiers in the ceremony, the Jews countered the typical claim that they were cowardly, unpatriotic, or disqualified from military service due to physical limitations or religious restrictions. By collecting alms for the poor of all religions, they showed their civic virtue and countered claims of "Jewish particularism." By playing Haydn music they demonstrated their enlightened taste, and by playing the Grétry aria, "*Où peut-on être mieux qu'au sein de sa famille?*," they claimed to belong to the "family of Frenchmen." This final claim suggested not only an enthusiastic acceptance of the revolutionary principle of "*fraternité*," but served as a claim of equality between the Jews and their non-Jewish "brothers."[20]

The texts of the Hebrew hymns and their vernacular translations and of the various speeches delivered in the synagogue, themselves published in pamphlet form, likewise contributed to the project of "impression management." To begin with, the idea of imminent Jewish regeneration permeated the speeches and songs at the birthday ceremony, as it did more generally the official literature of Jewish self-presentation. Rather than deny the claims of immorality that had moved Napoleon to call the special assemblies, Jewish spokesmen adopted the position, articulated most famously by Grégoire but repeated by virtually every advocate of legal equality for the Jews, that the Jews had "degenerated" from a position of ancient virtue in Biblical and classical times to a modern condition of vice. Yet they blamed this decline on historical circumstances, especially the restrictions on Jewish occupations and education that

left them with no choice but to adopt the infamous and "useless" profession of usurer, and promised that civic equality would lead to their moral regeneration.

One of the deputies, Samuel Wittersheim,[21] depicted the process of regeneration in a hymn by describing an "unhappy captive, bent under his irons, languishing in the darkness of prisons (*cachots*)." Suddenly his chains are broken and he exits into the light of day. "Such [was] the people of Israel," the composer explains, "since its dispersion among the diverse nations" and before its "liberation" at the hands of Napoleon, who has "taken [it] forever out of the humiliation (*l'avilissement*) to which the injustice of the nations had reduced it for so long."[22] Another composer, Moïse Milliaud of Carpentras,[23] praised Napoleon for having "cast his eyes upon a people victimized (*un peuple victime*) . . . by all misfortunes and always the butt of the blows of fate (*toujours en butte aux coups du sort*)." He continued, "Napoleon! it is you whom the Lord has anointed to bandage the wounds of those whose heart has been broken," thus combining the sacramental and medical senses of "ointment" and suggesting, much as Napoleon's officer Molé had done, that Jewish degeneration was a kind of illness that needed to be treated with the proper medicine.[24] Although the conflation of medical and moral categories would have more sinister connotations in the following century, in 1806 the clinical diagnosis of moral failings could be seen primarily as exculpatory.

Yet another hymn urged the Jews to show themselves worthy of their "liberation." Its author, Abraham de Cologna of Mantua, who later became Chief Rabbi of France and Italy, described Napoleon's gift of "happiness" and "peace" and asked, "For this benefit, what does he [Napoleon] claim in return? He wishes for the generations to come among us to devote themselves to culture, and for morality and reason to become the regulating guide for their actions."[25] Though this moral advice suggested, like the admonition of Molé, that the Jews' status as equal members of French society might be revoked if they showed themselves "unworthy" of it, the dominant mood in all the texts of the birthday celebration suggested that regeneration was imminent.

Closely associated with the idea of imminent regeneration was the metaphor of inclusion in a single "family of Frenchmen." This image saturated the language of the Jewish deputies, both at the ceremonies of 15 August and elsewhere. One of the deputies asserted that Napoleon had called the Jews "as a father calls his children."[26] Another stated that the emperor saw in "Catholics and Lutherans, Jews and Calvinists . . . only children of the same father."[27] Abraham Furtado, the president of the Assembly, reiterated this idea when he called Napoleon "the common father of his subjects," and declared, "Whatever religion they profess, he only sees in all of them members of the same family."[28] The birthday hymns similarly reflected the notion of a single family. Wittersheim referred to Napoleon as a father to his children, and in a phrase connecting family membership to regeneration, described a previously debased Jew whose "name, rehabilitated and honored," will

way that made it not only acceptable but valuable. They made themselves signs of Napoleonic success at empire-building—despite the inconvenient fact that Napoleon had lost Egypt and Palestine—and thus took advantage of an opportunity that had been closed to them during the Revolution, when the dominant ideology had been that of militant Jacobin nationalism.

The cultural performance of the Jewish deputies before the Napoleonic state and observers in French society, therefore, was more than a passive acceptance of an official ideology imposed from above. By manipulating the terms of that ideology the Jews presented themselves as victims of past persecution whose membership in the "family of Frenchmen" guaranteed their regeneration and simultaneously secured their equality before the law, thus contesting the powerful and threatening view that characterized them as hopelessly foreign and permanently marked by vice. At the same time, however, they preserved their otherness, and even flaunted it, by reconfiguring images of oriental exoticism in such a way that they associated themselves with the aura of Napoleon's imperial charisma and appeared as the very essence of his multinational empire.

Notes

1. For a sanguine assessment of Napoleon's treatment of the Jews see François Piétri, *Napoléon et les Israélites* (Paris: Fayard, 1965). More critical of Napoleon are Robert Anchel, *Napoléon et les Juifs* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1928) and Simon Schwarzfuchs, *Napoleon, the Jews, and the Sanhedrin* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979).

2. Simon Dubnow, a Jewish nationalist who advocated political autonomy for the Jews of Russia, lambasted the Jewish deputies for their "servility" in collaborating with Napoleon's assimilationist projects. *Weltgeschichte des jüdischen Volkes, von seinen Uranfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, trans. [from the Russian] Dr. A. Steinberg, vol. 8, *Die neueste Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes: Das Zeitalter der ersten Emanzipation (1789–1815)* (Berlin: J. discher Verlag, 1928), 141–157. Dubnow's treatment of the Jewish deputies was strikingly similar to that of the anti-Semitic Albert Lemoine, who wrote of them: "Having become as clever in the art of seduction as in traffic and hawking, always having gilded and sonorous arguments at their disposal, wiping off the refusals and bearing the insults with a patience that nothing repulsed, bowing their heads and bending their spines with a servility always the same, they accepted, with a recognition certainly less sincere than political, the yoke of Bonaparte . . . ." *Napoléon Ier et les Juifs* (Paris: F. Frères, 1900), 32.

3. See, for example, R. F. E. Weissman, "Reconstructing Renaissance Sociology: the Chicago School and the Study of Renaissance Society," in *Persons in Groups,* ed. R. C. Trexler (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1985), 39–46; Peter Burke, *Historical Anthropology in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 150–167, and *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). Weissman and Burke draw on the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1958), to whom I am indebted for the notion of self-presentation.

4. Ibid.

5. Gary Kates, "Jews into Frenchmen: Nationality and Representation in Revolutionary France," in *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity,* ed. Ferenc Fehér (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 103–116.

6. Ronald Schechter, "Competing Proposals for the Regeneration of the Jews," in *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History: Selected Papers,* ed. Barry Rothaus (1996): 483–493.

7. Ibid.

8. Mona Ozouf, *L'homme régénéré: essais sur la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), esp. 116–157.

9. Abbé Henri Grégoire, *Essai sur la régénération physique, morale et politique des Juifs* (Metz, 1789; reprint, Paris: EdHis, 1988); and *Observations nouvelles sur les Juifs et spécialement sur ceux d'Allemagne* (n.p., 1806).

10. Louis de Bonald, "Sur les Juifs," *Mercure de France,* xxiii (1806), 249–267.

11. Diogène Tama, *Collection des actes de l'assemblée des Israélites de France et du royaume d'Italie, convoquée à Paris par décret de Sa Majesté impériale et royale, du 30 mai 1806* (Paris and Strasbourg: Chez l'Editeur, 1807), 107–110.

12. Tama, *Collection des actes,* 130, 131; and *Détail officiel de tout ce qui s'est passé à la première et deuxieme séances de l'Assemblé des Juifs* (Paris: Chez l'Editeur, 1806).

13. Among the questions were:
2. Is divorce permitted by the Jewish religion? Is a divorce valid without having been pronounced by the courts and in virtue of laws contradicting those of the French Code?
3. . . . . does the law wish for Jews only to marry among themselves?
4. In the eyes of [French] Jews, are the French their brothers or are they foreigners?
5. In the one case or the other, what relations does the [Jewish] law prescribe with Frenchmen who are not of their religion?
6. Do Jews who were born in France and are treated by the law as French citizens see France as their Fatherland? Do they have the obligation to defend it? Are they obliged to obey the laws and follow the provisions of the Civil Code?
8. What police jurisdiction do the rabbis exercise among the Jews?
9. Are the forms of election and this police jurisdiction stipulated by their laws, or only consecrated by custom?
11. Does the law of the Jews prohibit them from committing usury against their brothers?
12. Does it prohibit them from or permit them to commit usury against foreigners? Tama, *Collection des actes,* 132–33.

14. I borrow the term "cultural performance" from David Parkin, Lionel Caplan and Humphrey Fisher, eds., *The Politics of Cultural Performance* (Providence and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996). This collection of essays stresses the ways in which competing political groups use "cultural performance" as a means of promoting their rival claims.

15. Tama, *Collection des actes,* 183–184, 201–219

16. Among these songs were Jacob Mayer, *Ode pour célébrer le jour de l'anniversaire de la naissance de Napoléon, Empereur des françois et Roi d'Italie; Composée en hébreu par J. Mayer, et traduite en françois par Michel Berr, homme de loi, membre de plusieurs académies, député pour le département de la Seine à l'assemblée des citoyens françois professant la religion juive, convoquée par décret du 30 mai 1806* (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1806). Hebrew title: *Mizmor shir al yom huledet adonenu Napoleon ha-adir kaiser tsarfatim u-melech italia yarom hodo* [A hymn on the birthday of our lord Napoleon the Magnificent, Emperor of the French and King of Italy, may his splendor grow]; Abraham Cologna, "Ode pour the Jour de la Naissance de Napoléon de Grand, Empereur des françois et Roi d'Italie, composée par Abraham Cologna, de Mantoue, l'un des députés à l'assemblée des citoyens françois professant la religion juive." Hebrew title, "Ba-yom hitkadesh chag huledet ha-adir Napoleoni Kaiser ha-tsarfatim u-melech italia . . . . [On the day of the festival celebrating the birthday of the magnificent Napoleon, Emperor of the French and King of Italy . . . .]." Both versions appeared in *Odes hébraïques;* Samuel Wittersheim, *Hymne chanté par les députés françois professant le culte de Moïse, dans leur temple à Paris, le 15 août 1806, jour de la naissance de notre auguste empereur et roi; composé en langue hébraïque et traduit par Wittersheim l'aîné, député du Bas-Rhin. Dédié à M. Furtado, Président de l'assemblée des députés* (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1806). Hebrew title: *Mizmor shir yom halidat ha-kaiser u-melech Napoleon yarom hodo* . . . . [A hymn on the birthday of the Emperor and King Napoleon, may his splendor grow . . .]. Moïse Milliaud, *Cantique adressé à Napoléon le Grand, Empereur des François et Roi d'Italie, par Moïse Milliaud, député du département de Vaucluse à l'assemblée des citoyens françois professant le culte de Moïse* (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1806). Hebrew title: *Mizmor shir le-Napoleon ha-gadol ha-kaiser ve-ha-melech* [A hymn to Napoleon the Great, the emperor and king].

17. Tama, *Collection des actes*, 204; and Jacob Carmi, *All'assemblea ed al Sinedrio di Parigi, 1806–1807. Lettere del Rabbino Maggiore Jacob Israele Carmi*, trans. and ed. Consiglio amministrativo dell'università israelitica de Reggio nell'Emilia (Reggio: L. Bondavalli, 1905), 29.

18. Dubnow, *Die neueste Geschichte*, 141–157; and Lemoine, *Napoléon Ier et les Juifs*, 32.

19. Schwarzfuchs, *Napoleon and the Sanhedrin*, 141.

20. On the importance of the family in the revolutionary imagination see Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992)

21. Wittersheim was born in 1766 to a wealthy family, and studied both religious and secular subjects before becoming chief rabbi of Metz in 1820. Abraham Cahen, "Le Rabbinat de Metz pendant la période française (1567–1871)," *Revue des études juives* 13 (1886): 121–122.

22. Wittersheim, *Hymne*.

23. Milliaud belonged to an academy of rabbis in Carpentras. René Moulinas, *Les Juifs du Pape en France: les communautés du Comtat Venaissin aux 17e et 18e siècles* (Paris: Commission française des Archives juives, 1981), 182; cf. Armand Mossé, *Histoire des Juifs d'Avignon et du Comtat Venaissin* (1937; reprint, Marseille: Laffitte Reprints, 1976), 237.

24. Milliaud, *Cantique*.

25. Cologna, *Ode*.

26. Lipman Cerfberr, "Discours pour l'ouverture de l'assemblée générale des Juifs; prononcé par M. Lipman Cerf-Berr, député du Département du Haut-Rhin," in Tama, *Collection des actes*, 157–159. Published separately as *Discours pour l'ouverture de l'Assemblée générale des Juifs, prononcé le 26 juillet 1806* (Paris, 1806).

27. Baruch Cerf Berr, "Réflexions d'un député," in Tama, 154. Cf. Grégoire: "Enfans du même pere, dérobez tout prétexte à l'aversion de vos freres . . . ." *Essai sur la régénération,* 194. Here Grégoire refers to God as the "pere," whereas in Baruch Cerf Berr's speech the line is blurred between the Heavenly Father and the Napoleonic father.

28. Tama, *Collection des actes*, 136.

29. Wittersheim, *Hymne.*

30. Born around 1765, Mayer was listed among the members of the Assembly of Notables as "rabbi in Niederhuheim." He became Chief Rabbi of Strasbourg, and died in his native village of Bergheim in 1838. Tama, *Collection des actes,* 116; E. Carmoly, "Jacob Mayer," *Univers israélite* 24th ser., 6 (1863): 268–269; and M. Ginsburger, "Jacob Jeqil Meyer, premier grand rabbin de Strasbourg, 1739–1830," *Archives israélites françaises* 94 (1933): 154–155.

31. Mayer, *Ode.*

32. Michel Berr, "Avertissement du traducteur," in *Ode hébraïques*, 5–12.

33. Elie Lévy, *Hymne à l'occasion de la paix, chantée en hébreu et lue en français, dans la grand synagogue, à Paris, le 17 brumaire an X.* Trans. Sylvestre de Sacy. Hebrew title: *Ha-Shalom. Ha-Shirah ha-zot sharu ha-yehudim ba-vet tefilatam poh Paris ba-yom hushav ha-cherev la-nadan* . . . [The peace. The Jews sang this song in their house of prayer here in Paris on the day when the sword was returned to the sheath . . . .] (Paris, Year X [1801]). On Sacy as an Orientalist see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

34. *Courrier des spectacles*, 23 Brumaire Year X (14 October 1801), and 18 Nivôse Year X (7 January 1802); "Poésie. Ha-Shalom. Hymne à l'occasion de la Paix . . . ," *Magasin Encyclopédique*, 7th ser., 5 (1801): 364–369.

35. Tama, *Collection des actes*, 162–163.

36. Wittersheim, *Hymne*; and Mayer, *Ode.*