In an essay written in 1911 under the title “The Zion of the Jewish Woman,” Martin Buber denounced the “materialism” of Jewish women. Idealizing women’s roles in traditional life, Buber contrasts these roles with what he calls—echoing Max Nordau’s famous book—their contemporary degeneration. In past times, he says, the family was the cornerstone of the Jewish world, the substitute for the lost Jewish state, and women were its main guardians. Given women’s central role, the Jewish family’s decline in modern times is largely their fault, as they have become slaves to their Christian servants. The “regal beauty” of Jewish women in earlier times has become ostentatious materialism.

Now, feminism has certainly given us a very different perspective on such matters than was the case in 1911. I have little doubt that if Buber were alive today, rereading this essay would make him roll over in his proverbial grave. But his essay can still serve as an important jumping-off point for thinking about Jews and consumer culture, pointing, as it does, both forward and backward. Let us start with forward, towards Zionism on the one hand and American Jewish culture on the other. I will then turn to backward, to the question of Jewish consumer culture in Europe in the nineteenth century and, then, to whether one can speak of a Jewish consumer culture before the modern period.

Martin Buber’s attack on the materialism of Jewish women derived from his belief that Zionism must be anti-materialistic—that it must find its primary value not in the bourgeois ideal of individual consumption, but rather in collectivism based on spiritual values. A few years after Buber wrote his essay, the orthodox German Zionist, Hans Goslar, weighed in in similar terms. Goslar denounced what he called

---

2 Hans Goslar, Die Sexualethik der jüdischen Wiedergeburt. Ein Wort an unsere Jugend (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1919). For a discussion of these two essays, see my Eros and the
the “contemporary cult of women” (*Frauenkult unseres Zeitalters*) that had turned them into sexual objects and materialistic “luxury animals” (*Luxustierchen*) rather than treating them as comrades, wives, and mothers. Goslar contrasts this modern, materialistic culture to the biblical custom on the 15th of the Hebrew month of Av when young men and women would dance in the vineyards and create bonds of love totally divorced from material concerns; since the women were not allowed to wear jewelry, he claims, the poor would have as good a chance of finding a mate as the wealthy.

Both Buber and Goslar clearly romanticized traditional Jewish life—not to mention, in Goslar’s case, the Bible—when women ostensibly played a proper spiritual role and were not seduced by material culture. Of course, this ideological position had a particularly Central European flavor and reflected the *embourgeoisement* of Jewish women. It contrasted sharply with the reality of the life of Jewish women in Eastern Europe, where they were typically active in the marketplace even more than men. There, women as merchants—rather than women as consumers—were the norm.

But Buber and Goslar were partaking in another trope that had its origins in the nineteenth-century Haskalah and its fruition in Zionism: the attack on traditional Jewish marriage in favor of romantic love, free choice, and, ultimately, in the case of utopian Zionism, at least the theoretical equality of the sexes and abolition of marriage altogether.3 The most significant aspect of this attack on traditional marriage was its economic component; indeed, for traditional or premodern Jews, the marriage of their children was probably the most important economic transaction of their lives. The dowry alone, depending on economic class, of course, frequently dwarfed all other transactions, even, in some cases, the purchase of a house. In addition, the cost of a wedding, even in premodern times, often proved to be exorbitant. Setting aside the purely financial dimension, can one actually refer to the acquisition of a mate as a form of consumption? To be sure, a wife according to Jewish law is not chattel, even though a symbolic sum of money is exchanged to “purchase” sexual rights to her.4 But from the

---

3 Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, chs. 7 and 8.