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The Law of the Other: Converts and Gentiles in the Eyes of Seventeenth-Century Istanbul Rabbis

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The Law of the Other: Converts and Gentiles in the Eyes of Seventeenth-Century Istanbul Rabbis

Abstract
The Jewish communities of seventeenth-century Istanbul comprised coherent societies featuring religious and judicial structures apart from Ottoman administration. Members of these Jewish enclaves typically interacted with members of the surrounding Ottoman society in their everyday lives. Using the available responsa literature, documents comprising anonymous questions to which notable rabbis would issue responses rooted in Jewish law, this paper explores financial, legal, and ethical conflicts between Jews and Muslims, including new Muslims who had converted from Judaism. The paper argues for a conceptualization of Jewish society in the Ottoman world as fluid and open to exchange with neighboring Ottoman and Muslim identities. Furthermore, the paper also argues for the conceptualization of Jewish communities in the Ottoman Empire as a network of smaller enclaves with nuanced differenced that maintained interaction with each other, rather than as a singular, monolithic community. The conclusions and conjectures found in the paper, based on this argument, produce material for further research on the relationship between a governing society and a network of communities within the Ottoman Empire and the broader early modern world.

Keywords
Jewish, Ottoman, Istanbul, Jewish history, rabbis, responsa, Jewish law, communities, early modern, seventeenth century

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THE LAW OF THE OTHER: CONVERTS AND GENTILES IN THE EYES OF
SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ISTANBUL RABBIS

Elyakim Engelmann-Suissa

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INTRODUCTION

By the seventeenth century, the Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire constituted a coherent network of local congregations that allowed for a complete range of Jewish society, including judicial, administrative, and religious components.1 While the story of early modern Jewry at large is one of mass movement and building of communal networks, the Ottoman Empire especially hosted an array of Jewish populations that generally experienced an open society that normalized interactions with both Muslim individuals and the Ottoman administration.2 In this paper, I explore such interactions, especially those of religious conversions, involving the Jewish communities of seventeenth-century Istanbul, the capital of the Empire. To this end, I examine excerpts from the responsa literature (sing. responsum; an authorized rabbinic decision resolving an incidental conflict) produced in Istanbul during the seventeenth century. Rabbinic responsa are especially useful for understanding individual conflicts between average, non-scholarly individuals in a shared society. I argue that the societal situation of seventeenth-century Istanbul is best understood through the intersections and tensions of population groups including Jews and Muslims, including converts from Judaism, and local Jewish communities in Istanbul. These groups, although having an outward appearance of separate and static monoliths, were in reality all part of a shared cultural milieu and were in constant negotiation of cultural exchange.

Until recently, much of the scholarship regarding conflicts of religious conversion, with which this paper is largely concerned, has gravitated toward the massive

ideological movement known as Sabbateanism.\(^3\) This late seventeenth-century movement involved Shabbetai Tzevi (1626-1676), a self-declared messiah-turned-apostate who converted to Islam in front of Sultan Mehmet IV (r. 1648-1687), famously donning the Muslim turban. Sabbateanism spread throughout the Ottoman Empire so fervently to the extent that most non-intellectual Jews believed in Shabbetai and his messianism.\(^4\) Shabbetai’s practices during his life were highly controversial and matched his erratic personality. He was known for explicitly violating the Sabbath and abolishing fast days (such as the fast on the Ninth of Av in remembrance of the Temple’s Destruction) to replace them with feasts.\(^5\) All of this was in line with the kabbalistic idea that the messiah, or even someone of a highly pious nature, was able to descend into the realm of sin in order to expunge it from the world.\(^6\) Sabbateanism led to a major splintering within mainstream rabbinic Judaism. Although the controversial, indeed “heretical,” movement was quelled shortly after Tzevi’s conversion in 1666 and his subsequent death in 1676, it survived in cryptic forms and surfaced again in other forms during the eighteenth century, including Frankism and the legacy of the Dönmeh. Frankism was an eighteenth-century strain in Sabbateanism in eastern Europe revolving around Jacob Frank (1726-1791), and the Dönmeh comprised Shabbetai Tzevi’s followers who had converted to Islam along with their teacher.\(^7\)


\(^7\) Adam Shear, “Jews and Judaism in Early Modern Europe,” 160. See Maciejko, *The Mixed Multitude* for a detailed history on Frankism.
Since a great deal has already been written on Sabbateanism, both in its original form as well as beyond Shabbetai’s death, I have chosen instead to focus on Jews independent of any significant religious movement.⁸ My research has been heavily concerned with conversion, but not primarily the conversion that Shabbetai Tzevi undertook upon threat of death, nor the conversions that some of his followers undertook to eventually form a crypto-Sabbatean Islamic hybrid (the Dönmeh). Rather, I am concerned with the plights of individuals who, although they would have strongly identified with Judaism, did not generally have any hard theological standpoints. In other words, I am chiefly interested in the experiences of laypeople, especially those that did not closely associate themselves with a massive ideological movement. Even absent from such movements, the responsa reveal many isolated instances of conversion not explicitly fueled by any ideology. The figures studied in this work were not the pious individuals mentioned in kabblistic literature, nor did they probably know much of anything about esoteric kabbalah. These Jews were busy merchants, physicians, and overall people who were comfortable in participating within the larger Ottoman world; by and large they did not make their careers in Judaism. Nevertheless, pre-Enlightenment individuals of Europe and the Ottoman Empire, whether Christian, Muslim, or Jewish, generally possessed strong religious attachments. These beliefs were possibly independent of explicit rabbinic teachings and sometimes developed as part of an orally-passed tradition of the laypeople.⁹

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⁸ Maciejko’s *Mixed Multitude* and other works largely focus on European Sabbateanism. After Shabbetai Tzevi’s death, the movement that he left behind resurfaced in eighteenth-century Poland.

The Ottoman Empire of the seventeenth century, along with neighboring contemporaries such as the Safavid and Holy Roman Empires, was in the midst of what has been suggested as an “age of confessionalization,” a term that offers an non-Eurocentric alternative to “early modern,” allowing religious patterns in the Ottoman Empire and the Safavid Dynasty to be placed in a similar context to its European counterparts.  

A primary application of “confessionalization” as a term is the increased tension between the Ottoman Empire and the Holy Roman Empire in the sixteenth century, as well as part of the seventeenth century. Another application is the widespread messianic expectance of the Muslim world at the turn of the first millennium in the Muslim calendar (AH 1000; 1591 AD). In the leadup to this time, a series of unusual natural disasters occurred which many Muslims who operated in the sphere of thought of “millenarianism” interpreted to be intended by God as admonition prior to the coming of a messianic figure. About seventy-five years after the Muslim millennium, Shabbetai Tzevi’s arrival would translate similar messianic expectancies and fears over into the Jewish sphere.

In order to understand the role that the Ottoman Jewish population occupied in the religious mileu prior to Shabbetai Tzevi’s arrival in Istanbul (1666), a knowledge of the general history of Ottoman Jews is essential. By the late fifteenth century, a large number of Jewish communities in Iberia, collectively known as Sephardic Jews, had prospered there for a millennium under both Muslim and Christian rulers. As the culmination of gradually increasing religious intolerance, the 1492 Alhambra Decree ordered the expulsion of all practicing Jews residing in the Kingdoms of Castile and Aragon who

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refused to convert to Catholicism. Many of these expelled Jews found refuge in the
Ottoman Empire and built several communities almost from scratch, the largest of which
by the seventeenth century were in Istanbul, Salonika, and Izmir.\textsuperscript{11} The Ottoman
administration operated on a policy of general tolerance for the “People of the Book,”
namely Jews and Christians, in return for a special tax payment known as the *cizye*. In
this paper, I write both “community” and “communities” when talking about Jewish
groups. With “community,” I refer to generally mean the broader Jewish world of
Istanbul, shared predominantly by Sephardic Jews although not exclusive of other Jewish
groups. With “communities,” I refer to the local congregations formed by Sephardic Jews
as well as Macedonian Jews, eastern European Jews, and Karaite Jews.\textsuperscript{12}

In the period of time between the thousandth year in the Hijra calendar and
Tzevi’s arrival (1591/92-1666), Ottoman Jews were largely adherents of their local
rabbinic authorities. The makeup of ancestral heritage among Ottoman Jews was
predominantly Iberian (referred to as *Sephardic*, after the Hebrew name for the Iberian
peninsula), although much diversity existed outside of Sephardic circles. Prior to the
expulsion of Jews from Spain, from which many arrived in the Ottoman Empire, there
existed a Macedonian Jewish (Hebrew: *Romaniot*) community in Constantinople and
other formerly Byzantine regions, along with eastern European Jews (referred to as
*Ashkenazim*, after the Hebrew name for the Germanic regions). Although Jewish
households lived in the same vicinity as Muslim households and Christian households,

\textsuperscript{11} Yaron Ben-Naeh, *Jews in the Realm of the Sultans: Ottoman Jewish Society in the Seventeenth Century*
(Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 2.
\textsuperscript{12} These demographics are distinct from one another, each with its own history. For a comprehensive
history on Karaite Jews, see Daniel Lasker, *Karaism: An Introduction to the Oldest Surviving Alternative
Jews organized themselves into distinct communities, based on their origins in the diaspora. Apart from the various Sephardic communities, which became the predominant strain of Judaism in Istanbul only after the 1492 expulsion of Jews from Iberia, there were the older Romaniot and Karaite communities. Following the influx of Sephardi Jews in the early sixteenth century, many communities in Istanbul, such as the once predominant Ashkenazi community, were prompted to assimilate into the Sephardic ones after a decrease in size. Most of the source material discussed in this paper concerns Sephardic Jews, as these made up the most prominent communities of Istanbul, and the rabbis authoring the responsa that I have selected hail from Sephardic families.

The diverse history of the Jewish populations in Istanbul did not have a distinguishing effect on their access to society. The seventeenth-century Ottoman Empire was a world in which Jews, unlike their counterparts in most of eastern Europe, could find success at the highest echelons of society. Physicians, particularly useful to the state, featured prominently as a field of interest in Jewish communities. Jewish women also could attain high status in those roles specifically reserved for women in the Empire, especially in the role of intermediaries between the harem and the larger world of the court. This role was typically avoided by Muslim women in an effort to maintain the protocol of harem seclusion. Alongside such visible success, Ottoman Jews generally did not fully assimilate into their surroundings, preferring to form tightly knit communities with a distinct religious culture. Jews, like Christians, paid a special poll

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14 Gerber, Crossing Borders, 14.
tax, the cizye, a price for their extensive freedom of worship and a large boon to the Ottoman economy. In return for the payment of the cizye, Jews were permitted their own courts of law, relatively free to abide by Jewish traditions that were theoretically untouched by the outside Islamic world. Nevertheless, the Ottoman Empire never formally recognized the Jewish court, known by its Hebrew name as the beit din. If a Jew felt wronged by the beit din, he or she could apply to the Muslim courts with the potential result of overturning any decision made by Jewish authorities. However, doing so was strongly frowned upon by Jewish authorities.

Although I have made an effort to focus on the non-scholars of Istanbul Jewry, my main source material has been the responsa authored by Istanbul rabbis. Responsa, generally written in Hebrew, are question-and-answer documents authored by respected rabbis throughout Jewish history. Generally, a real scenario will arise that the relevant local congregation does not know how to resolve. For lack of a solution, a representative wrote the “question” segment of the document, in which he (presumably a male local leader) explained the background to the conflict and asked what should be done in the framework of Jewish law. The question is sent to a high-profile rabbi, or sometimes multiple rabbis, and the rabbi responds to the question with a conclusion after deliberation and typically a summary of the arguments of previous great rabbis in the context of similar scenarios.

I have found the responsa to be especially useful in understanding non-elite classes. Early modern sources that primarily concern people other than intellectual

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scholars and powerful elites are difficult to come by, not least because it was largely those groups that left behind written documents for historians to examine. Hebrew in the seventeenth-century (indeed for all of Jewry following the Second Temple era) was the language of the intellectual elite. The responsa offer the doings of ordinary people and they reveal that information through the perspectives of rabbis and other scholars. With both audience and authorship in mind, the responsa can be explored through multiple dimensions, offering the possibility of endless analysis.

Rabbinic responsa as a method of community coherence begins in the Geonic period. The Geonic era of Jewish history, spanning roughly from the late sixth century CE to the middle of the eleventh century, followed the Talmudic era (approximately 200-600 CE), during which the majority of Jewish law (gathered in a corpus known as the Talmud) was codified. The Geonic era is named after the Geonim (sing. Gaon) of the central Babylonian Jewish academies of Sura and Pumbedita. The great rabbis of these academies produced a wealth of responsa as a method to form close relationships with Jewish communities elsewhere. The reception of circumstantial questions and the replies of the Geonim also helped to solidify their position as the undisputed leaders of Judaism at this time, strengthening their academies and giving their own interpretations of Jewish law more weight in the process. After the Geonic period ended in the eleventh century, the responsa literature grew into a genre frequently used by many leading rabbis all over the diasporic world. In the early modern period, responsa as a genre of rabbinic work was popular in Eastern Europe as well as in the Ottoman Empire.

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The responsa, rather than merely an improvised and disparate collection of queries, is very much a genre with a specific form. In fact, many features of responsa published in Istanbul have remained the same since the Geonic period, including a system of anonymizing the names of subjects to refer to the names of the biblical tribes of Israel.\(^{20}\) These names typically progress from the oldest to the youngest of Jacob’s sons in the Torah, with the first mentioned male named “Reuben,” the second “Simeon,” the third “Levi,” and so on. The names of female characters are typically replaced by the names of Jacob’s wives and daughter, including “Leah,” “Rachel,” and “Dinah.” Where I must include these names in order to distinguish characters in my analysis of the source material, I do not use quotation marks. It is important to remember that these all names mentioned in the selected responsa, apart from the names of rabbinic authors, are anonymous, and that it is impossible to collect any extraneous data about the lives of these individuals based in the names available.

The majority of documents in this paper are authored by Yeḥiel Basan (1550-1625), Joshua Benveniste (ca. 1590-ca. 1665), and Joseph Katzabi (d. 1696 or 1698). These seventeenth-century authors, living in Istanbul for at least the majority of their careers, authored responsa on a wide range of issues dealing with many aspects of Jewish life. These aspects included, but were not limited to, marriage, divorce, congregational quarrels, and appointments of new rabbis. In this paper, I am primarily interested in the various questions that they received, rather than the responses themselves. While the responses of the rabbis are detailed and contain a wealth of information on complex issues of Jewish law, the questions to which they responded portray anonymous

individuals who entered into conflicts of whatever sort with other individuals of differing backgrounds. I wish in this paper to make the stories of these anonymous individuals accessible, to ruminate on them and place them in a larger historical context. Although the responsa documents cannot be precisely dated due to the practice of printing them in large collections, their use in this paper will hopefully allow the reader to populate the story of Istanbul Jewry with ordinary people that engaged in real problems not covered by the broad sweep of history. Additionally, the documents attest to a world in which identities were fluid and communities were in constant negotiation with one another without presumed stability. In Chapter One, I use the responsa to examine relationships and conflicts between Jews and Muslims. In Chapter Two, I use the same methods to explore the role of the Jewish-turned-Muslim convert, both from the attitude of the responsa and their relationships, if still in existence, with the Jewish community. Chapter Three explores the network between local Jewish communities, and movement between them as well as outside of Istanbul through the responsa. Although the source material clearly anonymizes each individual, I believe that much can be gleaned from examining the stories and narratives of each document explored in this paper.

**Note on Translation and Transliteration**

In providing direct translations, I have generally leaned toward a literal translation of the text. However, there are instances in which the original Hebrew phrasing does not lend itself toward a clear English equivalent. In these cases, I have taken liberties while striving to preserve the original meaning. In all instances of translation, I have provided
the original Hebrew text in a footnote for the convenience of the reader, especially in cases where there may be ambiguous language.

In transliterating Hebrew words and phrases, I have adopted a system that differentiates between $h$ ($ח$) and $kh$ (soft כ). In transliterating Turkish words and phrases, I have adopted the equivalent spelling in the Modern Turkish alphabetical system, even if the subject is an Arabic loan word. In all instances, the transliteration is secondary to an English translation of the words for convenience of the reader.
CHAPTER ONE
JEWS AND GENTILES

The sources analyzed below highlight a multifaceted dialogue between distinct communities and their surrounding society. While the solutions provided by rabbis in their responsa collections may provide insight into the study of Jewish law and Jewish tradition, I focus instead on the questions that originated each responsum, thereby prioritizing societal concerns that are typically not explicit in the text. Despite the implicit nature of extracting such concerns, this practice is crucial to understanding the text as well as the lives of the peoples that produced them and their ingrained worldviews. While the existing scholarship on Jewish life in the Ottoman Empire has already demonstrated the frequency and routine nature of Jewish-Muslim interactions, this chapter illuminates the utility of rabbinic responsa towards revealing the diverse nature of those interactions. The sources discussed below feature a range of extra-communal interactions involving Jewish subjects present in royal court culture, non-Jewish judicial courts, and financial conflicts involving Jewish and Muslim individuals.

Conflict in Service of a Higher Power

A particularly intriguing responsum written by Joshua Benveniste (ca. 1590- ca. 1665) tells of a conflict between two Jews that involved the Sultan’s viziers. This responsum was published posthumously in Benveniste’s Sha’ar Yehoshua (Gates of Joshua). Joshua Benveniste himself lived in Istanbul as a rabbi and was a scion of the
notable Benveniste family that hailed from eleventh-century France and Spain.\(^{21}\) An analysis of the question to which Benveniste responded demonstrates the upper limit to which early modern Istanbul Jews could aspire. In the story below, the reader encounters court intrigue and powerful displays of devotion from Jewish merchants to their superiors, some of the most powerful men in the Ottoman Empire. Although the question’s author is anonymous, as in the majority of responsa documents, the text is atypical in that it presents an extended literary narrative rather than a brief synopsis of the relevant events.

The beginning of the responsum question is provided below:

Question: Reuben was a merchant with a shop of his own, buying and selling goods, clothes, and silk clothes and things such as these in the manner of merchants, and God granted to him a chance visit from a very great man from the ministry of the King, and he [the minister] bargained with him [Reuben] two or three times. From then and onward, [Reuben] did not move from his [the minister’s] fondness [i.e. they became close]…. and he became a member of [the minister’s] household, the one who took out and brought in all that was taken out and brought in, and was appointed over his affairs…. And the days multiplied and the minister was made a Vizier in the administrative palace and he was made to buy for himself all that he needed for his clothing, and the clothes for his servants and his youths, for they were abundant…. [Reuben supplied these expenses on credit] and besides this all that was asked of him [Reuben], he gave. For he said,

“perhaps God will bestow his grace and raise me up to a high level to be among
the men of high places, and ‘the one who tends a fig tree will eat its fruit [and the
one who cares for his lord will be honored, Proverbs 27:18.’”

This responsum relates to Jews interacting with Muslims at almost the highest
echelon of the Sultanate court — the vizierate. The vizierate, although certainly integral
to the structure of Ottoman administration, has a long history dating back to the roots of
Islamic government. Although the true vizierate structure as we know it came into being
under the Abbasid government (r. 750-754), a very similar office probably existed under
the Umayyad state. In short, the vizier was intended as the Sultan’s close associate and
advisor, as well as the official in charge of his administrative affairs. Beginning in the
early years of the Ottoman Empire, Orhan I (r. 1326-1362) instituted a court of viziers.

Under his administration and continuing as a staple of Ottoman rule, multiple viziers
would operate under a single Grand Vizier. with the reign of Mehmed II, the Sultan
distanced his position in society from a visible tribal chieftain to more of a secluded


backstage figure, a man larger than life due to his increasingly rare public appearances.\textsuperscript{25} Only his family, close servants, and the viziers had direct access to this almost otherworldly figure.\textsuperscript{26} By the time of Mehmed IV (r. 1648-1687), the likely ruler in the backdrop of the conflict that Benveniste received, the viziers, and especially the Grand Vizier, were the effective executives of the Ottoman government.

According to the responsum, the Jewish cloth seller was soon incorporated into the Ottoman minister’s house. Reuben takes care of all of the minister’s needs and home arrangements. During this arrangement, which lasted for upwards of twenty-five years, it would appear that the minister was somewhat of a spendthrift, as he continually borrowed money from his Jewish servant, with the Jew loaning money to him on a credit system. The question notes that by a certain point in this living arrangement, the Ottoman minister owed his servant a total of close to twenty thousand \textit{gurush}. The minister was then promoted to the Vizierate. Even after this appointment, his faithful Jewish subordinate was still in his service and was still loaning credit to him. The new vizier still did not pay back his servant, and the debt accumulated to almost thirty thousand \textit{gurush}, triple the previous value.

The responsum demonstrates the precarious nature of maintaining good favor in the Ottoman administration. Reuben’s hopes of “eating the fruit” of the tended fig were soon dashed, as they were dependent on the whims and favors of a monarch, and such favors are always unreliable. For “‘the wrath went out from God,’ and the Holy One,

\textsuperscript{25} Stavrides, \textit{The Sultan of Vezirs}, 34-37.
\textsuperscript{26} See “The Third Court: Layout of the Sultan’s Residence and the Chamber of the Sultan’s Residence and the Chamber of Petitions” in Gürür Necipoğlu, \textit{Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power: The Topkapi Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries} (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991), 91-110 for a comprehensive and detailed outline of the Sultan’s residence.
Blessed is He, caused the wrath of lords upon their servants, and the wrath of the king was ignited regarding four of his adjutants [in the vizierate] that were in the gate of the King for an unknown reason….“

These viziers, including Reuben’s, are suddenly exiled to Rhodes. Reuben, worried as a result of his mountainous debt accumulation, runs away to follow his Vizier to exile. Upon their reuniting, the Vizier is overjoyed and promises that “if God will remember him for good [i.e. reverse his exile],” the Vizier will return to Reuben all that is owed.

Of course, and it would seem almost inevitable from the nature of the storytelling at hand, the Sultan (most likely Mehmed IV, r. 1648-1687, or possibly his predecessor Ibrahim I, r. 1640-1648) allegedly underwent a change of heart and reinstated the good vizier to his former post, and is eventually promoted to the governorship of Egypt. All the while, Reuben had been “cast aside on the bed of suffering,” but even so, the vizier did not forget his friend and rewarded Reuben’s extensive loyalty with the promotion of chief financier of the governorship. At the same time, another Jew, Simeon, attempted to influence the Grand Vizier to appoint himself as the chief financier instead. Because Reuben’s vizier insisted on giving the position to Reuben, Simeon agreed to settle a compromise with Reuben in Egypt, for which Reuben paid him. When both of them arrived in Istanbul after Reuben completed the duration of his post, Simeon claimed that the compromise was forced upon him. The central query of the responsum’s question is whether Simeon’s case has any legal or moral merit. Benveniste rules that Reuben was in the right and the compromise between Reuben and Simeon was valid.

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27 Hebrew:

ברוך הוא, וקצרה עבדיהם וחמה המלך בערה בארבעה ויזירוש שארון...

Benveniste, Sha’ar Yehoshua, 93.
From the beginning of the question, God plays a central role in the narrative:

“...and God caused to his hand a man from the ministers of the king [Sultan], a very great [man] that happened upon him…” Later, we see that Reuben is faithful to his superior, the vizier, because he hopes that God will favor him for his piety, and give him a more exalted status. In this story, God plays an immediate hand in all the affairs of our righteous marketseller. And further: the idea of divine favor is chiefly manifested in the establishment and development of relationships with a distinctively non-Jewish upper class.

The story of the Jew and the vizier evokes narrative themes from the biblical tale of Joseph, with the effect of making a statement regarding Ottoman court culture.

According to the Book of Genesis, Joseph, son of the patriarch Jacob, was sold by his jealous brothers into slavery in Egypt. Despite finding himself in a pagan world, severed from his monotheistic roots, Joseph never loses his faith in God. Alongside his righteousness, Joseph is a hard worker and a loyal servant, and manages to rise in the ranks of Egyptian society. When he is able to interpret a dream of Pharaoh concerning a forthcoming famine in the land of Egypt, Joseph is promoted to Pharaoh’s second-in-command and is given full control to lead Egypt to prosperity despite a famine throughout the surrounding lands. Joseph’s food storage is known to those outside of Egypt and attracts Joseph’s brothers who are overwhelmed with joy at reuniting with

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28 Hebrew: “והאלהים אנה לידו איש משרי המלך גדול מאד שנזדמן אליו...” Benveniste, 93.
29 Genesis 37-50. In the biblical story, Joseph the son of Jacob is sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers. His gift for interpreting dreams empowers him to stave off a devastating famine. In doing so, he is promoted from a slave to Pharaoh’s right-hand man. Joseph’s tale is retold in the Qur’an, with differences, in Surah 12 (“Yusuf”).
him, while deeply regretting their treachery. The Torah is clear in stressing that Joseph’s success and family reunion were connected to Joseph’s faith in God’s plan.

The parallelism between “Reuben” in the responsum and the figure of Joseph serves to comment on the role of a Jew in Ottoman court society. Joseph’s story would have been immediately familiar to any Jew in the Ottoman Empire during the seventeenth century, and indeed throughout the Jewish world. Joseph’s story is also recognized in the Islamic tradition and is frequently referenced in the Qur’an. Furthermore, the biblical relationship between Joseph and Potiphar’s wife had grown in the medieval era into an central tale told and retold in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. Thus, Joseph would have also been close to the heart of most, if not every, Muslim in Istanbul. The anonymous character of “Reuben,” who according to the document above was a pious servant of the Ottoman administration, presented the opportunity to the author of the responsum question for an analogy to Joseph, another Jew who served a non-Jewish government. In this context, the author of this document made a statement regarding the place of Jews in the Ottoman world. Like Joseph, Jews had the ability to ascend the social ladder, but doing so was a gift granted by God and could just as easily be taken away through the plotting and intrigue of adversaries.

Intercommunal Conflict in the Muslim Court

30 In the biblical narrative, Joseph is imprisoned after the wife of his master, Potiphar, attempts to seduce Joseph. When Joseph refuses her advances, Potiphar’s wife accuses him of attempted rape. In the Islamic tradition, as well as in medieval Jewish commentary, Potiphar’s wife is named Zulaikha. Joseph and Zulaikha’s relationship is greatly expanded in Islamic poetry.
Yeḥiel Basan’s responsum on the selling of a minor’s property represents a perfect example of individuals crossing over perceived borderlines. Basan (1550-1625) was born in Rhodes. By 1610, he had moved to Istanbul and was a notable rabbi and judge in the Istanbul Jewish community. Basan’s extensive collection of responsa entitled She’elot u’Teshuvot (Questions and Answers) features a style of answers consisting of short and lenient decisions. In the question discussed below, addressed to Basan, we see Karaite Jews dealing in a Muslim court and selling a house to gentiles, who rent the house to other Jews. The Karaite ideology, whose name comes from the Hebrew word for “scripture,” originally arose from the leadership of Anan ben David (d. 795) in the eighth century Islamic Empire but reached their peak of dissemination around the tenth century under such figures as Solomon ben Yeruham (fl. 940-960). As opposed to the “rabbinical” communities and leadership, Karaites professed that only the Hebrew Bible should be treated as sacred and authoritative. According to this line of thinking, the Talmudic canon added unnecessary exegesis that came solely from the minds of the rabbis. Because the Talmud was not given directly by God, it had no right to be authoritative.

31 While the child’s age is not specified in the source material, the use of the term “minor” (Heb. katan) for a male indicates that he is younger than thirteen years old. For a discussion of childhood and adulthood within the context of Jewish law, see Israel Lebendiger, “The Minor in Jewish Law,” The Jewish Quarterly Review 6, no. 4 (1916).
33 Ibid, 190.
Karaite ideology arose and spread precisely at the time when rabbinical Judaism solidified itself as the mainstream line of Judaism. The era of the Geonim saw a concerted effort to solidify the study of the Babylonian and Yerushalmi Talmuds (although the Babylonian Talmud became the preferred text over time, until this day) while the Geonim themselves advocated for a top-down Judaism that consisted of the rabbis interpreting Torah for the guidance of the masses. In short, the laypeople of Judaism ultimately began to practice and live their lives according to the legal opinions of distant rabbis in other lands. By the seventeenth century, rabbinical Judaism had fully consolidated itself into a thoroughly organized system followed and agreed upon by a majority of lay Jews. While the Karaite Jewish population had flourished in Byzantium prior the conquering of Constantinople in 1453, the Ottoman conquest catalyzed a shift in the center of world Karaism from Byzantium to Eastern Europe.\footnote{Daniel Lasker, \textit{Karaism: An Introduction to the Oldest Surviving Alternative Judaism} (London: Liverpool University Press, 2022), 60-61.} Although there still remained Karaites in Istanbul by the seventeenth century, they were a smaller community than in Constantinople, mostly concentrated in the Hasköy district and overshadowed by Rabbanite Jews.\footnote{Yaron Ben-Naeh, \textit{Jews in the Realm of the Sultans}, English (Germany: Mohr Siebeck Tübingen, 2008), 82. See also Lasker, \textit{Karaism}, 206.}

Despite practices that differed significantly from the predominant rabbinic strain of Judaism, we know that all of the distinct Jewish communities in Istanbul engaged in cooperation toward a “supra-congregational”\footnote{Ben-Naeh’s term, \textit{Jews in the Realm of the Sultans}, 211.} format of collective leadership during the sixteenth century. This was the \textit{vaad hakolel}, or the “overall committee,” which enjoyed proportional representation from the Sephardi, Romaniot, and Karaite \textit{kehalot}.

\footnote{Ibid.}
the middle to late seventeenth century, the Romaniots also possessed their own supra-congregational leadership, although it is unclear as to what degree the Karaite population maintained a similar leadership.

The question begins: “Reuben was appointed in the Ishmaelite court as a guardian over the orphan Simeon, for he is a minor, and Reuben and Simeon, these, [were in a] place of the Karaites and Reuben sold Simeon’s house, in the power of his guardianship, to a gentile [goy], and the gentile who bought it rented the house to Levi…”

The “Ishmaelite court” (din hayishmaelim) refers to an Ottoman Muslim court, as opposed to a traditional Jewish court (beit din). Traditional rabbinical sources prefer this term due to their interpretation of the Arab ethnicity as descending from Ishmael, the illegitimate son of the biblical Abraham. It is probably not the case that “Ishmaelite” is used here for any polemical purpose, despite the original meaning referring to an ethnicity and not a religion. Given that the Ottoman Muslims were not ethnically Arab, the term appears to have transformed to refer to all Muslims.

The responsum question touches on the significant matter of Jews circumventing their own courts in order to obtain a desired response from non-Jewish, Ottoman courts. A probable scenario is that, after Reuben and Simeon had already visited a Jewish court, Reuben was dissatisfied with the result. They did not allow him the guardianship, and so he ignored the authorities within his religion’s framework of law, and visited an administrative court that would dictate the matter by Ottoman rather than Jewish law, hoping to achieve his intended outcome. This action was likely the cause of negative

41 Hebrew: 
רָאוּבֵן נַתְמָנֵה בְּדִינָה הָיִשְׁמָאֵלִים, אֶפָּרְתוֹפָּו וּעֲלֵיהּ שְּמַעַן, כִּי קְצַו וַהֲזוּ יְרָאוּבֵן וָשְּׁמַעַן אֵלֶּה, כְּהִכְּרָאֹנָא מַסָּר רָאוּבֶּן בְּחִטְוָו, שִׁלְו, שְּמַעַן בְּכִיהֲפֲרָתוֹפָּו לְהֵבִין לָו הָכֹהֻנִּים הָשֵּׁדָר אֵלֶּה בְּחִיתִּי לְלֵל. Basan, She’elot u’Teshuvot, 21a.
judgement from those who viewed the Jewish community as providing an all-encompassing lifestyle. In the theoretical world of Istanbul Jewish society, the Jewish courts that ruled by the legal system known as *halakha* were sufficient to provide the solution to every possible type of conflict. As such, the act of circumventing the Jewish courts to take one’s case to Muslim courts constituted an implicit challenge to, and denigration of, Jewish prestige.\(^{42}\) Because the Jewish courts did not possess actual power unless the Jewish population collectively adhered to it, such a move would have been sternly discouraged by rabbis and Jewish court authorities.\(^{43}\) Although it is strange to see this scenario when there appears to be no evident case of dissatisfaction with the Jewish court system, the frequency level of Jews in “Ishmaelite” courts represents a disconnect between proper Jewish observance and community gatekeeping, as defined by the rabbis, and the accepted everyday practice, as defined by organic interactions between lay individuals.

Throughout the responsa referenced by Rabbi Basan, we see a pattern in which a Jew sells an item to a non-Jew, and the non-Jew sells it back to a Jew. The pattern is displayed in this example, in which Reuben sells Simeon’s house to a gentile, and the gentile rents the house to Levi, a Jew. The “gentile as middleman” trope may serve as a way to complicate a scenario otherwise involving a Jewish community (or multiple Jewish communities, as is the case here involving the Karaite neighborhood) through use of an external, but easily removable, factor. Another possibility is a preference on the part of both parties to sell and trade with people outside their demographic enclosure.

Conducting business primarily with Jews was most common in early modern Italy and


\(^{43}\) Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History*, 81-82.
eastern Europe, where Jews were often forced into the role of moneylender due to restrictions on occupations for the Jewish population.

Financial Conflicts Between Individuals

Another responsum, also received and responded to by Rabbi Yehiel Basan, involves a financial conflict between a Jew and a gentile. This question, included in a posthumously published collection, is slightly unconventional because it concerns a conflict that has already been resolved in another responsum by Rabbi Elijah Mizrahi (d. 1525/6), a Romaniot born in Istanbul. Rabbi Basan’s purpose here is to argue against Mizrahi’s position on the matter. The original scenario, which according to Rabbi Mizrahi originates from a certain Rabbi Avigdor, stipulates that “if a Jew was made a guarantor for the sake of a gentile to a Jew, his friend, and the gentile did not pay back, the Jew is absolved.” In simple terms, the structure of loaning here is as follows: a Jew loans money to a gentile, and a second Jew agrees to pay the debt of the gentile in the event that the gentile defaults. As we shall see, this structure centers on the gentile’s non-Jewishness and leads to the question of whether a Jew, even one who agreed beforehand to pay a gentile’s debt, is actually liable to make the payment.

While Rabbi Avigdor absolves the Jew of his responsibility, Rabbi Basan pushes back. According to Basan, Avigdor’s opinion is not “supported by the majority of the decisors of Jewish law [Heb. poskim].” Among the “majority of the poskim,” Basan allies with Rabbi Shlomo Yitzḥaki (d. 1105) and Rabbi Abraham ben David (d. 1198), both

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45 Shmulevitz, The Jews of the Ottoman Empire in the Late Fifteenth and the Sixteenth Centuries, 192.
46 Hebrew: “אם יהודי נעשה ערב בעבור הגוי ליהודי חברו ולא פרע הגוי הישראלי פטור…” Basan, She’elot u’Teshuvot, 61b. I have not as yet been able to identify the figure of Rabbi Avigdor.
seminal medieval rabbis. After citing opinions from their responsa, Basan states his final stance: “...In the matter being discussed, that he [the borrower] is a gentile, there is no oath here to the gentile and claims to the guarantor... that he [should] admit that there is not, in his claims, any room for exemption [of the guarantor].”

In this situation, Basan is not replying to an immediate conflict that requires a solution. Here, he is writing across time to reply to Rabbi Avigdor, who could not have lived later than the first half of the sixteenth century. It is entirely possible that Rabbi Basan was simply reading the works of Rabbi Mizrahi and was alerted by a responsum that Basan believed to be wrong upon a closer look. Nevertheless, given Rabbi Basan’s large corpus of responsa concerning Jewish-Muslim relations, he is likely aware of the impact that his decision would have on the Jewish merchant community at large, and it may even be a deliberate intention of the responsum.

Conclusions

The responsa of Benveniste and Basan discussed above illustrate societal negotiations between members of different communities. While the interactions between these individuals are fluid and normalized, their respective identities, especially as religious labels, make the reader of the questions in the responsa (especially the author of the answers) acutely aware of each individual’s role in society. The story of the vizier and his Jewish servant highlights an example of Jews reaching positions of high status in the Empire, albeit an unstable status that could be removed in the tension of a moment.

47 Hebrew: "בנידון דידן שהוא עירו אין כאן שבועה לגוי וטוענים לערב שמעו פרעים הגוי ויפריע תשעה אלפים ויפריע תשעה אלפים הוא מודה שאין בטענותיו מקום פטור.

Ibid."
There are significant features common throughout the responsa of a financial nature such as the two responsa found in Basan’s collection and analyzed above. Financial conflicts between Jews often involve a non-Jew as a figure that acts as an intermediary to facilitate the conflict. For example, a Jew selling the lease for a house to a non-Jew, and then selling it to another Jew, creates a potential conflict between two Jews in an indirect manner. Furthermore, such a scenario pits different communities in constant contact and material exchange. The case involving Karaite Jews in a Muslim court is a prime example of the implicit tension and unstable relationship between the Ottoman administration and supposed Jewish autonomy, especially in the seventeenth century during which Jewish sovereignty was at its most precarious in the wake of Sabbateanism.

While the responsa may be considered a body of literature in and of itself, they must also be placed in their historical context in order for their scenarios to be fully appreciated. While it is unclear as to what extent the decisions of the rabbis were followed at any time period before the rise of a strict Orthodoxy in the Enlightenment era, the rabbis of Istanbul, at least during the first half of the seventeenth century, were typically viewed as authoritative. Because the Jewish Ottoman system did not function there as it did in Italy and eastern Europe, where the power of the communal rabbi conflicted with, and was often dependent on, a group of wealthy lay elites, the rabbis of Istanbul were the primary authorities in Jewish matters.\textsuperscript{48} This would especially be the case when they receive a question and must issue a decision, because the existence of

\textsuperscript{48} Ruderman, “Communal Cohesion,” in \textit{Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History}. 
such a document informs us that the local authorities who wrote the questions and sent them to more notable rabbis did not feel confident resolving such cases on their own.

The following chapter involves an examination of relations between Jews and converts from Judaism to Islam, further illustrating an awareness of societal roles as well as the fluidity inherent in conversion, an act of crossing between these roles. Chapter Two explores the convert’s place in between both the Jewish and Muslim communities in a position of constant negotiation of identity.
CHAPTER TWO
JEWS AND CONVERTS

Suspected Conversions

With the conquest of Mecca and Medina in 1516, and the conquering of Syria and Palestine in the following year, the Ottoman Empire had comfortably positioned itself as the supreme and legitimate Muslim power by the early seventeenth century.\footnote{See Tijana Krstić, “Chapter 1: Historicizing the Study of Sunni Islam in the Ottoman Empire, c. 1450-c.1750” in Tijana Krstić and Derin Terzioğlu, Historicizing Sunni Islam in the Ottoman Empire, c. 1450-1750 (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2020) for a brief discussion on the (possibly overstated) effect that the lands of Arabia had on the Sunnitization of the Empire’s central administration in Istanbul.} The Ottoman Muslim world was arguably in the midst of an era of heightened Sunni religious sentiment and practice, especially in its continued tension with the Shi’a Safavids in modern-day Iraq.\footnote{Krstić and Terzioğlu, Historicizing Sunni Islam in the Ottoman Empire, 7-8.} Largely in the throes of conflict with the burgeoning Shi’a state, the Ottoman administration initiated a concerted effort of “Sunnitization,” by which the state formed clearer definitions of Islamic “orthodoxy” and “heresy.”\footnote{Ibid, 9-15.} Istanbul, the seat of the Sultan, was naturally at the center of such a religious environment. In a shared cultural environment, Jewish rabbis and scholars, as well as congregations as a collective whole, were concerned about conversion rates among Jews, as the responsa selected below will demonstrate.

It can be reduced from the responsa that, in the early seventeenth century, some members of Jewish congregations were apprehensive toward the possibility of malicious, secret converts from Judaism to Islam who allegedly could still be operating within the community and destroy its level of sanctity in ritual practices. Regardless of the truth or
the degree to which these “crypto-converts” existed and were a palpable threat to Istanbul Jewish communities, the responsa of the time discuss the effects that a fear of such a notion can have on individual members. Rabbi Yeḥiel Basan (d. 1625) received a scenario in which “someone called to his fellow in the community and witnessed a convert (Hebr. meshumad) who converted (hamir, from a shared root with mumar) his faith, and also dispute with his rabbi in front of [the community]. What is their judgment?”

The term meshumad bore especially negative societal ramifications. The reponsa documents generally use two different terms with which to refer to converts: the more neutral mumar, which bears the simple meaning of “converted,” and the term meshumad, which literally means “destroyed.” The connotation of meshumad is undoubtedly that of apostasy, one who is a threat to Judaism by actively opposing it. Thus, it is no surprise that this latter term is preferred in the instance of a dramatic exposing of apostasy. Regardless of whether the targeted person is actually a convert or apostate, it can be deduced from the responsum that, at least in the particular congregation at hand, it was a serious accusation to make in public that could permanently damage a person’s reputation. The accusation is doubly serious in this case, as the man evidently turned against the rabbi as well. In the Ottoman Empire, more so than in Europe at this time, the rabbi held considerable sway over a congregation, holding power both nominally and in practice. Rabbi Basan responds in harsh terms against the accuser, and his final ruling is as follows: “It follows, in the matter under discussion, that if he disputes with his rabbi, then he proscribes judgment unto himself. Behold, he is in a dispute with the Divine

Presence [shekhinah].”\(^{53}\) Rabbi Basan, basing his judgment on a chapter from Tractate Sanhedrin of the Babylonian Talmud,\(^{54}\) essentially rules that, by initiating a public dispute with both a congregant and especially the rabbi and spiritual leader of the congregation, the man is decreasing the level of the congregation’s holiness.

Although the question to which Rabbi Basan responds is short and gives little details, there is room for speculation. It is possible that the accused member of the congregation may have been a crypto-convert who still wanted to involve himself in a Jewish community, whether with good or malicious intentions. However, the rabbi may have wished to avoid a public fight and preferred to settle the matter privately, to which the accuser objected. It is also entirely plausible that meshumad was intended as a slur, and the accuser did not actually believe that this man, who may have been reputed as a pious congregation member, was an apostate. Rather, the accuser may have wished to defame him in the midst of a feud. The rabbi stepped in and was also insulted, a scenario which puts the accuser in an even worse light. If this scenario is what occurred, then we would learn that calling someone an “apostate” could have been a normative, albeit serious, insult at this time. Insults likely hinted to a significant anxiety among congregants against positive feelings toward embracing Islam, or even against the absorption of some Islamic practices into Jewish tradition. Indeed, historians have already examined rabbinic positions on several controversial practices of this nature at the popular level.\(^{55}\)

\(^{53}\) Hebrew: “...אמר מעתה בנידון דידן שאם חולק על רבו שקבע лицודו לְגַמֵּר וַיְזָרַה содержит על השכינה...” Ibid.

\(^{54}\) Rabbi Basan’s words: “...ודין חולק על רבו בסנהדרין פרק חלק אמרו כל החולק על רבו כחולק על השכינה...” Ibid.

\(^{55}\) Yaron Ben-Naeh, Jews in the Realm of the Sultans (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 431-432.
Another possible scenario is that the accused man had actually converted, but now wished to renounce his apostasy and rejoin his former Jewish community. While certainly a rarity, we can glean from contemporary responsa documents that it was possible to return to Judaism after a regretted or coerced conversion to Islam, despite harsher restrictions by Ottoman courts on the nullifying of accidental or coerced conversions in the early seventeenth century. In the next responsum, we will examine one such case of a return to Judaism after conversion to Islam.

**Return from Conversion**

An illuminating, albeit puzzling, instance of conversion and a convert’s social standing is found in *Sefer Sha’ar Yehoshua [The Book of Joshua’s Gate]* by Rabbi Joshua Benveniste. Benveniste (d. ca. 1665) wrote in Istanbul in the mid-seventeenth century, while his brother Hayyim Benveniste, perhaps more widely known, operated in Izmir. The Benveniste family had produced scholars dating back to the eleventh century, and both Benveniste brothers most likely enjoyed an illustrious reputation in the main Jewish centers of the seventeenth-century Ottoman world. Joshua Benveniste’s standing in Istanbul Jewish society can be shown in the responsum described below. We will see that he writes from within a circle of rabbis, is able to criticize them, and believes that there is a chance of being able to sway their opinions.

Benveniste’s response is addressed to a contemporary rabbi in Istanbul, known to us only by his initials, “Ḥakham (Sage) Rabbi Y.” While the original question is lost to us, the conflict of the matter can be inferred from the responsum. It seems that an

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56 Joshua Benveniste, “Chapter 57” in *Sha’ar Yehoshua* (Jerusalem: Mekhon Or ha-Mizrah, 1982), 213-216.
unnamed convert (the term here is mishtamed, which literally means “one who is destroyed”) had returned to Judaism, but then found himself in a financial conflict: he was asked to pay a sum to another individual that is incurred in relation to his conversion. The sum was also connected to his relationship with his wife. The response begins with Benveniste summarizing the claims of “Ḥakham R. Y.” in favor of the payment: “First, that he already converted [to Islam] and there is nobody able to inherit. And furthermore, that it was in his mind to divorce her. And furthermore, it is on him to choose the localized custom (Hebr. minhag) of Constantinople if he returns half of the payment to whoever gives the wedding dowry….” From this third point, we know that the requested payment is specifically related to the former convert’s dowry payment that he received as part of the marriage. Rabbi Benveniste fights back against these points systematically, professing that he is “surprised” by these arguments of Rabbi Y., a subtle literary criticism.

While he professes that the first argument is null because the convert returned to Judaism, Rabbi Benveniste argues a step further and cites holdings from Shelomo Yitzhaki (d. 1105) and Maimonides (d. 1204), two prominent medieval Jewish scholars, that the convert must pay through the Jewish court (beit din), and the court will manage it from there.

From Joshua Benveniste’s responsum on a Jewish man who converts to Islam for an unspecified short amount of time and then returns to Judaism, we can deduce that leaving Islam after conversion was, at least in some cases, a possible and viable action.

The responsum should be considered as reliable and based on an historical scenario,

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Hebrew: חאדא, שכבר נשתמד ואין ראוי לירש. עוד, היה בדעתו לגרשה. עוד, עליו לברר מנהג קושטנדינא אם"周转 반 חצי אlashesו ליון/resource’י. Ibid.

Hebrew: "ותמיהני על טענותเหลנ..." Ibid.
given that Benveniste implores the community to assist in convincing another rabbi to alter his decision against the convert in question. Benveniste expresses his concern over a conflicting opinion throughout his writing, and clearly believes that the subject is an urgent matter that must be given great care.

Nevertheless, several crucial details concerning Simeon the convert are missing in Benveniste’s responsum and the narrative that we can infer from it: these lost details include Simeon’s motives in converting, how long he stayed a Muslim, how involved he was in the Muslim community, and why he returned to Judaism. A likely explanation for his conversion is that Simeon was angry with his wife and, perhaps not feeling wholly connected to his Jewish community in Istanbul, thought that converting to Islam and starting a new life would solve his problems. Although a trivial moment of anger may not seem to justify an official conversion, it is hinted by Rabbi Benveniste arguing over a conjecture that Simeon considered divorcing from his wife upon conversion. After the conversion process, Simeon perhaps found his new life unsatisfying and was ashamed that he had abandoned his family. Lack of further context, however, makes it difficult to draw conclusions regarding the process by which Simeon was able to withdraw from the Islamic community and return to the religion in which he was born.

Nevertheless, there are other historical examples from which we can see how the Muslim courts generally acted toward “renegade converts.” As Tijana Krstić demonstrates through her exploration of the boundaries of accidental conversions by Christians to the Islamic faith, the seventeenth century was a period in which Muslim fetvas (authorized decisions based on Islamic law) began to call for the enforcing of harsher regulations that narrowed the middle ground for what can be counted as a
“sincere” or “official” conversion. The şeyhülislam (chief Islamic jurisprudent in the Ottoman Empire) Ebussuud Efendi (d. 1574) ruled that if a non-Muslim says “I am a Muslim” out of fear (i.e. not from a genuine sentiment), that is enough to make him or her a Muslim. Meanwhile, Ebussuud pushed back against the allegations surrounding the donning of Muslim headgear: Ebussuud ruled that if a Jew simply wears a white turban, again “out of fear,” he is not immediately a Muslim.\(^59\) Fetvas from the şeyhülislams of the seventeenth century, however, subtly push the boundary of conversion. One striking example is when the şeyhülislam Ali Efendi (d. 1686) wrote that the involuntary acceptance of Islam should be counted as a true conversion. Moreover, Ali wrote that if the involuntary convert wishes to nullify this conversion, he should be “driven into Islam by force.”\(^60\) This ruling was perhaps seen as merciful at this time, given that many reluctant converts were routinely executed by local Ottoman court judges.\(^61\) Still, this evidence begs the question as to how our convert in Benveniste’s responsum was able to seamlessly switch between religions. Moreover, he presumably lived in Istanbul, the center of the Ottoman Empire where the chief interpreter of Islamic law (şeyhülislam) would have more control, and where the administration likely preferred to impose a Muslim dominance.

It is clear from the responsum that Rabbi Benveniste supported the full acceptance of the reneged convert by the members of his Jewish community. Return from conversion was continually hoped for among the Jewish community. The next responsum to be

\(^{60}\) Ibid, 151.
\(^{61}\) See “Chapter Five. Between the Turban and the Papal Tiara: Orthodox Christian Neomartyrs and Their Impresarios in the Age of Confessionalization” in Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam*. 
examined involves a converted girl who unfortunately died before she could have a chance to return to Judaism. Rabbi Yehiel Basan speculates on whether she converted by will or coercion.

**Ritual Mourning for a Converted Child**

A question for our teacher, the Light of the Diaspora:

A certain girl converted at eight or nine years of age, and she died fifty or sixty days afterward, and was buried in the idolatrous manner of the gentiles. [The central question is] whether her father and her mother are required to mourn for her [according to the laws of Jewish ritual mourning]. According to the reasoning of Rabbeinu Tam [Jacob ben Meir, d. 1171]... there is no ritual mourning for a minor at one or two years of age that converted with his mother. And he [Rabbeinu Tam] brings in the Mordechai [Rabbi Mordechai ben Hillel, d. 1298] [who says] “Rabbi Y was asked concerning the matter of a minor of one or two years of age, who converted with his mother and died. Is there [ritual] mourning over him? And he answered, ‘Rabbeinu Tam says that there is no [ritual] mourning over him.’”

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62 Hebrew text: “שאלה יורנו מורינו אור הגולה בחורה אחת המירה בת ח או ט שנים ואחר נ או ס יום מתה ונקברה בדתם על ידי הגוים אם אביה ואמה義務_loaderת עליה סעודה ר"ז שביא ב' ד"ל ול"ך קום שטימר על גומ מ"ג שטימר על גומ מ"ג שטימר על גומ מ"ג ע"ן זכאי ל"ל על ע"ן זכאי ל"ל על ע"ן זכאי ל"ל על ע"ן זכאי ל"ל על ע"ן זכאי ל"ל על ע"ן זכאי ל"ל על ע"ן זכאי ל"ל...". Yehiel Basan, “Chapter 70” in She'elot u' Teshuvot (Constantinople: n.p., n.d.), 39b-40a. “Rabbi Y.” is unidentified.
The question quoted above concerns ritual mourning in the tragic case of a child who was converted to Islam and then passed away shortly afterwards. For the Jewish community, and especially the individuals closest to this child, it was certainly a double tragedy: her conversion, which may or may not have been coerced (as the responsum discusses below), would probably have necessitated shunning and disownment by her family members and would have been viewed as a grave affront to her congregation. Next, her subsequent death severed a chance of her return to Judaism and their reunion with her. Because the responsum’s question does not detail the circumstances of either the girl’s conversion or her death, both Rabbi Yeḥiel Basan and the reader are left to speculation. Nevertheless, in doing so we may be able to learn much about the attitudes of Istanbul’s Jewish community towards conversion to Islam, as well as what it fundamentally means to be a Jew in the view of Rabbi Basan and the rabbinic sages whom he cites.

This responsum assumes a basic understanding of ritual mourning laws in the Jewish tradition. In Jewish tradition since at least the Talmudic era, a close family member of one who passes away, including a parent or child, would be required to rent his or her clothes upon learning of the loved one’s death. A period of accepting vistors in the mourner’s home for seven days [Heb. shiva] would also have been practiced. The question, evidently asked by a learned community member, ultimately concerns whether the girl’s death necessitates the following of these ritual mourning laws. If so, then the

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63 See Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1972) for a comprehensive guide to contemporary Jewish mourning laws based on traditional religious law. Much of the laws established dates to rulings in the *Shulḥan Arukh* (see Chapter Three), which would have been closely observed by Sephardic Jews in the Ottoman Empire.
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girl was still considered to have died a Jew, as the laws of mourning typically only apply to the Jewish dead. If not, then she was considered to have fully converted.

Basan’s responsum sheds light on Jewish attitudes toward Islam in the Ottoman Empire. In answering a question about the contemporary scenario, Basan refers to the law of the hypothetical “ir hanidachat” (“the wayward city”). The Torah features a command to burn down and kill all the inhabitants of any Israelite city that collectively turns to idolatry:

If it is true [that all of the inhabitants of the Israelite town are idolaters], the fact is established - that abhorrent thing was perpetrated in your midst - put the inhabitants of that town to the sword and put its cattle to the sword. Doom it and all that is in it to destruction: gather all its spoil into the open square, and burn the town and all its spoil completely for [my Lord] your God. And it shall remain an everlasting ruin, never to be rebuilt.64

In the Talmudic extrapolation and interpretation of Torah law, a majority of the Sages agreed that for a city to be “wayward” (nidah), a totality of the inhabitants would have to be totally idolatrous. As such, this law is never expected to be applicable to reality, and it is purely legal in nature.65 Basan uses this theoretical example as a basis for which to judge the idolatry of children. If the inhabitants of the city are to be killed for idolatry, does this commandment include young children “who do not know their left from their

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64 Deuteronomy 13:15-17.
65 Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 71a.
right?” (I.e. they are too young to understand the consequences of idolatry.) Should they be punished for simply following the actions of their parents?

Rabbi Basan’s ultimate answer is as follows:

…And despite the fact that there is room for judges to dispute with this [ruling], my opinion leans toward lifting [the requirement of] mourning. All of the above only applies if she converted by her own will, but if the matter was done through coercion, I say that she is [still] in the sphere of Jewish law [i.e. she is Jewish and her parents should observe ritual mourning laws].

As ruled by Rabbi Basan, the matter is fundamentally one of conversion by will or by coercion. It is unclear to both Basan and the reader which scenario was the reality, although considering the girl’s age of “eight or nine years old,” there is a likely chance that she was coerced or tricked into conversion by proselytizing acquaintances.

The next responsum explores the possibility of continued involvement within one’s former Jewish community after converting to Islam.

**A Converted Wineseller**

Concerning the matter of a convert who is in the practice of his winemaking to make it pure [by Jewish dietary laws] so that he will be able to sell it to Israel [i.e. the Jewish population in Istanbul]. He gave [his wine] to the Jewish wine treasury

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66 שארית יודע בר נמי兰州לאל.
67 Hebrew: "אף על פי שרירות יש להטלות על *=חה נמע מחלק באזלב. אוסר על זה באיה והויה ברעתה את זה מחלק. "" הרבר בולו רדחא ומיי נמי ומחלק כשששית. ""Ibid.
through his Jewish wife, on the condition that he himself will not enter the
treasury, [and] only his wife will sell the wine to Israel.68

This story sent to Rabbi Joseph Katzabi (d. 1696 or 1698), a chief rabbi of
Istanbul by the end of his life, reveals a scenario in which a convert who is still married
to a Jewish wife can find a place in his wife’s community by selling kosher wine (i.e.
wine that is in accordance with Jewish dietary laws) to a Jewish community.69 Although
the conflict took place in Edirne, it was sent to Rabbi Katzabi in Istanbul, an
acknowledgment that it is a scenario that required a more learned decision than the
community in Edirne could have provided. This story arouses significant curiosity
drawing from three of its aspects: the relationship between a convert and his Jewish wife;
the sidestepping of possible legal and societal issues with a Muslim selling wine to Jews;
and the unstable relationship between the convert and the Jewish community that
tolerates him.

The existing agreement quoted above stipulates that the convert is allowed to
make the wine in a kosher manner, so long as he does not actually sell it to a Jew. Rather,
all transactions must be handled through his Jewish wife for the wine to be considered
kosher. An obvious, but nonetheless interesting, fact regarding this story is that the
convert still has a Jewish wife, and their marriage survived the conversion. This does not
appear to be common, and is certainly in contrast to Rabbi Joshua Benveniste’s

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68 Hebrew text: “על ענין מומר שדרך יינו בטהרה כדי שיכול למכורו לישראל ונתנו באוצר ישראל על ידי אשתו היהודית.
על ענין מומר שדרך יינו בטהרה כדי יכול למכורו לישראל ונתנו באוצר ישראל על ידי אשתו היהודית.”
responsum analyzed above (concerning the man who left his wife to convert, and then returned). In that document and throughout the responsa literature, a convert typically tries his or her best to separate from the Jewish community and assimilate as much as possible into the mainstream Islamic community. Here, we see a convert who made an effort to maintain interactions with his former community. He was still married to a Jewish woman, and he intended to only sell his wine to Jews on levels of stringency that may necessitate the employment of Jews.

We can deduce that there is a specific reason for this convert to be willing to embrace all of these stringencies (and suspicion, as we shall see soon) just to sell his wine to Jews: he may not have been able to sell alcohol to a large number of the Muslim population in Edirne. While alcohol is forbidden in the letter of Islamic law, we know that wine was a cultural staple of Arabo-Islamic society through the Middle Ages and into the early modern era. Furthermore, mainstream Arabic poems include an entire genre about the pleasures of wine drinking. Although the Sunnitization of the Empire that largely began under the reigns of Sultans Selim I (r. 1512-1520) and Süleyman I (r. 1520-1566) did much to remove alcoholic beverages from the cultural visibility of Istanbul, it is known that international wine imports remained a significant revenue at least through the end of the sixteenth century. If the convert was indeed able to sell his wine to Muslims, as a new Muslim himself he likely did not find it proper for Muslims to drink

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71 See Halik İnalcık, “Chapter XIV: The Ottoman Empire and International Trade” in *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age 1300-1600* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000) for a discussion on the international wine trade.
wine. Wine-pressing may have been his trade before converting, and he still valued his profession as an efficient skill that was appreciated by the Jewish community.

Nevertheless, the intellectual and legal elite of such a Jewish community inevitably regarded his career with significant suspicion. The conflict to which Basan is responding concerns the reliability of an agreement that only allows the wine to be sold by the convert’s wife. The question component of the responsum asks that if his Jewish wife could procure the key to the wine storage room, what could stop her husband, who lives with her, from borrowing the key and entering? It ultimately appears from the responsum that the convert is allowed to continue his trade. While suspicion no doubt was prevalent among the community, the wineseller could still maintain a relationship with his wife’s community.

**Conclusions**

Ultimately, a closer examination of the responsa literature produced in seventeenth-century Istanbul is necessary to fully understand how the genre lends itself to a study of conversions in the city. A systematic study would reveal how individual conversion scenarios change, if at all, across the seventeenth century. Possible transformations include effects of popular movements during specific decades, such as the Muslim reformist movement surrounding Kadızade Mehmet (d. 1635) in the middle of the century as well as the movement of Shabbetai Tzevi (d. 1676) in the 1660s.

Nevertheless, there are several points that are made clear from the responsa selected above, as well as from a range of responsa that are not included in this chapter. Perhaps the most important conjecture that can be made is that conversion was not a
taboo topic to be avoided in the discourse of rabbis and congregational leaders. On the contrary, laws and stories of conversion were frequently discussed among community intellectuals, and the Hebrew word meaning “apostate” was even construed as a serious insult among lay congregants. The frequency of discussion, however, did nothing to diminish the urgency of the topic at hand. The responsum on the converted child, for instance, discussed serious matters of whether the girl could still be considered Jewish upon her death. The theoretical value of this discussion bears larger ramifications surrounding the degree to which a convert can be considered Jewish, at least in application to ritual laws, after a time of apostasy.

Regardless of the degree to which a Jew has apostatized from Judaism, the question of a return to Judaism appears undisputed among the responsa literature. While any former convert is welcomed according to the law, we know from Rabbi Joshua Benveniste’s responsum that return to Judaism was likely not a smooth process. Returned converts likely met with obstacles from former community members, who had been accustomed to shunning the convert and now had to welcome him or her back into their community. Jewish community members who did not wish to welcome a convert back, on the other hand, could use the past conversion as a justification to continue ostracizing a sincere Jew. Furthermore, it is unclear to what degree of freedom new converts possessed in the manner of reneging on their conversions to Islam. In the early seventeenth century, it was possibly left up to local Muslim court judges and may have been a matter of social standing and influence.

At the same time, we have seen that reneging on a conversion was not always necessary to maintain a limited association with the Jewish community following a
transition to Islam. In the case of the converted wineseller, his Jewish wife enabled him to continue profiting from his trade, likely in the sphere of a local community with which he was already familiar. Although there were prevalent suspicions in the community concerning the wineseller’s intentions, he was still allowed to continue his trade at a distance. This scenario also says much about his Jewish wife. She remained free of community suspicion and was not seriously suspected of being influenced by her husband away from Judaism.

In the next chapter, I emphasize the complex network of Jewish communities in Istanbul and the extended Ottoman world. By focusing on internal community tensions and struggles, I aim to portray Istanbul’s Jewish network as a symptom of a century of significant reflections on religious worldviews, on the individual as well as the communal level.
Non-Muslim communities in the Ottoman Empire, such as Jews and Christians, are each often viewed as comprising a singular entity. This is especially prominent when discussing Jews in the Ottoman Empire and the autonomous nature of the Jewish community vis-à-vis the Ottoman administration. Rather than conceptualizing the Ottoman Jewish population as a homogeneous unit, which carries the risk of marginalizing significant relationships and conflicts within the Jewish population, the Ottoman Jewish population should be considered as a network of smaller communities with shared interests, practices, and confession. These communities involved Jews of varied histories and with different religious practices, and each one was a cog in a wheel that operated with other Jewish populations at the local level, both within the same city and across the empire. While each enclave could stand alone as a cohesive unit of Jewish life, it was mutually influenced by its counterparts and changed as a result of intercommunal interactions. Despite each community’s individual cohesiveness, sustained contact and cultural exchange were common between several Jewish communities in the empire. These interactions occurred between the normative expectations of the community and the volatility of everyday life and personal relationships. The Jewish population of Istanbul operated as a network of communities,

with individuals crossing boundaries and influencing each other in Istanbul and in other cities across the empire.

**Movement Between Congregations**

Intercommunal interaction could involve voluntary movement of individuals between Jewish communities, as we see in a responsum by Rabbi Yehiel Basan (1550-1625). The responsum presents an example of a community deliberately crossing local boundaries in order to solve a conflict with their original congregation. While the responsum leaves open a range of interpretation as to the outcome of the conflict, it involves an argument that results in the movement of members from one congregation to another, and the source material can be viewed as one instance of a larger trend toward the blurring of communal lines in the seventeenth century. Voluntary movement between nearby congregations lends itself to a study of both the safeguarding and exchanges of varying customs and ritual practices within the Ottoman Jewish world. This particular case also shows the material implications of movement between different congregations.

The responsum discusses a society (Heb. hevrah) within a certain congregation dedicated to acts of charity, known in Hebrew as a hevrat gemilut hasadim (lit. a “society that bestows kindness” or “good deeds”). The local congregation (Heb. kahal) was the focal point of each Jewish community in early modern Istanbul, with its own prayer spaces and specific religious practices. The society in the question mentioned above, 

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presumably well known by the congregation as it had been long established, made items of silver for the congregation. Although the responsum does not specify the function of such items or how they were connected to acts of charity, it is likely that the objects were of a ritual nature to be used by the congregation. A conflict arose when the charity (ḥesed) society was usurped: “...and behold, now most of the members of that society went to their rest as one, and other members rose after them who possessed that society by force....” A quarrel ensued between the original members and the new members, although the writing here does not make clear why there was another group who wanted control over this society. The original members of the charity society decided to leave their congregation in which the quarrel broke out, “and went to pray in another congregation (kahal), and took with them the items of silver in their possession.” The question and Basan’s answer revolve around the items of silver that the disgruntled members transferred from one community to the other. After the move, the congregants pleaded with the society members to return the items of silver if the members would not come back themselves.

Here, the act of crossing from one community to the other is performed as a statement in the throes of an argument. Rather than merely viewing intercommunal movement as an isolated process, it should be understood as occurring within a broader context of communal transformations. The responsum leaves out the details and outcome of the communal disruption. The reader is not told whether the new congregation readily

75 Yehiel Basan, “Chapter 2” in She’elot u’Tshuvot (Constantinople: Isaac Basan, 1736), 1b-2b.
76 Hebrew: “...והנה עתה אנשי החברה ההיא רובם כולם הלכו羊毛 חפצי הכסף שלהם וה المحليים אשר עמדו אחריהם להחזיק במעוז החברה ההיא.” Ibid.
77 Hebrew: “...ואב אול אול לו הלך בקהל אחר והוליים עמדו בכפי מתפלי ראש וידידים...” Ibid.
accepts the members, or whether the population shift resulted in frustration and confusion in the midst of differing practices and power struggles. While the intricacies of this particular scenario are unknown, we may be able to reach an understanding of such a communal collision by examining Jewish communal dynamics as a whole. Early modern Istanbul Jewish communities were locally organized by congregation (Heb. kahal). Each congregation consisted of members with a shared origin.\textsuperscript{78} For this reason, there existed in Istanbul alone a plethora of small, distinct Jewish congregations that each had listed members who frequented their own shared prayer space. For instance, according to Ottoman tax records, the congregation whose members’ ancestors arrived from Portugal was distinct from the congregation whose members hailed from Catalonia, and likewise between the Catalan congregation and the “Alaman” (Germany) congregation.\textsuperscript{79} Given that the two congregations in the responsa are presumably in proximity of each other, they were probably congregations with separate histories and ancestral origins.

Most of the congregations that had formed in Istanbul by choice (known in Ottoman Turkish as the \textit{kendi gelen}), rather than by forced relocation from another Ottoman city (\textit{sürgün} congregations), were comprised of a majority membership of families that had lived in Istanbul since the fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{80} Nevertheless, their members still remembered the homes of their ancestors by means of language and shared customs that had become associated with Jewish practice over time. In terms of language, Jews regularly spoke a Judeo-Spanish language (alternatively called \textit{Judezmo}, or more

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{78} Minna Rozen, “Public Space and Private Space Among the Jews of Istanbul in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” 337-8.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{79} Yaron Ben-Naeh, \textit{Jews in the Realm of the Sultans}, 83; Yaron Ben-Naeh, \textit{Yehudim BeMamleket HaSultanim: HaHevrah HaYehudit BAlmperyah HaOtt ‘manit BaMeah HaSheva’ ‘Esrekh} (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2006).}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{80} Minna Rozen, \textit{Public Space and Private Space}, 333.}
\end{footnotes}
frequently *Ladino*) within their internal communities. Judeo-Spanish was primarily a Spanish dialect written with Hebrew characters, and it survived in the Ottoman Empire because of the Iberian Jewish population’s (*Sephardim*, from the Hebrew name for Spain) becoming the dominant Jewish population in Istanbul and other major Ottoman cities. Other longstanding communities such as eastern European Jews (*Ashkenazim*, from the Hebrew name for the Germanic region) and Macedonian Jews (*Romaniots*) eventually assimilated into Sephardic congregations and often merged their prayer spaces. The fact that the prominent Jewish communities throughout the Ottoman Empire kept Judeo-Spanish rather than adopting a new “Judeo-Ottoman” language speaks to the strong ties of a shared cultural history.

The prayer spaces in particular saw the need for separate congregations with distinct customs due to a long history of diasporic legal rulings. In addition to Jewish law that had largely been codified in the era of the Talmud (a large codex of Jewish law and narrative to which many rabbis over several generations contributed) and was considered legally binding by all rabbinic Jews, separate customs (Heb. *minhag*) arose throughout the diaspora in the medieval era.  

81 These customs applied to a range of Jewish activities, including private practices and the arrangement of texts in the daily prayer book (Heb. *siddur*). In the early modern era, such customs were newly codified into texts such as Joseph Karo’s *Shulḥan Arukh* (*The Set Table*, 1565) and Moses Isserles’s (d. 1572) commentary on the same work.  

82 Due to such codification that made accessible reference

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81 The Babylonian Talmud was codified in roughly the sixth to seventh centuries AD, after several centuries of writing and editing.
to customs that had developed gradually and organically by local populations, the customs became more centralized and harder to change. Codification likely also made customs more binding, elevating them to a status almost akin to that of codified law (Heb. halakha). Consequently, Jews who had left their homelands in the fifteenth century, either by will or by forced relocation, did not arrive in the Ottoman Empire with the expectation of merging with Jews from other lands and creating a new “Ottoman” community. Rather, each diasporic community bonded together by means of a common tradition of customs, thanks to the innovation of the printing press and a centralization of legally binding customs that intellectual Jews were able to reference through codified manuscripts. For these reasons, large and voluntary transfers of populations between congregations were not common before the seventeenth century, but rather produced difficulties that arose from the molding of different communities, inevitably giving way to the compromising of individual customs. Small and often incidental movements between congregations such as the occurrence in Basan’s responsum likely made a significant contribution to the growing acceptance of movement between congregations in the seventeenth century.

The most prominent example of congregational blending of customs in the seventeenth century is the effective assimilation of the Romaniot Jews into Sephardic communities.83 The Romaniot Jews in Istanbul were Macedonian by heritage, and preceded the arrival of the Ottomans in Byzantium. Whereas Ottoman Sephardic Jews preferred to speak Judeo-Spanish and eastern European Jews preferred to speak Judeo-German (Yiddish), the Romaniots spoke Greek, the language prior to the Ottoman

conquest of Constantinople in 1453. It has been suggested by Minna Rozen that the use of spoken Greek was a possible contributor to the “disappearance” of Romaniot Jewish society because Greek became the language of the conquered subsequent to the Ottoman conquest in 1453.\textsuperscript{84} While Christians remaining in the city continued to speak Greek, Rozen notes that Greek is not present among Jewish source material following the late seventeenth century. This suggests a dwindling of Romaniot prominence during the seventeenth century, at the end of which Greek was either not spoken at all or only privately in Ottoman Jewish communities.

The beginning of the seventeenth century gave rise to an increase in movement of congregants between congregations, correlated with a decline in the significance attributed to following one’s own custom as opposed to the custom of the surrounding community.\textsuperscript{85} Although the society members of Basan’s responsum appear to have transferred congregations following a momentary disruption, movement across congregations with differing customs became more common during the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{86} Although Basan’s responsum does not explicitly mention the differences that the disgruntled community members may have encountered at a neighboring congregation, it can be inferred from a broader social framework that no two congregations were exactly the same. Rather, each congregation had separate traditions that informed each other by intercommunal movements such as the one viewed in the responsum.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{84} Ibid, 39.
  \item \textsuperscript{85} Ben-Naeh, \textit{Jews in the Realm of the Sultans}, 381-2.
  \item \textsuperscript{86} Ibid, 56.
\end{itemize}
Language as Network

Spoken language, as a primary means of daily communication, is crucial to understanding how communities function with respect to its individual members. While written history of the early modern period leaves this area with sparse information, a responsum by Rabbi Isaac Alfandari (d. ca. 1690) illustrates the use of spoken language between Jews as a specific network of its own, used in this case to conduct business. In this responsum, published in his father’s *Maggid MeReshit* ([He] Tells from the Beginning), a conflict arose from a misunderstanding in a letter between two Jewish businessmen, the sender of the letter living in Izmir and the recipient operating in Bursa. That letter was written in Judeo-Spanish and an excerpt from it is copied in Alfandari’s responsum. Its inclusion in the question received by Rabbi Alfandari highlights the concept of language as a method of maintaining a communal network. Responsa were written almost exclusively in Hebrew and were intended to have legal ramifications. Hebrew was generally not used by Jews outside of an intellectual or religious context. Instead, Judeo-Spanish was used for personal letters, accessible documents of a religious nature, and as the spoken language among Jews.

The conflict is described as follows: Reuben, in Izmir, sent to Simeon in “Brusa” (Bursa) a number of articles of clothing, instructing Simeon “not to sell them for less than a *gerush* and a half per cubit” (Heb. *amah*, a biblical measure of length amounting to the approximate length of a forearm) and to send the money to Istanbul (Heb. *Kushta*)

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through Levi.\textsuperscript{89} Reuben related these instructions to Simeon in a letter that partially contained Judeo-Spanish text, which is quoted in the responsum.\textsuperscript{90} At the end of the Judeo-Spanish section of the original letter, Reuben added in Hebrew: “Finally, do according to your wisdom (ḥokmantekha), for you are a wise (ḥakham) man.”\textsuperscript{91}

Unfortunately, Simeon did not follow Reuben’s instructions. Instead of sending it to Istanbul, which he was told to do because it is closer to Bursa than Izmir and the path to Izmir was more dangerous, Simeon sent the money, along with some goods that he had not sold, to Izmir. The money and goods were stolen along the way, and Reuben lost everything. When Reuben attempted to sue Simeon, Rabbi Alfandari pointed to the sentence at the end of the letter (“do according to your wisdom”) to rule in Simeon’s favor. This letter is an illuminating instance of a collision between Judeo-Spanish, a spoken language, and Hebrew, a language reserved for formalities.

Since Reuben’s letter to Simeon was partly written in Judeo-Spanish, an understanding of that language, its use, and its purpose for speakers of the language are necessary to comprehend ongoing communication between Jews of separate communities in different cities. Judeo-Spanish first arose in medieval Iberia, and consists of Spanish-related grammar and vocabulary written in Hebrew script and incorporating many Hebrew and Aramaic loan words, in addition to a Turkish influence during its later history in the Ottoman Empire. The degree to which Judeo-Spanish can be considered a

\textsuperscript{89} The responsa literature generally anonymizes the names of its characters, replacing them with the names of biblical Israelite tribes. See Robert Brody, \textit{The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 189. I have chosen to keep the anonymized names as a matter of convenience for the reader. The \textit{garush} currency mentioned in the responsum is the Ottoman \textit{kurus}. For more on the history of this currency, see Sevket Pamuk, \textit{A Monetary History of the Ottoman Empire} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Hebrew: שלא ימכור אותו至少 האמה garush חצי.

\textsuperscript{90} The full Judeo-Spanish text can be found in Isaac Alfandari, \textit{Maggid MeReshit}, 24b.

\textsuperscript{91} Hebrew: "סוף דבר ועשית כחכמתיך, כי איש חכם אתה." Ibide.
separate language, rather than merely a dialect or variety of Spanish, has been a question of considerable debate. Nevertheless, Judeo-Spanish was distinct from Spanish as it developed as a uniquely “Jewish language.” In the medieval diasporic world, such Jewish languages that incorporated the vernacular of the surrounding non-Jewish world were a common phenomenon that included the likes of Judeo-German (Yiddish), Judeo-French, and Judeo-Arabic as well as Judeo-Spanish. However, as the Jewish populations of Spain and Portugal were expelled from their respective lands in the late fifteenth century (1492 and 1496, respectively), their relocations to Italy, North Africa, and the Ottoman Empire gave way to a sprawling network of Judeo-Spanish speakers across Europe as well as the Islamic world. A connection through language across multiple continents, in addition to the *converso* population who underwent forced conversion from Judaism to Christianity in Iberia, facilitated an extensive trade network among Jewish merchants (such as Reuben and Simeon in the responsum discussed above).

Why was Judeo-Spanish, a Spanish dialect, spoken in the Ottoman Empire centuries after the Spanish expulsion? Why did Sephardic Jews not adapt a form of Judeo-Ottoman Turkish for their community, especially as Sephardic merchants needed familiarization with Ottoman Turkish to conduct trade in the Muslim world anyway? Scholars of Judeo-Spanish have conjectured a number of possible reasons as to why Judeo-Spanish remained in the Ottoman Empire. Among such reasons are the laissez-faire approach of the Ottoman administration to non-Muslim communities, insular Sephardic living quarters, and the increase of Judeo-Spanish publications by Jewish

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printing presses.\textsuperscript{93} A looming, broader theory relates to the heightened conservatism of post-Expulsion Jews in the face of mass movement across the world.

Analyzing a resistance to change, not despite, but as a result of sudden movement, is a core method of understanding the prominence of Ladino in the Ottoman Empire. In contrast to the Romaniot (Macedonian) community, who may have had little psychological pressure or immediate need to preserve spoken Greek, the Jews of Iberia managed to preserve Judeo-Spanish in a foreign land through music, literature, and occasional elements of religious services (including the \textit{meldado}, a commemoration for the dead).\textsuperscript{94} The remarkable preservation of the Judeo-Spanish language in the Ottoman Empire and its permeation through every aspect of Sephardic Jewish society is perhaps demonstrated best in the responsum examined above. Although typically written in Hebrew for an intellectual class, we see an abrupt language change from Hebrew to Ladino in order to cite the particular language of the letter sent from Reuben to Simeon. At the same time, the responsum shows that the same letter also incorporated Hebrew, illustrating a limited permeation of Hebrew into daily Ottoman life as well.

\textbf{Crossing the Temporal and Spiritual Borders to the Holy Land}

Reuben wanted to go that year to the Land of Israel, and there were those among the people of his house who pleaded with him at length not to go, until Reuben uttered these words: “If I do not go this year to the Land of Israel, and I remain


\textsuperscript{94} Ibid, 125.
The remainder of this question focuses on Reuben’s Nazirite oath and whether it is binding for only a year or for life, and whether he can now exit the life of a Nazirite. Since the responsum mentions a factor of subsiding the pleas of Reuben’s family, Reuben probably did not travel to the Land of Israel in the following year. In his response, Rabbi Yeḥiel Basan declares Reuben freed of his vow to be a Nazirite as long as it is clear that Reuben had subsequently regretted his oath.

It is on the beginning of the question, and Reuben’s strong desire to travel that lead to his commitment of asceticism, that I choose to focus. It is unlikely that Reuben had previously ever set foot in Ottoman Palestine, as the road was long and dangerous. Reuben could only imagine the land through the descriptions available in the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, from the abundance of burial sites traditionally attributed to the Patriarchs to the exact proportions of the inner courtyard of the Temple long destroyed. Nevertheless, many Jews, as well as Christians and Muslims, were willing to make pilgrimage to the Land of Israel throughout history, often late in the traveler’s life.96

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95 “Chapter 10” in Rabbi Yeḥiel Basan, She’elot u’Teshuvot [Questions and Answers] (Constantinople: Isaac Basan, 1736), 5a-5b. The quoted text belongs to the anonymously authored “question” component of the responsum. Hebrew: שאלת יורנו מורנו ורבינו על אודות ראובן שהיה רוצה ללכת שנה הזה לארץ ישראל והיו מפצירים בו spędתי ושביתו הרבה" לבלתי יילך עד שאמר ראובן כדברים האלה אם לא אלך שנה זו לארץ ישראל ואשאר פה עד ראש השנה אהיה נזיר מראש השנה ואילך עד שאלך לארץ ישראל עד כאן דבריו".

The Ottoman Empire conquered the region of Palestine (historically included in Great Syria) in 1516 under the rule of Sultan Selim I (r. 1512-1520), after which the region became a major center of both Jewish and Muslim intellectual thought. In particular, the city of Safed in the sixteenth century was home to groups of both Jewish (kabbalah) and Muslim (sufi) mystics. Jewish teachers such as Moses Cordovero (d. 1570) and Isaac Luria (d. 1572) were instrumental in developing a radical cosmogony that reinterpreted the divine to affect both abstract theology and daily religious practice. Additionally, Luria published an accessible compendium of Jewish laws known as the Shulhan Arukh (The Set Table) that was disseminated across the Ottoman Empire and Europe. Following the phenomenon of Luria’s success and the mid-sixteenth century growth of kabbalistic discourse in Safed, the city thereafter became known among some Jewish circles as a “holy place.”

In the seventeenth century, the Jewish community in biblical Israel suffered economic challenges and a weak central government, particularly in Safed. In contrast to rapid growth in the sixteenth and the first quarter of the seventeenth centuries, major cities in the Land of Israel witnessed a dwindling and aging population as well as higher unemployment rates by the end of the seventeenth century. These problems did not only affect Jews, but also Muslims and Christians living in the region, and can be seen as symptoms of broader economic setbacks throughout the Ottoman Empire. Despite this, Jewish communities in Istanbul continued to lend support to the Land of Israel in various

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99 Ibid, 74.
ways. Failed by their local governments, the heads of the Jewish congregations in the Land of Israel depended on the rabbis of Istanbul for political assistance in lobbying the viziers or the Sultan himself for their welfare. This lobbying operated through a Jewish network in Istanbul, whereby the most respected rabbis would contact those Jews who worked in the royal court and may have been close to the Sultan’s inner circle. Another type of assistance existed in the form of direct funds from Istanbul Jews to Jews in Palestine, consisting of both individual voluntary donations and collected funds raised by whole congregations. Needless to say, concerns of Istanbul Jews for the welfare of Jews residing in the Holy Land necessitated an active and conscious connection. Examining the responsum belonging to Basan, it is likely that Reuben was connected to the system of welfare for the Land of Israel that was popular in Istanbul at this time, either through political activism or regular donations to struggling congregations in that region.

Individual movement from the Jewish community in Istanbul to the Jewish community in Palestine was not solely geographical; it was also universally considered a spiritual movement toward holiness. This spiritual journey was not exclusive to early modern Jews. In an article that describes two seventeenth-century expeditions to Palestine, that of an Arab and an Englishman, it becomes clear that such individual sojourns were done primarily, if not exclusively, for religious meaning. The written account of Salim Abdallah al-Ayyashi (d. 1679), a Moroccan jurist who decided to travel to Ottoman Palestine following a pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, refers to his

100 Ibid, 76.
101 Ibid, 74-77.
destination as “the holy and blessed land,” and describes his dismay at the state of disrepair in which he finds several holy shrines. Al-Ayyashi was notably willing to make the trip despite his poor financial means.103 Meanwhile, the Englishman, known only as “T.B.,” traveled in 1669 with the anti-Catholic agenda of giving a uniquely Protestant description of Palestine. T.B., among a group of fellow Englishmen, focused on traditional holy locations regarding Jesus, such as Mount Cavalry, where Jesus was crucified, and the Sepulchre of Christ.104 While both of these travelers returned home, many Jews remained in Palestine once setting foot there. Indeed, many elderly respected rabbis (talmidei hakhamim) would travel to Palestine with the intention of dying and being buried in holy land.105 In this way, men and women, such as Reuben in the responsum above, wished to cross both a spiritual and locational boundary between Istanbul, a temporal center of civilization, and the Land of Israel, a spiritual center that found itself in temporal decline.

Conclusions

Entering a discourse that includes each enclave of the larger Jewish community as a distinct entity that constantly engaged with other enclaves and the surrounding world is necessary in order to accurately understand the role of non-Muslim communities in the Ottoman Empire. This study discusses the complex and changing relationships across identity groups and perceived boundaries. It is apparent from an outside view that the Jewish community, in a singular sense, was subject to the same dhimmi law constituting

103 Ibid, 38.
104 Ibid, 46.
protection of minority religions throughout the empire. However, the Jewish communities across the Ottoman Empire were many. Each had their own history and, in all probability, nuanced practices from congregation to congregation. On the other hand, while individual communities in Istanbul were typically insular and distinguished by idiosyncratic customs, they shared a network with communities across the Ottoman Empire, from Egypt to Palestine and Syria.

There are many other possibilities of movement and change that warrant serious examination from historians. Widespread documentation within the responsa literature shows Istanbul communities interacting with the Jewish communities in Egypt, who were renowned for their religious scholarship at the time. Another field that warrants further exploration is the role of women in Jewish society. The responsa primarily include men, while women are typically mentioned when a husband or male sibling is affected. While it is true that men had more access to communication across community borders, the role of women should be considered when discussing intercommunal interactions in other senses. Further exploration into the responsa literature, as well as a widening of the range of authors and source material, will undoubtedly shed light on such relationships.

The anonymous individuals highlighted in the responsa were not exceptions to the rule, as made clear when the responsa are read alongside outlines of the broader streams of change in Jewish communities and cultures during the seventeenth century. Although one congregation apparently transformed its membership as the result of a unique conflict between members, many other congregations underwent membership change for a slew of different reasons. In the same manner that Judeo-Spanish was used by two people to conduct a sale, so was it used throughout the Sephardic Jewish world to conduct trade on
a large scale. Lastly, just as one man wanted to go to the Land of Israel and was not able, so were many Ottoman Jews yearning to travel to their biblical homeland with increased rates of success. Indeed, as demonstrated by the examples studied above, the Ottoman Jewish past is a past of local and individual exchanges, boundaries, and adaptations. It is a past of everyday conflicts and personal relations as much as it is the story of a large transnational and multicultural network of communities.
CONCLUSION

In writing this paper, I have helped to move the scholarship surrounding religious conversions in the Ottoman Empire away from the “exceptional cases” of Sabbateanism and the Kadızadeli movement. Rather, I have focused on the story of the individual’s changing relationship with religion as far as can be gleaned from the responsa literature in its current state of analysis. A wide-ranging, systematic study of these documents would reveal much more information than I have presented here, and the genre lends itself well to a comparative analysis. Responsa documents may be compared both between different authors in Istanbul, as well as between the great authors of the major Jewish cities in the Ottoman Empire. In addition to Istanbul, the communities of Izmir and Salonika contain much information to be parsed.

In the early modern world, religion comprised an entire worldview. For the vast majority of people living in the Ottoman Empire as well as Europe, the religion into which one was born was the default portrayal of the world. This portrayal included information on how his or her world came to be, the nature of the godly power that governed it, the direction to which the world was heading, and how and on what basis the individual believer would be judged. Religion was generally deeply felt as a community adhesive. To convert from one religion to another was not only to switch truths and live in a different world; it also meant a rejection of the community in which one was raised.

I have demonstrated in this paper, through a limited source material, that the topic of conversion was one that Istanbul rabbis did not avoid discussing. While they accepted the reality of losing Jews to Islam, they were not prepared to lose hope that a convert would return to Judaism.
In this paper, I have argued for a framework for conceptualizing Jewish communities as a porous system of boundary shifting. By combining this method of thought with a study on converts, I suggest that individuals from multiple populations in Ottoman society have in common the experience of boundary shifting and fluidity of identity. Further study along the lines of my research will surely demonstrate the merits and limitations of this concept.
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Primary Sources


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