When scholars in early 19th-century Germany began to create the academic field known today as Jewish studies—called at the time Wissenschaft des Judentums (Scholarly Study or Science of Judaism)—they conceived a masculinist project. These Jews were men; they wrote primarily for other men about texts that men before them had written, and about a history in which men almost exclusively figured as actors. In their hands, Jewish history was intellectual history, the history of texts and ideas, a history to which women had very restricted access. Male Jewish scholars wrote political and economic histories in which Christian kings gave charters to male Jewish community leaders, and Jewish men traded goods (and books) from Tangier to Vilna, often amassing fortunes. Women barely figured in these accounts.

Only in the 1970s and 80s, when second-wave feminism came to inspire a new generation of female Jewish scholars, did change occur. Along with their peers in other disciplines and fields of study, and sparked by the large-scale political mobilization of the time, feminist Jewish historians challenged the status quo and began to transform Jewish historiography. In German Jewish history, Marion Kaplan’s 1991 book, The Making of the Jewish Middle Class: Women, Family, and Identity in Imperial Germany, represents one of the most influential of these works. Kaplan not only added women to her account of how German Jews engineered upward mobility, maintained middle-class status, and cultivated bourgeois lifestyles, she also changed the very story in the process. In her rendering, “economy” constituted what men did in the public and professional realms of society, as well as what women contributed to the family economy in less visible ways, often but not only in the domestic sphere. By focusing on women’s cultural labor within the family and taking the
Mother, nanny, and children out for a stroll. Leipzig, 1901.
family seriously as a central locus of Jewish life, Kaplan revised our conception of how Jews in German lands integrated into the German middle class and became Germans. Moreover, together with numerous other studies produced in the past decades, Kaplan’s work has redefined our understanding of Jewish culture. Rabbinic literature, liturgy, religious poetry, and philosophical treatises shape parameters of Judaism and Jewish life, but so does what is practiced in the kitchen, in the nursery, and in the bedroom.

However, the project of adding women to the records of Jewish history, restoring their voices to canons of Jewish literatures and thereby repairing and transforming the enterprise of Jewish studies has not been completed. Nineteenth-century Wissenschaft-style male-centered scholarship continues to be produced, and I have not yet stopped reminding my students that a book or an article in which women are absent is deeply and inherently flawed. Informed and responsible scholarship today needs at least to discuss and problematize, and ideally theorize women’s absence in a particular realm of society or text.

In fact, such theorizing has become an important part of the feminist project in recent decades. Employing insights from Foucauldian thought, French psychoanalytical theory, and a variety of other postmodern modes of analysis, scholars have probed more deeply into questions of how gender operates as a system that privileges men. In the course of these inquiries, it has become increasingly apparent that inequality, oppression, and even violence seem to reside within the making of the very categories of “men” and “women.” Gender studies scholars sensitive to these insights do not take “men” and “women” as foundational, self-evident entities. Thus they do not examine how men and women create relationships of power; rather they investigate how operations of power produce what we know as women and men (and the hierarchical ordering between them). Exploring how the categories of men and women are engineered and maintained has emerged as a crucial focus for feminist scholarship. This research agenda informs my current work and my reading of letters and diaries written by German Jews in the early- and mid-19th century. I have set out to uncover the process and the dynamics by which the authors of these texts wrote themselves into existence as Jews, as Germans, as middle-class individuals, and as women or men. Below I offer a glimpse into these texts along with the creation of categories and of regimes of differentiation within them.

In June 1836, Adelheid Zunz composed a long letter to her beloved husband Leopold Zunz (one of the founding fathers of Wissenschaft des Judentums) and in the addendum, Adelheid’s sister Henriette wrote a few words of greeting to her brother-in-law. She reported: “Something extraordinary has occurred here, the wife of William Lebin has given birth to a Zwitter. My heart beats, my hair is standing on end when I think about this creature…. Some people say that it will be a boy later, others say that it will be a girl: a young woman.” Zwitter was the term for a person who would have been called a hermaphrodite in the medical literature of the 19th century, and whom we would consider intersex today. Henriette asserted that there were only two sexes (male and female) and that the young person would have to live as either a man or a woman. But the body of this infant seemed to have defied the rules of a binary gender order. The ambiguity of the situation caused Henriette anxiety and severe physical discomfort.

More than a week earlier, Adelheid had reported to Leopold in another letter that during her travels, she had met a “baptized Jew.” In this case, Adelheid named the ambigu-
ous position of the individual she referred to without any mention of distress or anxiety. We thus might conclude that the categories Adelheid Zunz used to order her world and to ascribe boundaries, coherence, and thus reality to a person included not only Jews and Christians, but also hybrid or more complex identities or subjectivities such as that of a converted Jew. Adelheid might have been comfortable with shifting identities and unstable boundaries. However, it is equally possible that Adelheid did not experience any discomfort because she subscribed to notions of a hard and immutable boundary between Jews and non-Jews. Adelheid and Leopold Zunz might have concurred that Jews and non-Jews were clearly distinct and that the boundary between the two groups could not be crossed. They might have held that religion was not the defining marker of being Jewish and that a converted Jew was and remained a Jew.

Both of these incidents attest that none of the categories at play were natural or self-evident. Rather, the distinctions between what contemporaries constructed as two sexes and as the Christian/Jewish binary, and the definitions of what they believed constituted a woman or a man, the Jewish religion, race, or tribe, the German nation, and middle-class status were created and cultivated in such negotiations. Far from neutral, negotiations of this kind and their effects carry and produce the power through which the hierarchies, hegemonies and submissions, foregroundings and erasures they create are implemented. Thus a feminist historical analysis can suggest insights into how Adelheid and Henriette Zunz contributed to the making and maintaining of coordinates that structured the universe of modern German Jewish culture. And it can also expose that the omission of women from the historical accounts of 19th-century Wissenschaft did not constitute an innocent oversight.

A theoretically informed gender studies lens allows us to bring into focus how the authors of these texts forged manhood and built male hegemony, in the process through which they defined and constructed modern Jewishness and Jewish Germanness.