

## Between Two Worlds: Border Negotiation, Jewish Identity, and Transatlantic Parallels in *Das alte Gesetz*

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**ABSTRACT:-** This analysis examines how Dupont's 1923 silent film *Das alte Gesetz* (The Ancient Law) reflects Jewish identity and cultural integration in Weimar Germany while paralleling American Jewish experiences of the era. Through the interpretation of the protagonist Baruch's journey from a traditional shtetl to Vienna's theater scene, the study explores how the film addresses the intricate dynamics of Jewish assimilation, cultural preservation, and identity transformation. The study employs comparative analysis to illuminate similarities and differences between German and American Jewish experiences of cultural adaptation in the 1920s, utilizing theoretical frameworks from scholars like Zygmunt Bauman and Herbert Gans. Particular attention is given to the film's cinematographic techniques, including dissolves and parallel editing, which visualize the protagonist's navigation between traditional and modern worlds.

This paper concludes that *Das alte Gesetz* presents a delicate portrayal in the molding of cultural negotiation, contributing to a far-reaching historical context while lending itself as a metaphor for broader challenges confronting minority communities in their balancing of tradition and modernity.

**Keywords:** Jewish Identity, Weimar Cinema, Cultural Assimilation, *Das alte Gesetz*, Border Negotiation, Transatlantic Studies, E.A. Dupont, American Jewish Experience, Cultural Adaptation

### I. INTRODUCTION

After World War I, the Weimar Republic experienced significant social and political upheavals, affecting Jewish communities deeply. This essay examines the portrayal of these challenges in *Das alte Gesetz* and draws parallels with the American Jewish experience, providing insights into cultural identity amidst modernization threats.

The film's themes take a profound resonance when considered from a transatlantic perspective. Until the early post-World War I period, the Americas dominated as destinations for Jewish international migration (DellaPergola 765). Predictably, the United States of America emerged as a leading destination for many Jewish migrants. During this same period, Jewish communities in the United States of America were also navigating questions of cultural adaptation, although within a distinctly different context. While Jews in the German territory faced intensifying anti-Semitism within the instability of the Weimar Republic, Jews in the US grappled with negotiating their identity with other cultures. Salin notes that the US is founded on a continuous stream of immigration and has, since colonial days, struggled with the task of keeping cultural and civic unity national while satisfying its underlying ethnic diversity (Salin). An inquiry into the collective experiences of the Jewish community within 1920s German and American society provides insight into some of the critical issues of maintaining cultural identity amidst the constant threat of modernization.

As historian Hasia Diner observes, "American Jews, like their European counterparts, struggled with questions of tradition versus modernity, though within the unique context of American pluralism" (Diner 381). This parallel positions *Das alte Gesetz* as more than a German-Jewish narrative; it serves as a broader reflection on Jewish modernity across the Western world.

This paper also makes a cross-cultural comparison with the American immigrant experience, mainly within the Jewish community, to crystalize the shared challenges of cultural preservation and identity negotiation. Taking a cue from Glazer and Moynihan's *Beyond Melting Pot* work as a lens, this essay further

explores how both German and American societies grappled with issues of assimilation and cultural pluralism. The comparative analysis of the fluctuating social dynamics in the Weimar Republic with those of comparable trends in the US highlights the universal cultural negotiation most minority communities contend with in relation to asserting their cultural identity and guarding against assimilationist pressures.

The relationship between Baruch and his father, who is a rabbi, incarnates the tension between two extremes: one of heritage custody and one of new identities within the modern German context. Central to Baruch and his family's dilemma is whether to stick with ancient customs, hence remaining aloof, or fully blend into modern German life. Through Baruch's inner conflict, the film captures this struggle impacting the Jewish communities during this era.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Weimar Republic was established in 1919 and lasted till 1933. This was a time in German history when there was immense social and political upheaval. Amidst this tumult and uncertainty, questions regarding national identity, minority communities such as the Jewish population, and the discussion on integrating Jews into German society gained prominence. Many factors influenced the experiences of German Jews during this period. One of these factors is the push for assimilation into the prevailing non-Jewish culture juxtaposed with a troubling surge in anti-Semitic attitudes and perilous ideologies directed at the Jewish minority.

*Das alte Gesetz*, therefore, serves as an essential artistic exploration of these tensions through the lens of a Jewish family. Several scholarly works have analyzed the film through various critical lenses, adding diverse context and theoretical framing to understanding its importance as a commentary on Jewish identity, assimilation, and the border negotiations that characterized this unstable era in German history.

Valerie Weinstein's work explores *Das alte Gesetz* through the perspective of border dissolution and Zygmunt Bauman's conceptualization of the "assimilating Jew," revealing an ambivalence that challenges constructed political and social boundaries and hierarchies. Weinstein argues that the film's protagonist, Baruch, "occupies the space between" the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds, with his transformative journey from an Eastern European shtetl to a leading actor in the Viennese theater, which reflects how Baruch is able to blur this boundary. The visual metaphor of dissolves as Baruch sheds his traditional dress underscores this dissolution of identity categories amidst the assimilation process (Weinstein).

Weinstein further wrote about how Baruch's assimilated, cosmopolitan identity evokes contradictory attitudes; first, as an object of desire of the Archduchess but also a perceived threat to traditional social order. This ambivalence mirrors Bauman's theorization of anti-Semitism, the web of philosemitic attitudes existing alongside antisemitic repulsion toward the figure of the assimilating Jew who defies categorization. Baruch's romantic relationships reflect this tension, portraying him as an object of desire yet inappropriate for his transgressions against Jewish orthodoxy (Weinstein).

Ofer Ashkenazi's essay contextualizes *Das alte Gesetz* within the broader social climate of the Weimar era, marked by unprecedented success in Jewish acculturation alongside rising antisemitic violence and the proliferation of racist ideologies in the wake of Germany's defeat in World War I. Ashkenazi explores how *Das alte Gesetz* encodes these Jewish perspectives through themes of displacement and simulation central to the assimilation experience (Ashkenazi).

Cynthia Walk provides valuable context on how the film engages with the debate around Jewish assimilation and anti-Semitism through the frame of a potential romantic relationship between Jew and Gentile. Walk argues that this mixed-couple scenario functions as a metaphor for the possibilities and limits of assimilation amidst the wave of anti-Semitism triggered by Jewish refugee migration from Eastern Europe after World War I (Walk).

Notably, as a form of border crossing from tradition to modernity, Oz's *Wie Man Fanatiker Kuriert*, offers a fascinating insight into the film's thematic depictions. Baruch's father, a religious fanatic, successfully negotiated the boundary of his worldview through literature. Oz posits that literature can serve as an "antidote to fanaticism" by injecting imagination and fostering perspective-taking.

Other scholars like Nicholas Allred (Allred) and Stefan Hofmann/Theresa Eisele further enrich the understanding of *Das alte Gesetz* within its historical context. Allred situates the film's subject matter amid the

fraught discussions surrounding Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe, forced acculturation, and the anxieties these visible markers of "foreignness" inspired among the German populace. Hofmann and Eisele examine how the film engages with contemporaneous discourses around Judaism and affinity for the theatrical arts, a supposed "national trait" that could signify assimilationist prowess or dangerous deception, depending on the perspective (Hofmann and Eisele).

This multidisciplinary scholarship illuminates how *Das alte Gesetz* operated as a profound cultural document, giving voice to the realities, debates, and discussions surrounding Jewish identity within the context of Weimar Germany. The essay also makes significant transatlantic parallels with the experiences of Jews in the US during the same period, drawing on Glazer and Moynihan's *melting pot* theory to illuminate shared challenges of cultural adaptation. The comparative analysis provides a broader understanding of minority identity negotiations, linking the Weimar and American Jewish experiences of cultural adaptation and extending the discussion to the universal challenges minority communities encounter in balancing tradition and modernity.

Through rich visual metaphors and profound historical insights, the film chronicles the tensions, ambivalences, and acts of self-determination that shaped this transition as Jewish communities navigated existential questions of assimilation, tradition, belonging, and precarious status within an increasingly hostile mainstream society. Theories of border negotiation, the assimilating figure's intellectual ambivalence, and the modernization's socioeconomic pressures all come together to ground the film's intimate family drama. As a film, *Das alte Gesetz* preserves these fragile negotiations of identity and meaning, ensuring their analysis remains vital for understanding this definitive period of German and Jewish history.

### III. BARUCH'S JOURNEY OF ASSIMILATION

Cynthia Walk contextualizes *Das alte Gesetz* within the significant migration of Eastern European Jews to Western Europe following World War I, a movement that proves a rise in anti-Semitism (Walk 84). She explains that these Orthodox Jewish migrants, characterized by "distinctive dress, beliefs, and customs," became a visible foreign presence in cities like Berlin and Vienna, provoking ambivalence among assimilated urban Jews who received them (Walk 84).

The anti-Semitic sentiments and social pressure underpinning *Das alte Gesetz* is a ripple effect of the influx of Eastern European Jews and the resulting tensions. The increased visibility of Jewish communities contributed to xenophobic anxieties about foreign influence and racial mixing, which created multilayered dynamics. Assimilated German Jews were torn between welcoming their Eastern European counterparts and feeling discomfort with their adherence to traditional customs.

Walk argues that *Das alte Gesetz*, alongside other early Weimar films, serves as a "cinematic intervention" in Germany's ongoing debate over "die Judenfrage" (the Jewish question) during a period when escalating anti-Semitism fostered xenophobia and fears of miscegenation (Walk 85). This aligns with analyses of border negotiation, as the film engages with rising anti-Semitism, scapegoating, and societal pressures for Jewish assimilation within the Weimar Republic. Allred observes that recent scholarship strives to delineate the extent of anti-Semitic unease in Wilhelmine Germany and the Weimar Republic (Allred 277), underscoring the importance of the film's subject matter in reflecting contemporary social and political concerns.

These migration dynamics and cultural adaptation found striking parallels in the American context. In "Haunted in the New World," Donald Weber noted that American Jewish immigrants during this period encountered comparable challenges related to visibility and cultural negotiation, albeit within the distinct context of American pluralism. (Weber). In contrast to Germany, where assimilation pressures loomed large, the American Jewish experience allowed for a model of adaptation in which, as Jonathan Sarna notes, Jews could participate fully in American society while maintaining distinct religious and cultural identities (Sarna ).

The differing reactions to Jewish visibility in Germany and the US are especially revealing. While Baruch's outwardly Jewish appearance marks him as an outsider in need of transformation, American Jewish performers like Al Jolson during this era often embraced and celebrated their Jewish identity publicly. Historian Michael Alexander points out that "American popular culture provided spaces where Jewish difference could be performed and celebrated, even as it was being negotiated and transformed" (Alexander)

Baruch's journey from his traditional Jewish village to cosmopolitan Vienna mirrors the experiences of Jewish immigrants in early 20th-century America. In New York, Eastern European Jews navigated an

increasingly diverse and modern society that encouraged the adoption of more *Americanized* appearances, shedding traditional attire and customs (Howe 59). Sociologist Herbert Gans's theory of *symbolic ethnicity* states that Jewish immigrants kept outward markers, such as clothing and language, as a means of promoting ethnic solidarity against the forced march to assimilate (Gans). This parallels Baruch's initial hesitation to cut off his sidelocks, indicating the difficulty in abandoning his identity.

As Baruch works toward becoming acculturated in his new life, he joins a traveling theater company and acts in Romeo and Juliet drama. Though he gains the audience's delight and the Archduchesses' acknowledgment of his acting talent, he becomes an object of ridicule for having Jewish sidelocks, reflecting the ambivalent acceptance of assimilating Jews. Milton Gordon describes this as "acculturation without assimilation," where immigrant groups in America adapted behaviorally but maintained distinct cultural identities (Gordon). Likewise, Baruch's transition in Vienna reflects not a complete shedding of his Jewish identity but a layered adaptation that combines a more secular aesthetic with retained cultural values.

As the film unfolds, Baruch's struggles serve as a microcosm of the broader challenges faced by Eastern European Jewish communities in navigating identity between tradition and modernity. Allred points out that the German Jews were faced with questions of identity raised by the arrival of Jews from Eastern Europe (Allred 278), introducing a larger social dynamic. The film sensitively captures the broader spectrum in this clash that depicts generational divisions within the Jewish communities as they navigate modernity, assimilation, and the preservation of tradition. Baruch's journey is emblematic of this broader immigrant experience of trying to balance home heritage with mainstream culture, as his relationship with his Orthodox father leads to a representation of the larger societal forces pulling the Jewish community in opposing directions.

Baruch's physical and metaphorical journey from a traditional Eastern European shtetl to Vienna, where he aspires to become a celebrated actor, represents a border negotiation. Valerie Weinstein notes that Baruch occupies a space between the Jewish and gentile worlds, and his actions demonstrate the dissolution of these boundaries (Weinstein 513). This fluidity is visually represented through dissolves (timestamp: 1:06:41–1:08:25) as Baruch transitions from his traditional Jewish appearance to a modern Viennese gentleman, shedding his sidelocks and adopting secular attire.

In these dissolving shots, Baruch undergoes a striking physical transformation as he sheds the outward markers of his Judaic heritage—his sidelocks are cut, and he dons the attire of a Viennese gentleman. This visual metaphor signifies more than a change in clothing; it symbolizes the breakdown of rigid identity categories. The dissolve includes the ambivalence of Baruch's process of acculturation and expresses it as a fluid experience in transition. Baruch's negotiation of both Judaic and non-Judaic spaces demonstrates that he feels comfortable in both boundaries. However, this process of change does not represent a complete loss of identity but is, instead, a liminal space in which both traditional and modern, Judaic and non-Judaic identities are blended.

The shifting, liquid quality of the dissolve reflects the flexibility necessary for assimilation, revealing identity as complex and nuanced for individuals such as Baruch. The ambiguous nature of assimilation becomes a subtle and transitional process of integrating rather than a complete abandonment of one's roots.

According to Zygmunt Bauman's theory, the assimilating Jew undergoes an "intellectual ambivalence" that bridges the gaps and cracks into the established social frameworks and hierarchies (Weinstein 498). Baruch's ability to navigate these borders accentuates his allure as a leading man in the Viennese theater and anxiety surrounding the foreign, as his cosmopolitan identity is perceived as a threat to the traditional order. As Hofmann and Eisele note, "In order to leave the traditional existence in the Eastern European shtetl behind and become an actor at the famous Burgtheater, he needs to adopt a bourgeois habitus" (134). The removal of his sidelocks marks Baruch's transformation, and it represents the performative aspect of acculturation, mirroring pressures to assimilate and the influence of the Maskilim on German-speaking Jews (133).

The concept of *the melting pot*, as seen in *Das alte Gesetz*, finds spaces in the American cultural narratives that idealized assimilation as a blending of identities into a cohesive national whole (Glazer & Moynihan). Just as Baruch adopts Viennese attire, Jewish immigrants in America often downplayed visible signs of their heritage, seeking a secular appearance that allowed flexible societal navigation. This comparison

enunciates the universal struggle minority groups face as they attempt to reconcile identity within societies favoring cultural homogeneity.

The mise-en-scène couples these thematic contrasts. The visual juxtaposition of Baruch's Eastern European shtetl stands for a more traditional Jewish life and his life at the Vienna cosmopolitan theaters for modern society. This juxtaposition serves to illuminate the border negotiations and the hardships encountered by characters like Baruch, who try to blend the two worlds. At the same time, Baruch's father, an Orthodox rabbi, represents the rigid traditionalist that protects the Jewish identity from the incursion of modernity. His commitment to faith and customs is in opposition to Baruch's journey, holding itself as a visual representation of the social tension between preservation and assimilation.

Amos Oz's reflections on literature in counteracting fanaticism find a powerful exemplar in *Das alte Gesetz*. Literature has an antidote to narrow-mindedness and fixedness since it injects imagination into human existence. According to Oz, "Literature contains an antidote to fanaticism" (Oz 53). Injecting literature into human imagination provides immunity against fanaticism by forcing an awareness about one's presuppositions and forging an understanding of one another. Resonance to Oz's notion comes to the fore in this film when, in a pivotal moment (1:56:29), Ruben Pick invites the rabbi to experience Shakespeare, a tale outside and beyond the precincts of his holy texts. This act encapsulates Oz's idea that moving into realms of imagination provides resistance to fanaticism and a place to meet in understanding. While Baruch's father's stance against these pressures stands out in sharp contrast to Baruch's attempts to negotiate both the dictates of his heritage and his ambition to attain acceptance in Vienna, it is thus possible to conclude that Baruch becomes a model of balancing issues of identity across cultural boundaries. The film reveals how successful Baruch has been in laying claim to his Jewish roots while also gaining acceptance into Vienna, with the latter being just an affirmation of his identity crossing these lines.

The clash of identities between what is culturally expected and what an individual dreams of creates tension. Such tension is heightened by Dupont's high art of parallel editing, switching seamlessly between Baruch's experiences in the traditional Jewish world and Viennese theater, most notably from 1:23:00 to 1:33:13. The parallel editing becomes a visual representation of Baruch's balancing act between conflicting identity and high ambition. According to Walk, this parallel editing pinpoints Baruch's journey as one negotiating assimilation and dissimulation, thus revealing his dual navigation of tradition and modernity (Walk 98).

Contemporary American Jewish cinema from the 1920s similarly explores the relationships between tradition and assimilation, which aligns with the portrayal of dual identities in *Das alte Gesetz*. Jewish filmmakers in Hollywood favored assimilation narratives such as B.P. Schulberg. In contrast, independent Yiddish cinema exemplified, through film-making formats, the complexities of the immigrant experience, as represented by Sidney Goldin. This trans-Atlantic parallel underscores film as a significant platform for articulating cultural identities and adaptations.

The film's revelation of border negotiation offers insight into the characters' experiences by exposing the interconnection between societal expectations, individual aim, and self-identity. It also incorporates dialogues on the Jewish proclivity for performance and theatre, viewing Baruch's gift as a marker of how Jewish culture has evolved in a broader social context. Ashkenazi argues that Jewish filmmakers of the time used film to respond urgently to the challenges facing German-Jewish communities, creatively engaging with these topics (Ashkenazi 25). By situating Baruch's journey in the context of Jewish theater, *Das alte Gesetz* captures the broader process of cultural adaptation.

Baruch's experience equally resonates with the concurrent rise of Jewish performers in American entertainment. While Baruch engages with high culture as a means of assimilation, the Jewish artists in the U.S., in most regards, drew from a range of Jewish cultural elements to transform their outsider status into innovative contributions to popular entertainment. Andrea Most notes that Jewish performers in 1920s America adapted their marginal position into a source of creativity, using their cultural heritage in their work (Most, 2004). Such divergences of national contexts allow for the appreciation of the different Jewish identities made in their artistic sphere on the two sides of the Atlantic.

The reception of the film also points to its cultural significance. Both critics and audiences received *Das alte Gesetz* with appreciation, with some even going so far as to assert a hope that it could bring social



harmony by praising Ernst Deutsch's empathetic performance and the film's presentations of Jewish life (Hofmann and Eisele 150). This response to the film crystallizes the film's potential as a cultural mediator when anti-Semitic sentiment was increasing.

Ambivalence toward Baruch's assimilation also surfaces through his romantic relationships. The film presents the Archduchess's attraction to Baruch as transgressive due to class differences, contrasting with his guilt over leaving his Jewish betrothed, Esther. Close-up shots and audience reactions in the theater emphasize Baruch as a desirable figure, encapsulating the emotional ambivalence Bauman describes regarding the assimilating Jew, evoking both attraction and repulsion (Weinstein 498). The central relationship between Baruch and the Archduchess symbolizes the boundaries and limitations of assimilation (Walk 85).

*Das alte Gesetz*, in the final analysis, does not reject assimilation nor depict it as inherently damaging to Jewish identity. In the final scenes, where Baruch's family reunites in Vienna, the film proposes the potential of Jewish identity to evolve within broad cultural tailoring even though some identity markers would be preserved. To the Gentile audience, Walk contends that the film undermines concerns regarding ethnicity by presenting an image of a cultural integration that does not compromise class structures and efface Jewish identity (Walk 88). For Jewish spectators, the film gives a sympathetic portrayal of the shtetl and authentic Jewish identity by addressing concerns over the loss of culture through assimilation. By showing Baruch's commitment to Esther and adherence to Jewish marital traditions, the film resonates with Orthodox and Zionist audiences concerned with preserving the Jewish community and tradition (Walk 89).

By interweaving Baruch's journey with this linear narrative of theatrical progress, *Das alte Gesetz* presents a vision of acculturation as a path to social mobility and cultural refinement. However, as Hofmann and Eisele astutely observe, the film acknowledges the sacrifices and losses inherent in this process, as Baruch must sever ties with his family, religious traditions, and past life (148-149).

Weinstein states that "Reconciliation is possible only through a redefinition of the Jewish family. In the world of assimilation, Jewish law no longer comes first" (506). Baruch's father acknowledged that "the heart must either supersede or be compatible with the law that the Lord has given," points toward a future where tradition can adjust to adapt to the demands of the new realities of social integration.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Rather than framing assimilation as purely harmful or promoting complete detachment from Jewish origins, the film chooses instead a middle ground whereby communities could adjust while staying united in the observance of central traditions. This theme is highlighted in Baruch's reconciliation with his father and the rekindled bond with Esther. He manages to incorporate elements of a dominant culture while at the same time observing vital customs like endogamy.

Broadly, the film reflects on the nuanced experience of Jewish communities, caught between social pressures for assimilation, anti-Semitism, and increased Eastern European Jewish immigration during the post-World War I. By examining discourses on Jews in acting, this film plays out the debatable status of the assimilated Jew as an ambivalent hero and yet a threat to tradition. This creative portrayal sheds light on the Jewish identity of balancing derived familiarity against the demands of modern life.

The film's transatlantic connection emphasizes how Jewish communities worldwide dealt with modernization's challenges. As German Jews struggled with conforming to the dominant culture in an increasingly hostile environment, American Jews had a more unrestrained choice in the cultural marketplace that allowed for a wide range of expressions of Jewish identity. This difference reveals how the national environment shaped cultural adaptation and, at the same time, indicates how these identity-preserving challenges were similar everywhere.

Based on this dynamic, the film's thematic imprints extend beyond the Weimar Republic; it also resonates with the experience of Jewish immigrants in America, who also adapted to the dual pressures of maintaining traditions and societal acceptance. Ethnic markers, as sociologist Gans suggested, permit immigrants to maintain a certain identity in complex structures (Gans). This universal element resonates with Baruch's commitment to his Jewish heritage. *Das alte Gesetz* thus goes to the heart of a universal search for cultural identity. It offers a universal experience relevant to the story of any immigrant community worldwide as it attempts to balance integration and cultural integrity. Lastly, the film offers no clear answers but instead

provides a complex and sensitive understanding of cultural negotiations for ethnically distinct groups in societies undergoing social and political changes.

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