From ancient times until the nineteenth century, Jewish life was primarily characterized by the absence of political power and an exceptional emphasis on religious learning. At the highest echelons of Jewish society was a rabbinic elite, which, building on the biblical and talmudic tradition, created one of the most powerful and profound of civilizations. Memory, analytic ability, and originality were prized above all as tools for bringing human beings closer to God. The rabbinical class was often a family affair, with fathers handing down their office to their most talented sons. Neither wealth nor family mattered to the intellectually egalitarian East European Jews when it came to rabbinic scholarship. The scholar might be dressed in rags but remained an aristocrat. A great scholar had something of the prestige of a nuclear scientist in the 1940s: someone with the uncommon brain power to open up the secrets of learning and the ability to reveal its power to the world. The dream of Jewish parents was to marry their daughters to scholars:

The dowry of a girl was proportional to the scholarship of the prospective bridegroom. Very rich fathers used to go to the yeshiva and ask the director for the best student, whom they would then seek as a son-in-law. An outstanding student would receive not only a rich dowry, but also a given number of years of kest – that is, of board at the home of his parents-in-law while he continued his studies. In this way, the son of the prost [common] family may marry into a family with yichus [distinction]; and in this way learning served as a potent instrument of social mobility – perhaps the most potent in the shtetl society (Zborowski and Herzog 1969, p. 82).
The secular enlightenment, by weakening religion, undermined this elite and forced it to use its enormous cultural capital in other areas, usually by means of secular schooling, which expanded enormously in the nineteenth century. This unleashing of rabbinic intellectuals into secular life “was an event of shattering importance in world history” (Johnson 1994, p. 341).

This chapter discusses the life and work of two representatives of this erstwhile rabbinical class at the turning point of modern Jewish and general intellectual history: Karl Marx (1818–83) and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). In which ways can their rabbinical origins be detected in their most determinedly secular lives and thought?

Marx and his tormented vision

Marx left little to indicate the psychological roots of his ideas and creative motivation. Hardly anything is known of his childhood and family. Like Freud, he destroyed most of the documents pertaining to his early years. Judging from his writings, Marx was motivated primarily by the social inequities of his age, by the poverty and suffering brought on by the rise of industrialism. This may be so. Yet Marx’s personality – described by acquaintances, and even disciples, as dictatorial, intolerant of rivalry and criticism, hot-tempered, destructive, vain, ruthless, conspiratorial, power-hungry – cannot be explained purely in terms of his anguished response to the plight and the needs of the workers in nineteenth-century Europe. Isaiah Berlin suggests that Marx’s depiction of the workers as outcasts, discriminated against, exploited, deprived of their freedom, debased by forces beyond their control, is also a portrait of the Jews, and a reflection of Marx’s personal torment and alienation despite his baptism:

When Marx speaks for the proletariat, in particular when he alters the history of socialism (and of mankind) by asserting that there is no common interest between the proletarians and the capitalists, and therefore no possibility of reconciliation; when he insists that there is no common ground, and therefore no possibility of converting the opponents of mankind by appeals to common principles of justice, or common reason or common desire for happiness, for there are no such things; when, by the same token, he denounces appeals to the humanity or sense of duty of the bourgeois as mere pathetic delusion on the part of their victims, and declares a war of extermination against capitalism, and prophesies the triumph of the proletariat as