By the second half of the 19th century, a number of Jewish artists had already studied in European art academies, from Rome and Munich to Krakow and St. Petersburg (Silver 2001, 123–141). While increasingly aware of their own Jewish identity, these artists had to focus during their art studies primarily on the classical and Christian models present in European fine art through the centuries. And so when they came to create a different iconography, reflecting their Jewish identity, they used such known models, but gave them new interpretations.

Mark Antokolsky was the first Russian Jewish artist to introduce the image of a Jewish Jesus (Amishai-Maisels 1982, 93–96). His 1873/74 sculpture entitled Ecce Homo did not show the Christian Deity crucified or performing miracles, but rather as an ordinary human being, caught, tied up and brought before his judges. By dressing him in a striped Bedouin robe and covering his head, adorned by side-locks, with a kippah, the artist introduced the 19th-century discussion regarding Christ’s Oriental and Jewish origin into the field of modern Jewish art (Rajner 1990/91, 112–114). Moreover, by showing Christ as a humiliated Jew, at a time when Russian Jews were suffering from anti-Semitic attacks carried out by Russians in the name of Christ, Antokolsky also raised questions regarding the morality of these Christians’ behavior.

Marc Chagall, a member of the third generation of Russian Jewish artists, continued this approach and in late 1909 and 1910 created several striking works—drawings and paintings—which comment on the subject of the Holy Family from a Jewish point of view. During this period of Chagall’s career, which concluded with his departure for Paris, the situation in Russia worsened. Thus, by 1909 the Russian government had given up the effort to introduce social and political reforms in order to modernize Russia. The third Duma’s decisions reflected a burgeoning Russian nationalism supported both by the Tsar and by the leading conservative forces. The ever-growing assertion of the rights of Russians over those of other nationalities, such as Ukrainians, Poles, Finns
and Jews, became a hallmark of the following period, and there was a renewal of fierce anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish laws (Gassenschmidt 1995, 105–109).

Chagall, strongly rooted in both the Jewish national revival and in Russian modernist culture, had hoped at first to find ‘a peaceful compromise’ between the Jewish and the Christian world surrounding him, in spite of the worsening situation. This hope was expressed in 1910, in the painting usually known as ‘Circumcision’ but lately entitled ‘The Family (Maternity)’ (fig.1). According to Franz Meyer, Chagall’s biographer who was the first to write about this work, the man sitting in front is the mohel, who will perform the circumcision and who is shown reading the preliminary prayers from a prayer book (Meyer 1963, 62). However, the act of circumcision or any clear indication that it will be performed is missing (Amishai-Maisels 1978, 79). Moreover, since the baby appears entirely naked, it is possible to see that it is a girl. This excludes the reading of this work as a circumcision and justifies the new title ‘The Family (Maternity)’.

The drawing (fig. 2) also usually known as ‘Circumcision’, but actually depicting a family scene and dated 1908, was probably created in 1909–10 as a preparation for this painting. It includes a man similar to the ‘mohel’ in the painting, sitting here on the left. He too does not act as a mohel, but seems to be holding a closed book, which in the painting is open. In addition, as Susan Compton points out, the scene showing the baby lying on the ground, the woman sitting in the center, and on the right the bearded old man wearing a skullcap and raising his hands in awe at the baby, reminds one of the Christian Adoration of the Child (Compton 1985, 159–160). Such a reading would then suggest that the characters depicted in the drawing are the baby Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and Joseph. Chagall was probably familiar with Filippino Lippi’s ‘Adoration of the Child’ at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg (fig. 3), which he may have seen during his studies in the capital, at the Imperial Society’s School for Encouragement of Art. The school’s director, the Russian artist Nicholas Roerich, taught such subjects as history of art, Christian iconography, and icon and fresco painting (Decter 1989, 29–30, 67). He probably also encouraged his students to study art collections at the Hermitage Museum. However, in contrast to Lippi’s work, the scene in Chagall’s drawing takes place indoors. The baby is naked as in the Renaissance painting, but in Chagall’s drawing it is lying on the floor, in the opposite direction, and is supported either by a pillow or by the legs of the kneeling Joseph. His kneeling position