

Zalkind Hourwitz, *Vindication of the Jews (1789)*

[Introductory note: In 1789, 40,000 Jews lived in France, most of them in the eastern provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. In some respects, they were better treated than Calvinists under the laws of the monarchy; Jews could legally practice their religion, though their other activities were severely restricted. They had no civil or political rights, except the right to be judged by their own separate courts, and they faced pervasive local prejudice. The major Jewish communities—in the city of Bordeaux in the southwest and the regions of Alsace and Lorraine in the east—essentially constituted separate “nations” within the French nation (and nations separate from each other since their status differed in many ways). In 1787 and 1788 the Royal Society of Arts and Sciences of the city of Metz in eastern France set up an essay competition on the question, “Are there means for making the Jews happier and more useful in France?” Its 2,000 Jews gave Metz the single largest Jewish population in the east. Among the three winners declared in 1788 was Zalkind Hourwitz (1738–1812), a Polish Jew. His pamphlet rapidly earned him a reputation in reformist circles, even though by today’s standard its language seems moderate, if not excessively apologetic. The excerpt here represents what might be called the “assimilationist” position, that is, that granting rights to the Jews would make them more like the rest of the French. At times, the author’s own arguments sound anti-Semitic to our ears because in his concern to counter all the usual stereotypes about the Jews, he repeats many of them and gives them a kind of credit. As a follower of the Enlightenment, Zalkind Hourwitz disliked the extensive powers exercised by Jewish leaders over their communities, and he even held out the possibility of encouraging conversion to Christianity. The inclusion of such a suggestion and the defensive tone of the recommendations for improvement highlight the many difficulties and prejudices faced by the Jews.]

The means of making the Jews happy and useful? Here it is: stop making them unhappy and unuseful. Accord them, or rather return to them the right of citizens, which you have denied them against all divine and human laws and against your own interests, like a man who thoughtlessly cripples himself.

To be sure, during times of barbarism, there was no shortage of ways of oppressing the Jews. Yet we are hard pressed even in an enlightened century, not to repair all the evils that have been done to them and to compensate them for their unjustly confiscated goods [hardly to be hoped for], but simply to cease being unjust toward them and to leave them peacefully to enjoy the rights of humanity under the protection of general laws. . . .

The simplest means would be therefore to accord them throughout the kingdom the same liberty that they enjoy in [Bordeaux and Bayonne]; nevertheless, however simple this means appears, it is still susceptible to greater perfection, in order to render the Jews not only happier and more useful but even more honest in the following manner.

1. They must be accorded permission to acquire land, which will attach them to the fatherland, where they will no longer regard themselves as foreigners and will increase at the same time the value of the land.

2. They must be permitted to practice all of the liberal and mechanical arts and agriculture, which will diminish the number of merchants among them and in consequence the number of knaves and rogues. . . .

4. To make their merchants more honest, they must be accorded the freedom to exercise every sort of commerce, to keep their stores open, to carry any product, and to live among the other citizens. Then being more closely allied with the other citizens, more at their ease and with their conduct more exposed to the inspection of the police, having moreover to manage their credit, their reputation, and especially their regular customers, they will have in consequence less inclination, less necessity, and less facility in cheating and buying stolen goods.

5. To better diminish this facility in cheating, they must be forbidden, on pain of annulment of the transaction, the use of Hebrew and German [Yiddish] language and characters in their account books and commercial contracts, whether between themselves or with Christians.

6. It is necessary therefore to open the public schools to their children, to teach them French, which will produce a double advantage: it will make it easier to instruct them and to make them familiar from earliest infancy with Christians. They will establish with the Christians bonds of friendship which will be fortified by living near to each other, by the use of the same language and customs, and especially by the recognition of the freedom that they will be accorded; they will learn from these bonds that the Christians worship a Supreme Being like themselves, and as a result the fraud

that the Talmud authorizes in dealings with pagans will no longer be permitted.

7. To better facilitate these bonds, their rabbis and leaders must be severely forbidden from claiming the least authority over their co-religionists outside of the synagogue, from prohibiting entry and honors to those who cut their beards, who curl their hair, who dress like Christians, who go to the theater, or who fail to observe some other custom that is irrelevant to their religion and only introduced by superstition in order to distinguish the Jews from other peoples [...].

We could add that the freedom of the Jews is the best means of converting them to Christianity; for, once putting an end to their captivity, you will render useless the temporal Messiah that they expect, and then they will be obliged to recognize Jesus-Christ as a spiritual Messiah in order not to contradict the Prophets, who predicted the arrival of some kind of Messiah. . . .

Are so many verbiages and citations necessary to prove that a Jew is a man, and that it is unjust to punish him from his birth onward for real or supposed vices that one reproaches in other men with whom he has nothing in common but religious belief? And what would the French say if the Academy of Stockholm had proposed, twelve years ago, the following question: "Are there means for making Catholics more useful and happier in Sweden?"

Source: *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution*, <<http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/>>.