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## **Napoleon's influence on Jewish law**

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Introduction

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## INTRODUCTION

Two hundred years ago Jews saw Napoleon as our liberator. The Sanhedrin of 1807, which he assembled, provided a foundation for modern Jewish life. The Emperor who controlled much of Europe leveled ghetto walls, created a new Jewish communal structure and published decrees both positive and negative.

Although Napoleon was soon defeated, he had moved the emancipation of European Jews from pamphlets, debates and halting legal steps to action. Full civil rights for Jews in the hundreds of jurisdictions which dotted Central Europe came slowly or not at all in eastern Europe, but the process had begun.

These beginnings with their economic opportunities and the accompanying social and political changes meant that Jewish life had to adapt. Virtually over night the century old semi-autonomous Jewish religious community disappeared and had to be replaced. Jewish life was forced to change, but the traditional leadership moved slowly which led to the creation of Liberal Judaism, Jewish nationalism, and the secular Jewish community.

These drastic changes, as well as others, continue to the engage Jewish historians. The essays in this volume will deal primarily with the halakhic implications of this revolution. My essay provides the general background, the motivation for Napoleon's Sanhedrin, and a halakhic analysis of the answers to the specific questions which the Emperor posed to the preliminary "Great Assembly" which were ratified by the Sanhedrin.

Ferenc Raj provides the background of the emancipation of Hungarian Jewry and brings us David Friesenhausen's suggestions for changes in Hungarian Jewish education and religious life. This essay was to be followed by a piece on the halakhic reaction of the large

and varied Hungarian Jewish community to emancipation and the modernization of Jewish life. Unfortunately that essay did not materialize.

David Ellenson shows how several traditional authorities came to terms with the demands of the new world. They could not reject the major trends of previous halakhic decisions, but found ways to reinterpret aspects of the tradition, sometimes quite radically. In this way they met the new challenges. Such adaptations have, of course, occurred previously, but not so widely or with such broad acceptance.

Mark Washofsky uses the well known halakhic narrative of the "Captive Infant" and its various interpretations to demonstrate how the leadership of the traditional Jewish world sought to come to terms with the modern secular world. Equally important is his discussion of the broader significance of the narrative and its interpretation in shaping the halakhah

The essays of this slim volume seek to make a contribution to the ongoing discussion of the Emancipation and the development of the modern Jewish community as we commemorate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Napoleon's Sanhedrin.

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