

IMAGINING FIN-DE-SIÈCLE ANGLO-JEWISH MINORITY SUB-GENRES: PROTO-FEMINIST VISIONS OF RELIGIOUS REFORM IN “WEST END” LONDON IN AMY LEVY’S REUBEN SACHS AND LILY MONTAGU’S NAOMI’S EXODUS

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ABSTRACT: Amy Levy (1861–1889) was an Anglo-Jewish author, poet, essayist, and translator of works, while Lily Montagu (1873–1963) was a prolific writer and the founder of Liberal Judaism in England. Despite their differing backgrounds, Levy and Montagu produced novels that converge in their portrayals of how a religion of “ritual,” Reform Judaism, failed to meet the needs of a Jewish community more and more equating morality with personal spirituality. Indeed, Amy Levy’s novel, *Reuben Sachs* (1888), is a critique of the recently founded Anglo-Reform congregation. Similarly, Lily Montagu’s *Naomi’s Exodus* (1901) expands on Claude Montefiore’s theology of Liberal Judaism that was itself a response to the stagnation of Anglo-Reformism. In these novels the religious discourse hinges on comparable portrayals of the West End Jewish community in London. This essay will for the first time connect the works of Levy and Montagu. In the process, we will examine the ways in which they attempted to deal with the late nineteenth-century pressures on Anglo-Judaism to assimilate the religious, primarily Evangelical, norms of Protestant culture and to address the concerns of a community that was reading the idealistic poetry of the Romantics and the novels of Charles Dickens and George Eliot, among others.

Amy Levy (1861–1889) was an Anglo-Jewish poet, essayist, and translator of works born in Clapham, London, while Lily Montagu (1873–1963) was a prolific author and the founder of Liberal Judaism in England. Levy’s biographical and literary reputation is currently in the process of being restored by scholars of feminist and minority literature across a range of disciplines. This process has been made all the more difficult given the destruction of her personal papers following her unexplained suicide. Indeed, what makes Levy interesting to current historians and critics working in the fields of Anglo-Jewish and feminist literary criticism is the way in which contemporary issues converge in the Levy corpus. Cynthia Scheinberg rightly argues that “Levy’s critical resurrection is also linked to the fact that so many of the issues she addresses in her writing speak to concerns of the contemporary critical moment.”¹ By contrast, Lily Montagu was involved in the foundation of Liberal Judaism in England. She was the first woman to minister to a synagogue in England and in 1918 she became the first to preach a sermon. Montagu’s liturgy, *Prayers for Jewish Working Girls*, was the first Liberal Jewish prayer-book.² Despite their differences, both Levy and

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¹ Cynthia Scheinberg, *Women’s Poetry and Religion in Victorian England: Jewish Identity and Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 190.

² Eric Conrad, *Lily H. Montagu: Prophet of a Living Judaism* (New York: National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, 1953), 49-50. See Lily Montagu, *Prayers for Jewish Working Girls* (London: Wertheimer, Lea & Co., 1895).

Montagu produced novels that converge in their portrayals of how a religion of “ritual,” namely Reform Judaism, similar to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Anglicanism, failed to meet the needs of a community more and more equating morality with inner-spirituality. Reform Judaism in England, rather than nurturing the spiritual and religious needs of its congregants, fed and fostered a culture of materialism in the West End.

Indeed, Amy Levy’s novel *Reuben Sachs* (1888) is a critique of the recently founded Anglo-Reform congregation at Upper Berkeley Street, London. Similarly, Lily Montagu’s *Naomi’s Exodus* (1901) develops and expands on Claude Montefiore’s theology of Liberal Judaism that was itself a response to the conservatism and stagnation of Anglo-Reformism. In these novels the religious discourse hinges on comparable portrayals of the West End Jewish community in London. These novels examine and critique the authors’ envisaged communities and negotiate the means of spiritual transformation through analyses of the failure of Reform Judaism and the activation of theological discourse centred on the Christian Evangelical notion of the redemptive woman. In this reading of *Reuben Sachs* and *Naomi’s Exodus* I will for the first time connect the works of Levy and Montagu. This will include an examination of their responses to the issues of acculturation and secularization, and their critique of the estrangement of female spirituality and the excessive limits on women’s subjective agency. In the process, we will explore the ways in which they attempted to tackle the late nineteenth-century pressures on Anglo-Judaism to assimilate the religious, predominantly Evangelical, norms of Protestant culture and to address the concerns of a community that was reading the idealistic poetry of the Romantics and the novels of Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and, Anthony Trollope.

Lily Montagu, in contrast to Amy Levy, was part of a reformative organisation – Liberal Judaism – that had proto-feminist aspirations at its very core. It was in a speech at the West London Reform Synagogue on February 1 1896 that Claude Montefiore envisaged a progressive Liberal Judaism in England.³ In the new Judaism, to be a “good” Jew was to be a productive citizen and to lead an honest and righteous life. The application of ritual and the traditional observances would be personally subjective and dependent on the individual and their conscience rather than being based on *halakhah* or the *Torah*. Thus, progressive Liberal Judaism would encourage moral conduct and the assimilation of the host culture in the place of Jewish specificity. According to Montagu,

Judaism is the hallowing of existing ideals, and ideals shift from generation to generation. A religion which rests on conscience is a robust religion, and makes a supreme demand on all human faculties. It claims the highest life from its devotees. The close connection between religion and life is clearly the ideal which all cults emphasise.⁴

In theological terms, individuals were considered not only part of a community, but able to personally commune with the divine whether at home or in the synagogue. Furthermore, Montefiore committed Liberal Judaism to the equalization of the sexes. Montagu took up and developed this theoretical mantle with great earnestness by transforming the daily lives of the Jewish women of her West Central Club and her congregation.⁵ Through her affluent upper-class family, connections to the Anglo-Jewish elite, and friendship with Montefiore,

³ *Jewish Chronicle* (February 14, 1896), 19–20.

⁴ Lily Montagu, *Thoughts on Judaism* (London: R. Brimley Johnson, 1904), 4.

⁵ Luke Devine, *Lily Montagu’s Shekhinah* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2011), 60–61.

Montagu could rely on moral, financial, political, and intellectual support. This is not to say that Montagu was unconcerned about money. Indeed, Montagu's commitment to the Liberal Jewish cause led to estrangement from her strictly Orthodox father. Samuel Montagu warned that his daughter's inheritance would be forfeited if she continued to promote the religious movement. He was duly ignored.⁶ Montagu was more at home with the working-class and socially disadvantaged girls of her Club, as she would later admit: "I learned about many home tragedies, and especially of the tragedy of unfulfilled aspiration. So many of my girls had wanted to be something different, and to achieve certain purposes which seemed to be denied them just through the hardness of circumstances." Montagu always "felt deeply moved by any effort at social amelioration, especially when based on a definitely religious foundation."⁷

On the other hand, Amy Levy's upper-middle-class, acculturated background did not afford her access to Anglo-Jewry's communal, intellectual, financial, or political leadership. This is despite her father's friendship with the editor of the *Jewish Chronicle* which led to her producing a series of essays for the paper.⁸ Even given Levy's association with non-Jewish intellectuals, her research at the British Museum, and her membership of various free-thinking and bohemian clubs, and, as we will see, her disappointment with the conservatism of Anglo-Reformism, she was never part of any organised movement geared towards transforming contemporaneous Judaism. Unlike Lily Montagu, Levy was not a public speaker or confident orator. In fact, Levy possessed, according to a contemporary, a "delicate little Oriental face dreamy."⁹ She was plagued by excessive shyness,¹⁰ as well as a list of medical ailments that included anxiety, depression, neuralgia, deafness, abscesses, and eye infections.¹¹ In contrast, Montagu was able to overcome an early childhood illness, and a spiritual crisis. She believed herself destined to revitalize traditional Jewish theology, ethics and ritual, and set about reforming and reinvigorating Anglo-Jewry. Montagu would confess in retrospect, "I felt compelled by a strong desire to found a movement to revitalise Judaism and rekindle the ancient lights so that these should cast a glow over the whole of life for all time."¹² Levy's activism, if we can call it that, similar to many Anglo-Jewish women writers of the period, was confined to the written word. According to Michael Galchinsky, "Women writers thus used the novel to argue not only for women's emancipation in the Jewish world, but for Jewish emancipation in the Victorian world."¹³ Furthermore, Levy's elementary and university education was secular/Christian. Similar to the majority of Jewish women in the period, she was formally prohibited from the study and interpretation of the sacred texts of traditional Judaism and instead reliant on her reading and research at the British Museum. In fact, Levy was potentially more familiar with Christianity and the King James Bible than she was with the rabbinic texts.¹⁴

⁶ Devine, *Lily Montagu's Shekhinah*, 2.

⁷ Lily Montagu, *The Faith of a Jewish Woman* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1943), 11, 19.

⁸ Christine Pullen, *The Woman Who Dared: A Biography of Amy Levy* (Kingston: Kingston University Press, 2010), 129.

⁹ Katherine Tynan, *Memories* (Edinburgh: The Edinburgh Press, 1924), 37.

¹⁰ Sharona Levy, "Amy Levy: The Woman and Her Writings" (Ph.D. Diss., Oxford University, 1989), 16.

¹¹ Linda Hunt Beckman, *Amy Levy: Her Life and Letters* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), 92, 127, 203.

¹² Montagu, *The Faith*, 27.

¹³ Michael Galchinsky, *The Origin of the Modern Jewish Woman Writer: Romance and Reform in Victorian England* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 36.

¹⁴ Luke Devine, *From Anglo-First-Wave towards American Second-Wave Jewish Feminism: Negotiating with Jewish Feminist Theology and its Communities in the Writing of Amy Levy* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2010), 73.

Conversely, Lily Montagu was educated by the Reverend Simeon Singer, Minister of the New West End Synagogue, and instructed in Christian and Jewish theology by Claude Montefiore, among others. Singer introduced the young Montagu to the Hebrew prophets. They regularly discussed the prophets in depth, as well as the “ideals of Judaism” and how they could be transformed into social service. Montagu was allowed to choose her own course of education which was supplemented by numerous tutors and extensive reading on social philosophy.¹⁵ Montagu was blessed with natural oratory skills and was able to draw on the self-belief of divine mission and on the resources of the Anglo-Jewish elite. These resources effectively cushioned her from the realities of anti-Semitism. By comparison, Amy Levy was plagued with self-doubt and confusion regarding her Jewish identity. Indeed, Levy was marginalized by those around her. She would always be a Jew among Christian acquaintances who maintained private anti-Semitic prejudices. But as a childless, unmarried, independent New Woman, she was alienated by the Anglo-Jewish community. Even though religious observance was becoming sporadic, Judaism traditionally places emphasis on marriage and the family. Marriage creates the necessary environment for the fulfilment of the *mitzvah* of *peru urevu*, “be fruitful and multiply.” More so, Levy was spiritually alienated by the religious institutions of her day.¹⁶ According to Iveta Jusova, Levy was an “Anglo-Jewish, middle-class woman living in the increasingly anti-Semitic London of the 1880s, . . . Levy’s life and work illustrates the ruthless splitting of ‘the outsiders’ from the self-declared privileged insiders.”¹⁷ Thus, we can see how *Naomi’s Exodus* would come to emphasize universalistic perspectives and openness to cultural exchange between Christianity and Judaism, given Montagu’s sheltered childhood. For Levy, however, being educated in Christian society, and the experience of anti-Semitism, however casual, made her sceptical of Jewish emancipation and the extent of acculturation. She would question her own identity, contributing to a critique of Christian literary and theological hegemony in her poetry and a critical account of the Jewish emancipation in *Reuben Sachs*.¹⁸

Reuben Sachs and *Naomi’s Exodus* are underpinned by the alienation of women’s spirituality in the synagogue and the limits on women’s subjective and intellectual agency in the community. Both novels are critical analyses of the Anglo-Jewish marital economy, the legalism of traditional Judaism, Anglo-Jewry’s inability to modernize, its cultural philistinism, its slowness to assimilate the religious norms of the host culture, its physical and moral degeneration, and its “oriental” treatment of women. Like Amy Levy, Lily Montagu reserved particular scorn for West End Jews, particularly those with little connection to religion. She would claim in “Spiritual Possibilities of Judaism To-Day” that:

The racial Jew, devoted to self-seeking and ostentation, and arrogant of his race, although destitute of spiritual faith, is indeed deserving of every scorn. His Judaism is not of his own seeking, and he consequently makes no sacrifice to follow it; he cherishes a materialistic ideal, which threatens the highest good of our age.¹⁹

¹⁵ Montagu, *The Faith*, 11.

¹⁶ See Devine, *From Anglo-First-Wave*.

¹⁷ Iveta Jusova, *The New Woman and the Empire* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), 131.

¹⁸ Nadia Valman, “Semitism and Criticism: Victorian Anglo-Jewish Literary History,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27 (1999), 239.

¹⁹ Lily Montagu, “Spiritual Possibilities of Judaism Today,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 11 (1899), 230.

By contrast, Levy had little knowledge of, or contact with, the East End of London. For Levy, Anglo-Reformism was stagnant, but while she was able to outline the dynamics of gender alienation and the necessity of communal transformation, she was not able to translate this into reformative discourse.²⁰ Instead, Montagu believed her mission predestined and spiritual, even transcendental. She envisaged communal reform and unlike Levy was well-placed to implement it.

The acculturated, upper-middle-class Levy family were members of the recently founded Reform congregation, the West London Synagogue of British Jews, a breakaway congregation of the Bevis Marks Synagogue. Reform Judaism in England was from the outset conservative. The synagogue immediately became an enclave for those well-to-do Anglo-Jews unable or unwilling to accommodate their anglicized lifestyles, including their employment commitments, social habits, and connections with the non-Jewish world, to the religious commitments of Orthodox Judaism. Amy Levy was a child of the political emancipation of Anglo-Jewry that was partially completed in 1858 (it is worth noting that a number of ministerial offices continued to preclude Jews). She was schooled in Christian society, first at the Brighton High School Girls' Public Day School Trust. She then became the first Jewish woman to attend Newnham College, Cambridge, although for reasons unknown she did not finish her degree. In her own lifetime Levy was a respected author and poet. In 1881 her first poetry anthology, *Xantippe and Other Verse*, was published. In 1884 a second poetry anthology followed and in 1888, along with *Reuben Sachs*, Levy published *Romance of a Shop. Miss Meredith* went into print the following year, along with the final poetry anthology, *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse*. Levy completed the final anthology in the weeks before she committed suicide by charcoal asphyxiation. Throughout her life Levy maintained informal links with many non-Jewish social commentators, writers, and intellectuals. Her friends included Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Havelock Ellis, Karl Pearson, Eleanor Marx (the daughter of Karl Marx), Beatrice Webb (née Potter), Dollie Radford, and Olive Schreiner. In her own mind, and in the eyes of her contemporaries, however, Levy was an outsider marked by her Jewish identity. She was a Jewish woman operating in Christian and secular circles that continued to be hostile, even anti-Semitic, whether in public or in private, in their analyses and personal opinions of Anglo-Jews.

Reuben Sachs contains various complex strands, subplots, and underlying social Darwinist, Reformist, and proto-feminist perspectives that are open to a number of interpretations. The novel caricatures assimilated Anglo-Jewry's supposed physical degeneracy and materialist culture. The upper-middle-class Jewish community is portrayed as morally vacuous, culturally backward, and physically repulsive. In describing the West End enclave, the character Leo Leuniger confesses that "we are materialists to our fingers' ends." Similarly, Reuben Sachs, the eponymous namesake, reminds that "This is a material age, a materialist country." In the novel traditional Judaism "is the religion of materialism. The corn and the wine and the oil; the multiplication of the seed; the conquest of the hostile tribes – these have always had more attraction for us than the harp and crown of a spiritualized existence." Leo laments Anglo-Jewry's financial avarice:

Ah, look at us. . . where else do you see such eagerness to take advantage; such sickening, hideous greed; such cruel, remorseless striving for power and importance; such ever-active, ever-hungry

²⁰ Devine, *From Anglo-First-Wave*, 4.

vanity, that must be fed at any cost? Steeped to the lips in sordidness, as we have all been from the cradle, how is it possible that any one among us, by any effort of his own, can wipe off from his soul the hereditary stain?²¹

Leo is convinced that Anglo-Jewry is destined for “disintegration” and “absorption” into the Christian host culture. The community’s moral degeneracy is manifested in its revolting physical traits. Throughout *Reuben Sachs* the characters are described as “sallow,” “pale,” “lifeless,” “dark,” “wrinkled,” “black eyed,” “black-haired,” and with “yellow” features (4–5, 15, 56, 119, 123, 128, 157, 190). More so, Reuben’s mental and physiological ailments, as well as those of the majority of characters, are a case in point. Indeed, internalising contemporary medical discourses about Jewish susceptibility to nervous diseases, upper-middle-class Anglo-Jewry is figured as overly prone to neurasthenia and hysteria. Reuben’s eventual death is born out of nervous “exhaustion”:

It was a case of over-work, of over-strain, of nervous break-down, said the doctors; no doubt a sea-voyage would set him right again, but he must be careful of himself in the future.

“More than half my nervous patients are recruited from the ranks of the Jews,” said the great physician who Reuben consulted. “You pay the penalty of too high a civilization.” (3)

The exception to Levy’s culture of hereditary degeneration (“the ill-made sons and daughters of Shem”) and the rampant materialism of the community is Judith Quixano, the beautiful heroine, who is of noble Sephardic ancestry. She is intellectually and physically superior to the other acculturated Anglo-Jews of the novel who we are to assume are of Ashkenazi stock (152). The idea of Sephardic racial hegemony was popular throughout Europe at the fin-de-siècle. Judith is descended from “a family of Portuguese merchants, the *vieille noblesse* of the Jewish community” (32). She possesses unacknowledged love for Reuben, although he is committed to the pursuit of political power that will ultimately lead to his untimely death. This is despite the fact that Reuben “knew by now that he was in love with Judith Quixano” (44). Through a Darwinist perspective the reader is aware that Judith could have redeemed Reuben’s degenerative ancestry. “With her beauty, her health, and her air of breeding, surely she was good enough, and more than good enough, for such a man as Reuben Sachs, his enormous pretensions, and those of his family on his behalf notwithstanding?” (75–76). Instead, Judith succumbs to the materialist impulse that has been enforced by her adopted family. They have little interest in biological concerns.²² Thus, Judith marries a false convert to Judaism who is merely seeking social advancement. The degenerative as well as the regenerative aspects that underpin the novel, according to Nadia Valman, tap into notions of Sephardic hegemony disseminated by Benjamin Disraeli, Grace Aguilar, and Jewish anthropologists who equated the Sephardim with “Aryanism.” For Valman, Levy’s heroine is “a paragon of dignified racial pride and openness to intellectual inquiry and cultural integration.” The doomed romance between Judith and Reuben implies that the progress of civilization subverts the operation of Darwinian natural selection.²³

²¹ Amy Levy, *Reuben Sachs: A Sketch* (London: Macmillan, 1888), 116–18. Subsequent references will be given in the text.

²² Emma Francis, “Socialist Feminism and Sexual Instinct: Eleanor Marx and Amy Levy” in *Eleanor Marx (1855–1898): Life, Work, Contacts*, ed. John Stokes (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 122.

²³ Nadia Valman, *The Jewess in Nineteenth-Century British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 183–84.

The anti-materialistic elements of *Reuben Sachs* are bound up in late nineteenth-century criticisms made by the Anglo-Jewish press and religious leaders that upper-middle-class Judaism was in moral decline due to its unbridled financial avarice.²⁴ According to Todd Endelman, “Most middle-class Jews at the time were not well-educated or inclined to take an interest in art, literature, or science. . . . Among others, the Rev. Simeon singer of the Bayswater Synagogue . . . thought the community was ‘far too much addicted to card-playing as the one unfailling resource to kill the demon of ennui.’”²⁵ Indeed, throughout *Reuben Sachs* the decor reveals the extent of materialist, worldly culture: “plush ottomans, stamped velvet tables, and other Philistine splendours” abound. “The great vulgar, over-decorated room, with its garish lights, its stifling fumes of gas,” and the “old-fashioned splendours of the drawing-room, where card-playing went on” (7, 29, 58) are central. The women are committed to transitory, self-serving pursuits. “Bayswater nodded to Maida Vale, and South Kensington took Bayswater by the hand, . . . love of gossip [could] have free play.” Even more, Reuben Sachs is imbued with acquisitiveness. “From his cradle he had imbibed the creed that it is noble and desirable to have everything better than your neighbour; from the first had been impressed on him the sacred duty of doing the very best for yourself” (71, 126). The novel’s characters are bound by “material advantage; things that you could touch and see and talk about.” This covetousness gradually infects Judith Quixano and becomes the “unspoken gospel” of her life (232). The risk of marrying for money (as is the unfortunate case with Judith) over suitable racial preference was ever present in late nineteenth-century discourse. Revealing reading of Francis Galton and his work on hereditary, *Reuben Sachs* implies that the imperative of race will become associated with “chief religious obligations.”²⁶

Indeed, in the novel Judith Quixano’s repression is a product not only of the upper-middle-class milieu that suppresses her personal liberty, she is also spiritually estranged by the Reform Judaism of the West London Synagogue. Reflecting Christian Evangelical criticisms of traditional Judaism as legalistic,²⁷ Judith’s congregational observance is characterized by obedience rather than inner-piety:

Judith Quixano went through her devotions upheld by that sense of fitness, of obedience to law and order, which characterized her every action.

But it cannot be said that her religion had any strong hold over her; she accepted it unthinkingly.

These prayers, read so diligently, in a language [Hebrew] of which her knowledge was exceedingly imperfect, these reiterated praises of an austere tribal deity, these expressions of a hope whose consummation was neither desired nor expected, what connection could they have with the personal needs, the human longings of this touchingly ignorant and limited creature? (92–93)

When read in the context of contemporaneous Reform Judaism and its conservative approach to the “Woman Question,” the novel reveals Amy Levy’s own dissatisfaction that the proto-feminist proposals of the classical German Reformers had not been enacted by the

²⁴ Valman, *The Jewess*, 175–76.

²⁵ Todd Endelman, “The Frankaus of London: A Study of Radical Assimilation, 1837–1967,” *Jewish History* 8:1–2 (1994), 131.

²⁶ Francis Galton, “Hereditary Improvement,” *Fraser’s Magazine* 7 (1873), 120; Laura Vorachek, “Mesmerists and Other Meddlers: Social Darwinism, Degeneration, and Eugenics in Trilby,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 37 (2009), 209.

²⁷ Valman, *The Jewess*, 191.

Anglo-Reform synagogue. At the Reform Conference of 1845, held in Frankfurt, Germany, Rabbi David Einhorn, who would later become a leader of the Reform movement in the United States, along with Samuel Adler, and A. Adler discussed several radical proposals with regards to the “Woman Question.” These were reprinted in a six point resolution for the 1846 Breslau conference. Einhorn suggested that women could be obligated to perform the time-bound *mitzvot* reserved for men, that women could form a *minyan*, that women should be given legal independence in divorce, that the age of religious majority should be thirteen for both sexes, and that the gender exclusionary morning prayer during which the male congregants thank God for not having been made a woman should be abolished. The proposals, however, were never enacted in England.²⁸ The Anglo-Reformers were merely concerned with making the synagogue accessible to Anglo-Jews and not with wide ranging reforms. In fact, Reform Judaism was a response to Christian Evangelical criticisms of Judaism as ritualistic and devoid of spirituality. Indeed, David Feldman has argued that Christian Evangelicalism was a significant influence on Anglo-Reformism.²⁹ Similarly, Daniel Langton contends that the charge of the “Christianisation” of Reform Judaism is a convincing one.³⁰

Reform Judaism in England was the product of an exclusive elite. The social background of the Reformers who instituted the West London Reform Synagogue was made up, in the main, of Anglo-Jewry’s upper-class aristocracy. The congregants were predominantly professionals or rich business men living in the fashionable West End. This close-knit elite was bound together by intertwined business and family connections. The twenty members of the Bevis Marks congregation who signed up for the initial reforms included ten from the Mocatta family, two from the Henriques family, three from the Montefiore family, and three from the Goldsmids. The West London Synagogue had a distinctly upper and upper-middle-class character and the price of seats, as in the Orthodox community, was enough to exclude even the middle-classes.³¹ In *Reuben Sachs*, it is only “old” Solomon who is interested in the prayers; the other characters are not spiritually affected. Similarly, Montague Cohen “belonged to that rapidly dwindling section of the Community which attaches importance to the observation of the Mosaic and Rabbinical laws in various minute points”:

He was proud, Heaven knows why, of his personal appearance, his mental qualities, and his sex; this last to an even greater extent than most men of his race, with whom pride of sex is a characteristic quality.

“Blessed art Thou O Lord my God, who hast not made me a woman.”

No prayer goes up from the synagogue with greater fervour than this. (48–49, 108, 110)

In the novel, Levy describes the Day of Atonement, or “Fast Day,” with a sense of irony as many of the congregants have breakfasted. It is only “public opinion” that forces “lax” Anglo-Jews to attend the Reform Synagogue on Upper Berkeley Street, with its “simplified service, the beautiful music, and other innovations” (86–88) brought about merely to bring

²⁸ Riv-Ellen Prell, “The Dilemma of Women’s Equality in the History of Reform Judaism”, *Judaism* 30:4 (Fall 1981), 421–23; Devine, *From Anglo-First-Wave*, 100; Devine, *Lily Montagu’s Shekhinah*, 42–43.

²⁹ David Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews: Social Relations and Political Culture, 1840–1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 62–63.

³⁰ Daniel Langton, “A Question of Backbone: Contrasting Christian Influences Upon the Origins of Reform and Liberal Judaism in England”, *Melilah* 3 (2004), 47.

³¹ Stephen Sharot, “Reform and Liberal Judaism in London: 1840–1940”, *Jewish Social Studies* 41:3/4 (Summer/Fall 1979), 213–14.

the Reform congregation in line with Protestant styles of worship. Esther Kohnthal, who refuses to attend synagogue, reveals her own spiritual alienation (internalising the sexist morning benediction): “When I was a little girl, . . . a little girl of eight years old, I wrote in my prayer-book: ‘Cursed art Thou, O Lord my God, Who hast had the cruelty to make me a woman.’ And I have gone on saying that prayer all my life – the only one” (193). Alternatively, those congregants with traditionalist backgrounds arouse resentment, as is the case with Adelaide Sachs and the “dreadful” Samuel Sachs who are deemed “a remarkable survival” (85). In fact, Anglo-Reformism, with its conservative modifications, was little different to the traditional congregation that had also responded to the influence and critique levelled by the Christian Evangelicals against Judaism. According to Stephen Sharot reforms and innovations by the Orthodox synagogues actually made the denominations more alike. The *Jewish Chronicle* observed that there was little to differentiate the leadership of either camp as they acted in unison for the Board of Guardians, the Board of Deputies, and the Jewish Religious Education Board. Reform and Orthodox members attended each other’s synagogues for ceremonies and ministers performed the same roles and maintained virtually the same beliefs.³² Moreover, the Orthodox synagogues, like the Reform congregations, took on the Church model. Synagogues became larger, rabbis dressed like Christian clergy, congregations introduced choirs, there were sermons in English rather than in Hebrew, elaborate pulpits, and the use of quintessentially Protestant titles such as warden, guardian, reverend, and vestry were introduced.³³ The leadership of both denominations was made up of the Anglo-Jewish elite who continued to maintain close social ties.³⁴ Significantly, the Reform prayer book included only minor alterations and the wearing of prayer shawls and phylacteries continued. Certainly, in the 1880s and 1890s Reform Judaism was unable to generate any sizable defection from the Orthodox community. No other Reform congregations were founded in London at the time. As David Feldman notes, “In all but their decision to dispense with some customary holidays, the doctrinal innovations of Reform Judaism in Britain were notably moderate.”³⁵

As we have seen, Amy Levy’s *Reuben Sachs* portrays West End Anglo-Jewry as a materialist, culturally retrogressive society that denies women intellectual and spiritual subjectivity. The community is in moral and physical decline and is even on the brink of social absorption into the host culture. Levy’s response to the Evangelical critique of Judaism is framed around the inability of contemporaneous Anglo-Reform Judaism to implement the radical proposals of classical Reformism. Specifically, Anglo-Jewry’s deterioration is linked to its secularisation and the eradication of the vital binding and guiding force of traditional Judaism. In the absence of “meaningful” religious experience a perceived spiritual void had been created that would eventually be filled by Lily Montagu’s Liberal Judaism.

Indeed, as Amy Levy was alienated by the Reform Judaism of the period, Lily Montagu was equally spiritually and intellectually estranged by the Orthodox community of her childhood and the strict upbringing, even given their upper-class, affluent status, enforced by her traditionalist father. Montagu was never convinced of the spiritual validity of the traditional ritual in either the Reform or Orthodox communities. She enjoyed the festivals

³² Sharot, “Reform and Liberal”, 217.

³³ Michael Hilton, *The Christian Effect on Jewish Life* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1994), 142–45.

³⁴ Sharot, “Reform and Liberal”, 213–14, 217–18.

³⁵ Feldman, *Englishmen*, 63–64; Devine, *Lily Montagu’s Shekhinah*, 45–46.

and the observances but they seemed legalistic – ritual for ritual’s sake – rather than being spiritualistic or promoting inner sanctity (*kavannah*). In fact, Montagu could not relate any type of spiritual experience with the Orthodox liturgy, synagogue, or the meagre commandments assigned to women (*nerot*, *challah*, and *niddah*). She was distraught that traditional Judaism had not given Jewish women roles applicable to their Evangelical defined status as moral and spiritual redeemers. Following a spiritual crisis, Montagu became an activist, social worker, and theologian. She was the author of numerous monographs, essays, novels, sermons, liturgies, and letters for the *Liberal Jewish Monthly*, the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, and as part of the Papers for Jewish People series. Montagu also held lectures, made numerous speeches, delivered prayers, and led synagogue services. This is not to say that Claude Montefiore did not theorize the philosophical, theological, and intellectual underpinnings of the movement. Rather, it was Montagu who initiated its inception when she began the process of sounding out supporters among the Anglo-Jewish social and religious elite. Indeed, Montagu recalled that it was Montefiore who agreed to help her in the pursuit of her “big adventure.”³⁶

Naomi’s Exodus contains autobiographical elements and tells the fictional story of Naomi Saul who is a young Jewish girl estranged, as Lily Montagu was, by the legalism of traditional ritual. The novel, similar to *Reuben Sachs*, internalizes the contemporaneous Evangelical cult of true womanhood that invests women with moral and spiritual qualities that are best applied in the service of others, domestically, and through volunteer philanthropy. In the mid-Victorian period, the Protestant emphasis on women’s inherent domestic virtues was transformed into the cult of domesticity. Indeed, women were thought to endow the home with spiritual and transcendental qualities. The late nineteenth-century cult of true womanhood was a product of, but in line with, the ideology of separate spheres (the division of the domestic and public spheres according to gender with women assigned to the home). Contemporaneous Christian Evangelicalism idealised women who, through their natural attributes of moral purity, tolerance, kindness, tenderness, and compassion, could as ethical protectors and being themselves protected usher in the moral regeneration of society. According to Olive Banks the cult of true womanhood, the idea of female superiority and the “feminization of religion” became widely endorsed concepts by the fin-de-siècle.³⁷ Banks argues that “The cult of domesticity became transformed into the ideal of female superiority, and the doctrine of separate spheres into the attempted invasion of the masculine world not simply by women, but, potentially even more revolutionary in its impact, by womanly values.”³⁸ These ideas penetrated the Anglo-Jewish community.³⁹ Indeed, Naomi is an ethical and regenerative paradigm not necessarily for religious reform *per se*, but for the infusion of traditional ritual with inner-piety, renewed spirituality, and contemporary relevance. In the novel, Naomi, who like Montagu experiences a type of spiritual crisis of faith, embarks on a

³⁶ Montagu, *The Faith*, 24, 28; Daniel Langton, *Claude Montefiore: His Life and Thought* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2002), 77.

³⁷ The “feminization” of religion refers to the growing number of women participating in Christian ritual and Church activities, as well as the compassionate emphasis on the forgiveness of a loving God in comparison to the idea of an all encompassing judge. In the Jewish community also, particularly in the Reform Synagogue, women often outnumbered the male worshippers.

³⁸ Olive Banks, *Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 4–5, 85–86, 89–91.

³⁹ Devine, *Lily Montagu’s Shekhinah*, 31–32.

redemptive journey and in the process learns to understand and appreciate the nature of “true” universal religion. Naomi is invigorated by her spiritual association with the ancestral faith and the ties of inherited memory:

Naomi had behind her the racial pride of her ancestors. The persistent, dogged tenacity with which they [Jews] had clung to their religious inheritance, even deifying its casings in their passionate zeal; the fiery jealousy with which they had cherished their isolation among all the peoples of the earth; these seemed suddenly to make their influence felt on the girl. She had been born a Jewess, and no spiritual yearnings, no discontent, no remorse could rob her of this birthright. Even though she had no understanding of the ancient religion, in spite of all her recent self-questionings and misgivings, a passionate devotion of Judaism was indelibly stamped in her blood. It only required her aunt’s question, expressed as it was with suspicion and apprehension, to fill her heart with intense anger that her loyalty had been challenged. Yet mingled with this anger was a feeling of acute pain, for Naomi had suddenly become conscious that in this home, which was so dear to her, she could never again be happy.⁴⁰

Following her spiritual journey of awakening, Naomi is able to return to the rigidly Orthodox house of her aunt who “fully appreciated the righteousness of her rigidly orthodox life and relished the comfortable certainty that it had brought her prosperity” (x). Naomi is now able to enjoy the Shabbat celebrations with renewed appreciation for their inner sanctity:

There was the high dresser, with its rows of plates and dishes shining as brightly as they did on that Sabbath eve – now so far distant – when Jacob had come to celebrate the anniversary of their engagement. But the prosaic application of hot water could never have given them the splendour with which to Naomi’s tired eyes they seemed endowed on this evening of her home-coming. The familiar Sabbath candles, too, appeared strangely unfamiliar to-night. The glow which they threw on the spotless tablecloth, seemed possessed with a mysterious sanctity which Naomi had never noticed before. (190–91)

It is the unthinking nature of contemporaneous religion that requires reinvigorating with renewed spiritual impetus. Moreover, through personal communion with God, Naomi comes to understand (as per Liberal theology) that the divine can be experienced in everyday life and that personal faith is compatible with modern daily living.

Naomi Saul’s spiritual crisis enables her to develop a personally subjective and immanent relationship with the deity through which she is able to call out to the divine in pious moments of need:

“Oh God, what shall I do? Oh, God, help me”!

That was the first prayer Naomi Saul had ever made.

Almost immediately her troubled spirit seemed somewhat soothed. The tension on her feelings was relieved as she gave herself up to the Power not herself of which she was becoming conscious. She lay for a whole hour, half waking, half-sleeping, in communion with her God. (26)

Naomi is at first uncomfortable with personal and private communion, but later in the novel is able to renew her pleas for cosmic direction that will unearth “[t]he purity of her soul, the strength of its nobility”:

After a time her head leaned up against the iron leg of the bedstead, and her lips murmured, “God! God! What shall I do – God”?

⁴⁰ Lily Montagu, *Naomi’s Exodus* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1901), 40–41. Subsequent citations will be given in text.

The prayer was spoken in utter exhaustion of spirit; the soul realized its weakness, and could no longer find rest within itself. It threw itself on the God without for help in its sore need. And the help was given. Naomi was much too tired to know how she reasoned, or whether she reasoned at all. It seemed as if she snatched from the inmost depths of her being the love, faith and hope which she had planted there for Clement, and with that cry to God threw them at His feet. And He accepted them. (162, 207)

Naomi is a young woman upset and confused by the breakup of her relationship with Clement Marks. Lily Montagu perhaps envisages Clement as Claude Montefiore. Indeed, Naomi “dared to love this great clever man, and since his indifference could not stifle her feeling, it should, at least, not disgrace him” (189). But it is “the God of love Who gave this girl the power of loving, even while He withdrew the human object of her love, came into her heart and gave her courage” (165). It is this immanence that would become central to Liberal Judaism. “The God to Whom she had appealed in her terrible loneliness, . . . that God in His infinite pity had led her into communion with Him. Yes, happiness meant free development, and straining towards God she would grow in godliness” (196). With the completion of Naomi’s spiritual journey we are told that “the child had gone forever, and in her stead had come a young woman, wise and gentle” (195).

Naomi Saul’s home is a “little Ghetto shop,” but the implication is that they do not live in the “*East*” of the city (12, 196). Lily Montagu is envisaging the recent immigrants. Naomi is one of them; her mother died in Poland (xii). As a religious minister and social worker, Montagu welcomed the new arrivals to her West Central Jewish Girls’ Club and defended the immigrants’ rights to the press by appealing to England’s “passion for liberty.” Indeed, Montagu began social work in the early 1890s.⁴¹ She was acutely aware of the social and religious differences between the East and West Ends of Anglo-Jewish London:

The “East End Jew,” whose religion is vigorous in spite of its deformities, has no confidence in the shadowy faith of the “West End Jew,” and refuses to be taught by “West End” methods. Examining this distrust, I find that it arises from the recognition of the dissimilarity in the two religions. The “East End Jew” is determined to follow the worship of his fathers, and spurns the flaccid religion of his “West End” brothers. To the pious “East End Jew” religion is obedience glorified into a cult; for him, God exists as a just Law-giver, ready to forgive and help those who obey the Law, delivered by him to his people through his servant Moses, and having misfortune and failure in reserve for the rebellious and indifferent.⁴²

Echoing Amy Levy, Montagu was convinced that the West End Jews were not spiritually motivated. Instead, they were merely affiliated to a Jewish denomination because it was considered respectable in non-Jewish society. These religionists were concerned with the length of the service rather than its sanctity as Judaism had no influence over their daily lives. According to Montagu, these Anglo-Jews either deteriorate into “materialism” or instigate religious understandings of their own choosing (a criticism of the interpretive/subjective nature of Reform theology). Their religiosity is about personal convenience even though they may imagine a “revived and ennobling Judaism.”⁴³

⁴¹ Devine, *Lily Montagu’s Shekhinah*, 60, 63.

⁴² Montagu, “Spiritual Possibilities”, 217–18.

⁴³ Montagu, “Spiritual Possibilities”, 218–20.

Lily Montagu, like Amy Levy, was critical of alleged Anglo-Jewish cultural philistinism and ineptitude, insularity, and tribalism. Naomi Saul's community, similar to Levy's upper-middle-class enclave, is inward-looking and narrow-minded. Mrs Saul, Naomi's aunt, in her ignorance, is wrongly convinced that she has converted. She threatens, "I tell you that Schickses have got hold of our Naomi and are leading her by the nose, and if you don't put a stop to this business I will!" Mrs Saul is convinced that Naomi is lost forever: "my Naomi is never – never a Meshummadas, is she?" Moreover, Naomi is ashamed of the showiness, materialism, and even vulgarity of her companions. She is loathed to be associated with them:

For the first time Naomi was ashamed of her companions. She had not before noticed that the men's dress was showy, that the girls' hats were objectionable, that they had all been talking much too loudly and attracting a great deal of vulgar attention. . . . That young lady was enjoying herself immensely. She was dressed in a tailor-made costume, with gold buttons. She wore white shoes and stockings, and a large hat with feathers decorated her hair, which was loosely dressed about her ears. (18–19)

The group of friends move quickly through the palace and its gallery as the "pictures bored them." What is more, the novel is underpinned, similar to *Reuben Sachs*, by the lack of agency assigned to women. Naomi is subject to her suitor, Jacob Mann, who is able to castigate her as he sees fit. The merest of insubordination results in his ire. He warns, "You've made a fool of me, young lady. You'd better look out" (20–21). But the novel is primarily concerned with the universality of "true" religion. From the outset (and to the finish) *Naomi's Exodus* focuses on Orthodox attention to ritual and observance over and above inner-piety. The anti-ritualism perspective is Evangelical influenced and sets up a contrast with the openness to cultural exchange through which Naomi maintains a friendship with the Christian, Mrs Finch. In the opening scene, we read of Mrs Saul's close attention to ritual:

The kitchen at the back of a small chandler's shop in a Jewish quarter of West London was decked in all its Sabbath-eve brightness. The row of plates, cups, saucers and dishes (specially preserved on the high dresser outside the region of breadcrumbs from one Passover season to the next) had an almost aggressively shining appearance. The table was spread with a spotlessly white cloth and burdened with cold fried fish, sliced Dutch herring, coffee, and bread and butter. Two candles stood on the table, and Mrs Saul, mumbling a Hebrew blessing, was applying a match to light them. (ix)

Conversely, Naomi's friendship with Mrs Finch suggests universality, culture, the aesthetical, philanthropic responsibility, and religious awakening (8) in contrast to the legalism and particularity of traditional Judaism. Naomi is inspired and will eventually take up social service by becoming a nurse: "Yes, happiness meant service . . . Having once realised the existence of God within and without her, she would never again lose him. She would find Him in the ritual customs of her people, in the small duties of her daily life, in her neighbours, in the world around her" (196–97). The close of the novel reveals Naomi's reengagement with the tradition and her ability to take up personal prayer with infused *kavannah*.

As we have seen, Lily Montagu's novel idealises Naomi Saul (resonant of Judith Quixano) and her potential to redeem while castigating the community, comparable to Amy Levy in her analysis of upper-middle-class Anglo-Jewry. Like Levy's *Reuben Sachs*, and its envisioning of West End Jews, there is longing for reconnection. Indeed, Naomi eventually returns to the Orthodox home of her aunt, and Judith, who is in exile married to the convert Bertie

Lee-Harrison, laments “Her people – oh, her people! – to be back once more among them! When all was said, she had been so happy there” (258). Both novels have in varying dimensions redemptive conclusions. Naomi is able to appreciate the sanctity and necessity of traditional ritual and prayer and the necessity of faith in daily life, while Judith is pregnant and her child will be Jewish:

The ways of joy and the ways of sorrow are many; and hidden away in the depths of Judith’s life – though as yet she knows it not – is the germ of another life, which shall quicken, grow, and come forth at last. Shall bring with it no doubt, pain and sorrow, and tears; but shall bring also hope and joy, and the quickening of purpose. (266–67)

In sum, both *Reuben Sachs* and *Naomi’s Exodus* respond to the needs of a society more and more equating morality with spiritual, emotional, and sentimental feelings. The impact of Christian Evangelicalism is evident. The adoption of Reform Judaism, and its failure, was perceived by some Evangelicals as a step towards the embracing of Christianity. Montagu and Levy intended their novels to respond to the impending “threat.” Levy did so through a critical account of Reform Judaism and its alleged fostering of materialist culture. Montagu expanded on Claude Montefiore’s theology of Liberal Judaism while at the same time elucidating similar criticisms of acculturated, West End Anglo-Jewry. Moreover, she adopts the language of Christian Evangelicalism and notions of Christian universality to demonstrate that Anglo-Jews can also be spiritual and progressive without having to convert. The heroines of these novels fulfil Evangelical notions of spiritual regeneration and female superiority. In different ways they express spiritual alienation and its remedies. When read alongside Montagu’s novel, Levy’s critique of Reform Judaism seems prophetic. Unfortunately, however, Levy had already committed suicide prior to the onset of Liberal Judaism in England.

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