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7-2015

## The Transformations of Judaism

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### Recommended Citation (OVERRIDE)

Ruderman, D.B. (2015). The Transformations of Judaism. In Scott, H. (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern European History, 1350-1750: Volume I: Peoples and Place*, (pp. 552-571). New York: Oxford University Press.

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## The Transformations of Judaism

### Abstract

This chapter addresses the primary transformations in Jewish civilization in the early modern era considering primarily the distinct histories of five large sub-communities—those of Italy, the western *Sephardim* (descendants of Jewish settlers from the Iberian peninsula who had primarily settled in Amsterdam, Hamburg, and Livorno beginning at the end of the sixteenth century), Germany and Central Europe, Poland-Lithuania, and the Ottoman Empire. It traces considers five markers in tracing the major political, social, and cultural transformations of early modern Jewry: mobility, migration, and social mixing; communal cohesion and laicization, a knowledge explosion, primarily the impact of print; the crisis of authority, primarily the impact of the messianic movement associated with Shabbetai Zevi; and mingled identities among Jews, Christians, and in some cases Muslims. These five major transformations allow one to describe a common early modern Jewish culture, one characterized by cultural exchange and interactions between diverse sub-communities.

### Keywords

Jews, Judaism, Sephardim, Ashkenazim, Hebraism, conversos, Sabbateanism

### Disciplines

Cultural History | European History | History | History of Religion | Jewish Studies | Medieval History

## Oxford Handbooks Online

### **The Transformations of Judaism**

David B. Ruderman

The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern European History, 1350-1750: Volume I: Peoples and Place

*Edited by Hamish Scott*

Print Publication Date: Jul 2015

Subject: History, Early Modern History (1501 to 1700), European History

Online Publication Date: Nov 2014 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199597253.013.24

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This chapter addresses the primary transformations in Jewish civilization in the early modern era considering primarily the distinct histories of five large sub-communities—those of Italy, the western *Sephardim* (descendants of Jewish settlers from the Iberian peninsula who had primarily settled in Amsterdam, Hamburg, and Livorno beginning at the end of the sixteenth century), Germany and Central Europe, Poland-Lithuania, and the Ottoman Empire. It traces considers five primary markers in tracing the major political, social, and cultural transformations of early modern Jewry: mobility, migration, and social mixing; communal cohesion and laicization; a knowledge explosion, primarily the impact of print; the crisis of authority, primarily the impact of the messianic movement associated with Shabbetai Zevi; and mingled identities among Jews, Christians, and in some cases Muslims. These five major transformations allow one to describe a common early modern Jewish culture, one characterized by cultural exchange and interactions between diverse sub-communities.

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DESCRIPTIONS of the history of Jews and Judaism in an early modern context are of relatively recent origin.<sup>1</sup> Despite a plethora of new studies in the last several decades, there have been few attempts to define the period of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries as a distinct epoch in Jewish history, distinguishable from both the medieval and modern periods.<sup>2</sup> Some historians have remained indifferent to demarcating the period, or have simply designated it as an extension of the Middle Ages, or have labelled it vaguely as a mere transitional stage between medievalism and modernity without properly describing its distinguishing characteristics. A few historians have used the term 'Renaissance' to apply to the cultural ambiance of Jews living in Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries alone without delineating the larger period and the more comprehensive geographical area. I offer here my own preliminary sense of how one might speak about the primary transformations in Jewish civilization in this era considering primarily the distinct histories of five large sub-communities—those of Italy, the *Sephardim* (descendants of Jewish settlers from the Iberian peninsula, who settled in the West (for example, the Netherlands), and those who settled in the East (the Ottoman Empire)), Germany and central Europe, and Poland-Lithuania—in their broader connections with each other.

I consider five primary markers in tracing the major political, social, and cultural transformations of early modern Jewry as a whole. Each element needs to be examined over the entire period and across regional boundaries to assess its significance as a vital dimension of a newly emerging Jewish cultural experience. These categories overlap but, to my mind, they offer a most promising beginning in speaking about a common early modern Jewish culture. I would be the first to acknowledge that these markers are tentative at best, that they might describe inadequately and incompletely certain aspects of the larger landscape I wish to describe, and that some of the factors affected more people than others. I am also aware that in attempting to define a distinct epoch in Jewish history, I focus more on transformations and discontinuities in this chapter than (p. 653) on continuities with both the medieval period that precedes this era and the modern that follows. Nevertheless, I remain convinced that these signposts of the entire period represent the most meaningful way of describing the historical experience of early modern Jewry as a whole while focusing especially on cultural exchange and interactions between diverse sub-communities.

## Mobility, Migration, and Social Mixing

The first element we might consider is that of mobility, migration, and social mixing. *Le juif errant* ('the wandering Jew'), as myth and reality, permeates all of the Jewish experience. But the theme, whatever its cogency in other periods, reflects a particular reality in the early modern period, a period of enhanced mobility for all peoples but especially for Jews. Human movement in this era was connected to every level of life from the intimacy of individual family economics to the place of state colonial and mercantile

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policies across the globe. In a period permeated by intense warfare, political oppression, and religious persecutions, migrations of individuals and entire communities were constant.

Yet for Jews, there was an added dimension: the period was marked by radical population shifts engendered by governmental expulsions and mass persecutions. I refer to the expulsion of entire communities of Jews in 1492 and 1497 from Spain and Portugal, local expulsions in Italy well into the late sixteenth century, in the Holy Roman Empire, and especially the brutality of the Chemelnicki pogrom of 1648 in Poland, engendering major Jewish population transfers from West to East and then later from East to West. Both sephardic and ashkenazic (or *Ashkenazim*, Jews who lived in the region of the Rhineland during the Middle Ages, and who during this period generally inhabited the areas of central and eastern Europe) Jews who were compelled to uproot their lives and migrate for reasons of persecution and economic hardship need to be considered alongside the migration of individuals, especially carriers of culture and literacy, who were mobile for personal and idiosyncratic reasons not necessarily associated with communal upheaval and disruption. The ultimate result of these movements was the creation of new Jewish centres in eastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire, and eventually the return of the Jews to the West, precipitated by converso economic networks as well as the significant migrations of ashkenazic Jews and their own networks of trade.

At the centre of this story is the creation of the two large Jewish communities in the East. In some fascinating ways, the histories of these two Jewish migrations display remarkable similarities to each other. As in the case of Jewish migration to the Ottoman Empire, the highpoint of immigration of Polish-Lithuanian Jews emerged at the beginning of the sixteenth century although waves of *Ashkenazim* had reached eastern Europe as early as the second half of the thirteenth century. With the worsening situation of Jewish life in the German regions, Jewish migrants were prepared to start afresh in the East given the receptive attitude of Polish kings and landowning magnates to their settlement and economic integration in a similar way that the *Sephardim* were (p. 654) received by the Ottoman government. Thus on the eastern and southern boundaries of Europe, the largest concentration of world Jewry emerged in the sixteenth century, whose ethnic composition and cultural character were largely determined by immigrants who had come from the West. And both communities flourished under governments that became the most tolerant sites for cross-confessional exchange in Europe. Only the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century, also a primary site for converso Jewish immigration, offered similar conditions for its minorities, including the Jews, to practise their own religion and to create their own semi-autonomous political structures without the interference of the ruling class.

The converso (a descendant of Iberian Jews who had converted to Catholicism, either voluntarily or under duress, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries) émigrés in the seventeenth century, who exited Spain and Portugal in search of refuge from persecution and, in many cases, new Jewish identities, constitute another critical dimension of the Jewish history of migration in early modern Europe. They came to southern France, to

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Amsterdam, Hamburg, and London, to Italy and the Ottoman Empire. They crossed the Atlantic Ocean to the West Indies, Brazil, Mexico, and even North America. In their wanderings, they fulfilled a highly distinctive function in the commercial and colonial expansion of Europe well into the eighteenth century. They created Jewish commercial networks following maritime rather than overland routes, importing non-European products over long distances, becoming a vital link between East and West, between Northern and Southern Europe, and stretching from Amsterdam and Hamburg to Recife and Curacao, to Izmir and Aleppo, and even to the Far East. The wide-ranging migratory patterns of the conversos and their remarkable networks of communication offer a remarkable case study of the impact of mobility on cultural and religious identity. As agents in an international system of trade, they had reason to travel from place to place, covering long distances, crossing repeatedly regional zones of commerce and culture. Moreover, their commuting between confessions and cultures—Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, and others—offered them an enormous challenge in defining themselves as well as a modicum of safety from religious scrutiny on the part of ecclesiastical and state authorities. Constantly in motion, they could escape the demands to define their social and religious identity strictly and conclusively.

One final part of the story of Jewish migration is the reversal of ashkenazic patterns of mobility. By the second half of the seventeenth century, the movement of ashkenazic Jews had shifted from an eastward direction to a westward one. After 1648, and especially in the course of the next decade, Amsterdam became a primary centre for the absorption of eastern European Jews, despite the ambivalence on the part of previously settled *Sephardim* in the city who now faced a major financial burden in supporting the new arrivals. For many of the ashkenazic vagrants and mendicants, Amsterdam represented only a way station as they moved through European cities, even returning to Germany, Bohemia, and Poland. By the 1650s, hundreds of Jewish refugees from Lithuania arrived in Amsterdam; but many moved on to Hamburg, Frankfurt, Italy, London, and Israel, while some were sent on to Danzig (p. 655) in the hope they would eventually return to Poland and Lithuania. Similar surges of eastern European migration to the West continued into the eighteenth century; most of the new immigrants were absorbed in Germany, most notably Polish rabbis. Other *Ashkenazim* migrated to Hungary, Romania, and the Northern Balkans, to the Ottoman Empire and especially to the land of Israel throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

These movements surely engendered pain and hardship of uprooting familiar landscapes for alien cultures. Equally apparent were the necessary social and economic encounters the new immigrants were forced to endure with Italian Catholics and Muslim Turks, with the varieties of ethnic groups in eastern Europe, or with Protestant Christians in German cities, in Amsterdam, or in London. Intense social mixing between Jews of different backgrounds could be particularly perplexing for Jews of Provençal and ashkenazic origins, indigenous Italian and sephardic Jews within the close quarters of Italian cities. While *Sephardim* ultimately overwhelmed other local Jewish communities in the Ottoman Empire and the *Ashkenazim* similarly dominated their new Polish-Lithuanian communities, Jews of differing backgrounds lived side by side not only in Venice, Rome,

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and Mantua but also in Amsterdam, Hamburg, Frankfurt, London, Prague, Cracow, and Jerusalem. When the conversos migrated to Livorno and Pisa, and to northern port cities, they introduced a new element into the mix of composite Jewish settlements.

I wish to suggest one final point related to the intense Jewish mobility I have described: that Jewish intellectual life and cultural production were shaped to a great extent by peripatetic Jewish intellectuals who moved from place to place either because they were forced to move or also because of personal choice. This is not an easy claim to demonstrate but there appears to be a strong circumstantial case for making such a connection with respect to many prominent intellectual figures among early modern Jewry. Evidence of this plausible connection might include the following: the accelerated pace of writing in many languages; the emergence of new forms of literary creativity in law, kabbalah, belles lettres, medicine, history and biography, homiletics and more; or the concentration of Jews in itinerant professions such as medicine, performing arts, the rabbinate, and trade. Mobility also determined new linguistic enclaves. *Ashkenazim* spoke and wrote Yiddish in Venice, Amsterdam, as well as Poland-Lithuania, despite its strangeness among the majority of people living in these places. *Sephardim* spoke Ladino and published extensively in that language in a Turkish linguistic field, while conversos in Amsterdam assembled regularly in their newly adopted city for readings in Spanish and Portuguese and used these languages for communal business and literary composition rather than Dutch. Finally, mobility of persons went hand in hand with mobility of books. The printer, the proof setter, and the book dealer were highly mobile people whose business rested on their shuttling from place to place. In a society in constant movement, the publishing of books surely could accelerate changes in cultural patterns and in promoting new ideas while simultaneously preserving and storing the memory of the past and its traditions as an attempt, albeit elusive, to fix and stabilize the present.

## Communal Cohesion and Laicization

A second element in describing early modern Jewish culture is the emergence of powerful structures of Jewish self-government throughout Europe and the Middle East. In the Netherlands and Italy, in Germany, in the Ottoman Empire, and especially in eastern Europe, Jewish communities appear to have become more elaborate and complex as agencies representing their Jewish constituencies before host governments and as providers of educational and social services to their individual members. This powerful surge of communal development stands in sharp contrast to the decline and deterioration of communal structures in the modern period.

Jewish communal organization in the long history of the Jewish diaspora can be traced back to late antiquity and to the Middle Ages. The political and economic conditions under which Jewish self-government emerged; the recognition by local authorities of Jewish autonomy; the admission and exclusion of members; the range of educational and social services the Jewish community offered; and the division of powers between lay and rabbinic authorities are matters that confronted Jewish communities from their earliest beginnings. Yet the Jewish communities of early modern Europe were different in some major respects from those of previous eras. Jacob Katz long ago underscored the size of early modern structures in his famous sociological overview of the period.<sup>3</sup> His point of reference was the elaborate organization of the so-called Council of the Four Lands in Poland-Lithuania which clearly had no precedent in medieval ashkenazic society. Surely size was also a factor in considering Jewish life under Ottoman rule, or in the large territorial organizations governing Jewish life called *Landjudenschaften* in German lands, or in the emergence of particular forms of self-governance within western sephardic communities in Livorno or Amsterdam. Not only size but the longevity of these early modern organizations distinguishes them from the occasional medieval synods which temporarily brought smaller Jewish communities under one roof but quickly dissolved after their collective deliberations had ended.

Early modern Jewish communities were also different because of the new political and economic policies of early modern states, of absolutism and mercantilism, which helped shape their evolution and limited success. No simple correlation between early modern statecraft and the formation of Jewish communal life might adequately explain the variety of structures that emerged from Amsterdam to Istanbul. Nevertheless, the new political landscape of early modern Europe, its religious wars, the movement of populations, the rise of new governments hospitable to the influx of new immigrants, and the struggle for power between kings and noblemen are all relevant in understanding why early modern governments not only tolerated self-administered Jewish communities, but in certain instances even encouraged them to flourish. And because of these new circumstances, the great historians of Jewish communities—Simon Dubnow, Salo W. Baron, and Jacob



Katz—were right to privilege this era as the one of most full-scale and intense Jewish communal development.<sup>4</sup>

(p. 657) An overview of Jewish communal development across the European continent as well as the Ottoman Empire allows the historian to paint a common picture with distinct regional variations. The unique setting of the ghetto system created by Catholic authorities often strengthened and rejuvenated Jewish communal life in Italy despite their best intentions to the contrary. The converso leadership in Amsterdam, Livorno, Hamburg, and London established communities governed by both Jewish traditional values and mercantile commercial custom. Jewish communities in German lands were uniquely formed because of the existence of court Jews and territorial organizations initiated by local princes. The Ottoman Jewish community, though lacking official recognition, took full advantage of benign neglect to shape communal cohesiveness both on a national and local level. And the Jews of Poland-Lithuania were allowed the opportunity to form a gigantic federation of smaller communities, a government within a government unparalleled in Jewish history.

While each Jewish community forged constructive relationships with their host governments, no single formula can define them precisely as they ranged from the more interventionist case of the German principalities to the less invasive Ottoman government. Conditions also varied over time, as in the case of Poland, where the monarchy initially elected to appoint rabbis as royal officials but later lost its power to that of the magnates who then more directly shaped Jewish life. This was also the case in the Ottoman Empire with the rise of rabbinic power in the seventeenth century in contrast to the weaker status of rabbis in the sixteenth century. What we can then say, noting these obvious differences over time and place, is that the early modern period represented a culmination of Jewish communal development everywhere across the continent, emerging both because of the initiatives of strong Jewish leaders as well as the relatively tolerant policies of governments that recognized a certain political and economic utility in their continued existence.

At the same time, these elaborate communal structures did not necessarily bode well for the rabbinic leadership of the community who often found themselves in conflict with powerful lay leaders. They were often run by a small number of affluent families in an oligarchic and even despotic manner. In Italy, for example, despite the prominence of individual rabbis, the latter were generally beholden to the communities they served and to the wealthy families who dominated communal life, including the many confraternities enriching the social and cultural life of the ghettos. The prominence of wealthy merchants in shaping communal affairs also marked the collective life of Amsterdam, Hamburg, and London Jewries. The governing hierarchy of these communities scrupulously controlled the management of communal affairs and demonstrated a heightened sensitivity to the projection of a proper image and to proper collective demeanour before governmental authorities. In the Ottoman Empire, no chief rabbinate ever existed and the authority of the rabbis was always circumscribed by the dictates of Muslim law. Despite the growing power of the rabbis in the seventeenth century, their

authority ultimately declined. Jewish communal life was weakened by the creeping penetration of merchant colonies of conversos in Ottoman port cities such as Smyrna and economically powerful magnates continued to hold considerable power. The elaborate Jewish (p. 658) self-government of Poland-Lithuania emerging by the sixteenth century was strictly under lay, not rabbinic control. Communal rules and ordinances were not enacted by rabbinic authorities but by lay leaders who virtually controlled the Jewish communities. Some rabbis exercised power due to their exceptional expertise in Jewish law and their strong personalities, but more often than not they also derived their authority by virtue of their own affluence, either gained through birth or proper marriage, thus allowing them to become part of the oligarchic power structure themselves.

The implications of this general picture seem clear. The seeds of the crisis over rabbinic authority, usually associated with the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, can already be located in the sixteenth, at the very inception of powerful communal structures and at the very pinnacles of Jewish self-government and internal political life. The rabbinate was certainly not a spent institution in early modern Europe; it had not yet been drained of all its considerable legal and moral resources to direct the religious lives of the constituencies it served; and it certainly did not see itself as in crisis until the very end of this period. But its power had been eclipsed and rabbis were reluctantly obliged to function within a new reality of shared leadership with lay leaders for generations.

## Knowledge Explosion

The third element, and perhaps the most significant in defining an early modern Jewish culture, I call 'knowledge explosion'. By this I primarily mean both the impact of the printed book as well as the beginnings of university education for Jewish students. Although Jewish mobility explains in part the possibility of a shared cultural experience between disparate Jewish communities at great physical and psychological distance from one another, the mobility of books explains even more. Before print, no one could have conjured up the seemingly unprecedented merger of two legal traditions captured in the printing in Cracow in 1578-80 of the sephardic code of Jewish law of Joseph Karo, the *Shulhan Arukh* ('The Ordered Table'), accompanied by the *Mappah* ('The Table Cloth'), the ashkenazic marginal notes of Moses Isserles. And no one could have imagined the extraordinary layout of multiple commentaries from different eras and regions surrounding the core text of the Talmud and simultaneously appearing on the same page with it, or those of the rabbinic Bible, both first published by the Christian printer, Daniel Bomberg, in Venice in the first decades of the sixteenth century. As Elhanan Reiner has shown, the migration of these and other Hebrew books printed in Venice into eastern Europe created a crisis for the rabbinic elites of Poland-Lithuania. The printed text soon arrested the creative and open process of a fluid scribal culture, making the text canonical and not subject to accretions and modifications. The text became the ultimate

word, not the teacher, thus diminishing the authoritative capacity of the rabbi as exegete. In this new market of books originating in Venice, Amsterdam, and Constantinople, ashkenazic readers were exposed to the classics of the sephardic library, while eventually sephardic readers became aware of ashkenazic writing. Printing thus (p. 659) shattered the isolating hold of potent localized traditions and attitudes as one community became increasingly aware of a conversation taking place long distances away.<sup>5</sup>

Another effect of the printing revolution was the emergence of secondary elites—preachers, teachers, scribes, cantors—who exploited the printing press to publish cheap books and to publicize themselves and their views. This dissemination of new publications ultimately shattered the exclusivity and hegemony of the rabbis, opening up new reading audiences. Books printed in Yiddish and Ladino, two Jewish languages that emerged in the early modern era in this new age of print, accelerated even more the wide dissemination of books and authors and the growing literacy of less educated males and females.

In the case of Yiddish, a wide reading public emerged across the continent truly creating a common European-wide Jewish culture transcending localized communities and linking especially the West and the East. While Yiddish books had initially been published in Italy, by the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Amsterdam became the centre of Yiddish printing in the Jewish world. Attracted by the relative lack of censorship and by the liberal printing business that published books in many languages, it was not unusual for eastern European book dealers to travel to Amsterdam in order to publish their manuscripts and return home to sell their new library of printed books. This image of a Jew from Cracow travelling across the continent, with a variety of other Jewish merchants, to publish a Yiddish book in what had been the centre of the western sephardic diaspora is as good a snapshot as any of the actual existence of a trans-regional Jewish culture by the seventeenth century.

Ladino works in the Ottoman Empire began to appear considerably later than Yiddish ones but they too were widely distributed because of print and they helped to shape an entirely new Jewish reading public. Centuries after the first Hebrew books had been published in Istanbul in the late fifteenth century by the first generations of sephardic immigrants to the city, Ladino printing came into its own with the publication in 1730 of Jacob Ḥuli's *Me'am Lo'ez*, an encyclopedic Biblical commentary and distillation of sephardic Jewish culture. It was followed over the next century and a half by a flow of popular Jewish books attempting to educate and to popularize Jewish knowledge. Ladino works represented a clear acknowledgement by rabbinic leaders of the need to communicate in the vernacular with Jews lacking sophisticated Jewish knowledge.

Alongside the publication of Jewish books in Ladino and Yiddish was the steady accretion of books written in Western languages by Jews, demonstrating the need for Jewish authors to speak to Christian readers beyond the immediate community of their own co-religionists. By the seventeenth century, this development of publishing in the vernacular

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took on added momentum with the emergence of apologetic works written either to convince conversos to return to the Jewish fold or to counter a negative image of Jewish religion and culture emerging in print among certain Christian authors.

Christians also sought out books in Hebrew, accelerating considerably the market of Hebraica written both by Jews and by Christians and purchased by both communities. Long before the early modern period, Christian scholars had sought out Jewish learning but in the Renaissance and Reformation periods, their interest in (p. 660) Jewish texts, especially Biblical and kabbalistic ones, reached a new intensity. These intellectual and religious transformations in the study of Judaism by Christians were certainly enhanced and magnified by print. The first Hebrew books were printed in the last quarter of the fifteenth century first in Italy, and then in the Ottoman Empire. But eventually the centres of Christian printing of Hebrew books were concentrated north of the Alps in the German principalities, France, and the Netherlands. While the Italian and Ottoman Hebrew presses catered primarily to Jews, the northern presses focused on the needs of Christians, publishing, for the most part, works dealing with Biblical scholarship. In the case of Amsterdam, however, with its significant resources for Jewish publications often exported to the East, the distinction between Christian and Jewish presses becomes more confusing. In other centres of Christian printing in the North there existed a close correlation between the printing of Hebrew books and the presence of Hebrew professors at Protestant universities.

Christian Hebraism thus constituted an intellectual explosion fed by print and university learning; a Christian spiritual quest rooted in the essential notions of rebirth and reform propelling the intellectual and religious developments of the sixteenth century and beyond; and also an appropriation and aggrandizement of the Judaic element of Western civilization to be utilized and appreciated for Christians in their own right. As has been often remarked, the new Christian scholars were often infatuated with Jewish books with little regard for actual living and breathing Jews.

Print also represented a critical factor in modifying the very notion of what constitutes appropriate Jewish knowledge. Jewish intellectuals in dynamic cultural environments such as Mantua, Venice, Amsterdam, and Prague, were bombarded with new books in print, and like other readers, were encouraged to expand their cultural horizons, to integrate and correlate the vast range of sources and ideas now available to them with those of their own intellectual legacy. Eastern European Jewish intellectuals were less involved in contemporary literary, philosophical, and scientific currents than their counterparts to the south and west of them. Nevertheless, the boundaries between their local communities and the others were always porous because of the migration of books and the constant stream of travellers between eastern Europe, Italy, and western Europe.

Besides the knowledge explosion engendered by books, one precipitated through the unprecedented entrance of Jews and conversos into the university, starting with Padua in the sixteenth century, should also be noted. Exclusively studying medicine, the students found the university an enriching and life transforming experience, both in the sense of

the formal knowledge acquired and in the socializing process that inevitably emerged as Jews invaded what had previously been almost an exclusively Christian space. While print ultimately was the primary agent in bringing individual Jewish communities closer together and offering a modicum of uniformity among diverse local cultural traditions, the emerging Jewish medical community, consisting of graduates of medical schools eventually throughout much of Europe, also served to shape a common Jewish culture and a common Jewish identity.

### (p. 661) **Crisis of Authority**

I would call the fourth element of an early modern Jewish culture a crisis of authority, accompanied by the threat of heresy and enthusiasm, the latter term associated especially with trends prevalent across the larger European landscape during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I would define this crisis in the Jewish world as primarily precipitated by the messianic movement of Shabbetai Zevi (1626–76), called Sabbateanism, emerging in the second half of the seventeenth century though reaching a crescendo in the first half of the eighteenth.

Shabbetai Zevi's declaration of his messiahship in 1665–66 engendered an enormous reaction among followers and detractors alike. He was ultimately incarcerated and converted to Islam but, nevertheless, remained the focus of messianic aspirations within the Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire and throughout Europe well into the eighteenth century. The phenomenon of this strange messianic figure became the basis of a new antinomian and nihilistic ideology constructed especially by Nathan of Gaza (1643/4–80) and Abraham Cardoso (1626–1706), his chief disciples, which challenged the very foundations of normative rabbinic Judaism.

Gershom Scholem's masterful reconstruction of the history of Sabbateanism has dominated contemporary scholarship for many years but has recently been challenged by a younger generation of researchers, especially his insistence on seeing the roots of Sabbateanism as primarily an internal matter based primarily on the dissemination of the kabbalistic ideas of Isaac Luria and his disciples of the sixteenth century and generally isolated from the larger European context where it can be meaningfully linked. Some have argued that Lurianic kabbalah was not particularly messianic in the first place, that it was not widely diffused by the late seventeenth century, and that mystical ideas, notwithstanding their usefulness to Nathan of Gaza and Abraham Cardoso in justifying the messianic apostasy of their hero, could not adequately explain the mass hysteria of a popular movement. Several recent historians have underscored the reception of Shabbetai Zevi within the Christian world, its intertwined connections with apocalyptic anticipations of seventeenth-century Christians, and the obvious and explicit connections between Sabbateanism and converso messianism. These latter connections are most obvious in the writings of the Sabbatean leader, Abraham Cardoso, former converso and

leading publicist of the movement, who portrayed Shabbetai Zevi as a converso himself living with two separate identities, and constructing a syncretistic messianic ideology based on elements of both religions.<sup>6</sup>

By the eighteenth century, with the fading memory of the apostate messiah, the rise of another messianic movement in Poland associated with the infamous Jacob Frank (1726–91), and the decline of Sabbateanism within the Ottoman orbit, the history of this movement and subsequent witch hunt to root out Sabbataean iconoclasts in all corners of the European world can be more readily explained by recourse to the notions of enthusiasm and anti-enthusiasm.<sup>7</sup> When the alleged Sabbatean prophet Nehemiah Hayon (c. 1650–c. 1730) evoked an unprecedented alarm among a remarkably (p. 662) impressive number of rabbis writing from all over Europe at the very beginning of the era, the charges surrounding him had less to do with his personal connection with Shabbetai Zevi and his ideology and more to do with his pretension to understand the divine essence as expressed in a Trinitarian form, that is, to understand the Godhead exclusively through his own innate powers. Similarly, the other great internal schisms associated with Sabbateanism in the eighteenth century, the accusations levelled against Moses Hayyim Luzzatto (1707–46) and Jonathan Eybeschütz (1690–1764), were primarily concerned with their explicit or implicit challenge to the authoritative structure of the rabbinate and the anxiety they and their followers generated over this perceived diminution of its actual power. Luzzatto's profile as a self-proclaimed prophet and the bearer of divine illumination could not have failed to evoke the consternation of the same rabbis who had objected to Hayon.

The controversy surrounding the rabbinic figure Jonathan Eybeschütz emerged from accusations of his Sabbatean leanings voiced by his rabbinic arch-rival, Jacob Emden (1697–1776). This complex altercation involved a clash of strong personalities, professional jealousy, the zealotry and obsessive behaviour of Emden, and even elements of syncretism with Christianity apparently present in Eybeschütz's own theological proclivities and those of some of his followers. As in the cases of Hayon and Luzzatto, the connections between Eybeschütz and the messiahship of Shabbetai Zevi were tenuous at best. Rather, as all three cases exemplify, Sabbateanism in its eighteenth-century dimensions was simply a code word, a convenient label for enthusiasm, heresy, and the undermining of rabbinic authority.

The last and most radical of Sabbatean prophets, Jacob Frank, connected his own pedigree more directly to Shabbetai Zevi and articulated his own nihilistic messianic aspirations. But here too the inherent danger of the Frankists that persisted well into the next century was primarily their subversion of rabbinic norms and rabbinic authority. The Frankist sect negated the very essence of religious authority claimed by rabbis and church officials alike. Frankism simply confirmed in a most vivid and dramatic manner the initial suspicions articulated by the most prominent rabbinic adversaries of Sabbateanism, Jacob Sasportas (1610–98), Moses Hagiz (1671–c. 1750), and Jacob Emden

that the menace of Sabbatean enthusiasm imperilled their very standing and legitimacy as religious leaders as well as the very foundations of their religious community.

Sabbateanism and anti-Sabbateanism and their vigilant rabbinic crusaders, as pan-European phenomena, underscore more than anything else the shaping of a truly early modern Jewish culture through books, emissaries, and a vast network of communication between advocates and detractors. Whatever else Sabbateanism engendered among early modern Jews, it created a real sense of their relationship to each other, their need to address either positively or negatively a predicament commonly shared by all and transcending regional boundaries. One might even speak about the emergence of a common front of 'orthodoxy' engendered by the anxiety created by Sabbatean heretics throughout the entire continent. Ironically, the European-wide rabbinic crusade to vilify Nehemiah Ḥayon and the publication of his heretical book in the early decades of the eighteenth century ultimately revealed not only a united front against a perceived (p. 663) enemy of the faith, but a common culture and a common fate. Sabbateanism left no doubt in the minds of its opponents that a threat to one rabbi or community was ultimately a threat to the entire fabric of Jewish faith and institutional life.

There is little evidence to suggest an equivalent contemporary reaction on the part of the Jewish community to the heresy of Benedict Spinoza as compared to that of Shabbetai Zevi. However, the common conditions under which Shabbetai Zevi and Benedict Spinoza emerged in the second half of the seventeenth century and the common results they achieved need to be stressed. Both were patently linked to the converso experience; Sabbateanism and Spinozism in general were nurtured in Amsterdam itself; and both generated ideologies that challenged the legitimacy of rabbinic norms and rabbinic authority. In the end, both converge in interesting ways although it is impossible to weigh them equally as factors in the collapse and decline of rabbinical authority, at least before the late eighteenth century. The connections between this Jewish crisis and the larger social, political, and economic crises of European society as a whole described by European historians also appear to be quite opaque. Nevertheless, Jews and Christians living in early modern Europe, most notably their religious and political leadership, seem to have shared a common perception of living through a genuine era of crisis which they could neither control nor arrest.

## Mingled Identities

The fifth and final element in my presentation of the constituent parts of a transnational Jewish culture in early modern Europe I term ‘the blurring of religious identities’ or ‘mingled identities’. By this I mean the recurrent and conspicuous boundary crossings between Judaism and Christianity (and sometimes between Judaism and Islam, as in the case of the Dönme, disciples of Shabbetai Zevi who followed his example by converting to Islam) on the part of a small but conspicuous number of Jews and even Christians. When Jewish identity became a matter of personal volition rather than imposed communal will; when apostasy was advocated as an agency of messianic renewal; when certain Christians attempted to recover their spiritual roots through an intense exposure to Judaism while certain Jews found social intimacy with Christians and spiritual nourishment in their faith more attractive than ever, the possibilities for Jewish–Christian syncretistic thinking and praxis were significantly enhanced. Decades before the late eighteenth-century Enlightenment, Jews and Christians were encountering each other in public and private places, in intellectual forums, and in radical and spiritualist movements. And certain individuals were actually shaping a personal identity drawn simultaneously from each of the faith communities. My goal is to describe succinctly in this section the simultaneous appearance of four interrelated groups: conversos, Sabbateans, Christian Hebraists, and individual converts. They each emerge as discrete circles but ultimately converge to create a new complexity, an utter confusion of confessional loyalties and religious identities within early modern culture.

**(p. 664)** The religious and cultural ambiguity of Jewish self-definition first became an acute problem in early modern Europe with the reintegration of conversos into Jewish life in Italy, Northern Europe, and the Ottoman Empire. For New Christians who attempted to return to Judaism in the seventeenth century, their *rite de passage* was neither simple nor complete. They retained consciously or unconsciously identifiable attitudes and associations with their distant past, both religious notions and ethnic loyalties, which, in most cases, they could not fully dislodge. For New Christians who exited the Iberian peninsula but hesitated to publicly acknowledge the Jewish faith, lingering in a transitional state between Christianity and Judaism, their religious and ethnic perceptions of themselves were even more complex. For some, it was possible, even desirable, to return to Spain and Portugal if opportunity permitted.

The new Jewish identity of the conversos, whether leaning to Jewish or back to Christian orthodoxy, or wavering between the two poles, was unique because it was based on choice, on personal autonomy. Neither the Catholic Church nor the Inquisition nor the rabbinic authorities could impose it from above. A converso strove and often succeeded, either publicly or clandestinely, in creating his or her own self-definition. The returning New Christians also created their own communal structures and secured unique political arrangements with local authorities in Pisa, Livorno, Amsterdam, or Hamburg, often noticeably different than those of organized Jewish communities elsewhere. They were



highly mobile, engaged in long-distance trading, multilingual, with often competing cultural loyalties. But above all, they were the first Jews to determine their own religious identity, the various components of faith and praxis they would choose to accept or reject, and whether to believe in any form of monotheistic faith or not. The conversos had been victimized by a Catholic Inquisition that could not tolerate their religious ambiguity. Rabbinic leaders faced with consternation this same ambiguity when these individuals attempted to return to the Jewish community. While most proclaimed themselves Jewish, many could not easily adjust to traditional norms and practices as obnoxious to them as those they had abandoned in Catholicism, or they remained indifferent to any religious ritual or doctrine whatever its origin. Others clung exclusively to a notion of ethnic or racial identity. Resembling notions of their own oppressors, they viewed themselves as members of the 'Naçao', distinguishable from their ashkenazic counterparts and from those Jews who saw their identity as primarily or exclusively confessional.

The Sabbateans too presented a new challenge in their own constructions of mingled identities. Resting on the authority of their alleged Jewish messiah, the Sabbateans converted to Islam (the Dönme) or to Christianity (the Frankists). In a bizarre manner, Jewish messianism was thus restructured to embrace its sister rival religions. The messiah had come to save the world by not only overturning all rabbinic authority but in reconfiguring Judaism in such a way as to reintegrate it with Christianity and Islam. The world could not be redeemed for Jewish believers without the direct mediation and involvement of the other two religious faiths. Sabbateanism, in its most radical manifestations, thus constituted a complete redrawing of traditional Jewish norms and beliefs as well as the breaching of conventional religious and cultural boundaries.

(p. 665) The religious identities and ideological agendas of Abraham Cardoso and Nathan of Gaza, as well as Barukhyah Russo (d. 1720), the leader of the Dönme, and Jacob Frank and his followers provide ample evidence of the integration of Christian and Muslim elements into Jewish messianic thought and activity. Besides offering a theological justification for Shabbetai Zevi's apostasy and an open invitation for widespread defection from normative Judaism, antinomianism, and even nihilism, each of these outspoken apostles of Sabbateanism successfully fused their newly constructed Jewish beliefs with others taken from Christianity, and to a lesser extent Islam, in often bizarre formulations abhorrent not only to Jewish religious leaders but also to their Christian and Muslim counterparts.

Along with the conversos and Sabbateans, Christian Hebraists might also be associated with boundary crossings and religious intermingling. As we have already seen, Christian Hebraism in early modern Europe constituted a new dimension of Jewish-Christian relations. It was first and foremost an intellectual explosion of dramatic proportions fostered in the print shop, in the university classroom, and even in the public press. But it also had a deeper spiritual dimension: a Christianity in search of the roots of its own identity. By gaining a fuller access to the riches of Jewish learning and spirituality, Christians were enriching and enlivening their own intellectual and spiritual worlds.

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Was the new Christian Hebraist a syncretist? Did his intense preoccupation with Jewish texts diminish his Christian loyalties while bringing him closer to a Jewish core of his identity? There is no simple and unequivocal answer to such questions. Christian scholars who devoted their lifetimes to the study of sacred scriptures, Jewish languages, ancient Jewish history and literature, and even, in some cases, the ethnographic study of Jewish customs and ceremonies could hardly be motivated by intellectual reasons alone. Some indeed saw their responsibility to reclaim an authentic reading of the Hebrew Bible for Christians; others hoped to locate in their study the original, pure, and unpolluted version of Christianity practised by Jesus; some were smitten by Jewish forms of esotericism which they hoped to appropriate to replenish the wells of Christian spirituality; while others even believed that early rabbinic Jewish culture and literature were the principal keys in deciphering New Testament prophecies. Whether the new breed of Christian Hebraists actually became more 'Jewish' in the process of their prodigious Jewish learning or not, they were often perceived as such, as Judaizers whose seemingly excessive exposure to Jewish sources had brought them unwittingly closer to Jews and Judaism.

There was yet another group of highly complex individuals who were literally 'boundary crossers', moving from Judaism to Christianity. These were the conspicuous numbers of Jews who chose to be baptized and joined, sometimes quite publicly, a Christian denomination, either Protestant or Catholic. We know especially of a large number of converts in Germany but significant albeit smaller numbers are easily located elsewhere in Europe. The individual convert, unlike the converso who generally left Catholicism for some form of new Jewish identity, was usually engaged in the reverse crossing—from Judaism to Christianity. Whether motivated by economic, (p. 666) social, or religious reasons, or simply the victim of aggressive missionaries, the convert from Judaism had to encounter an uncertain future where economic benefit or social acceptance or religious credibility in the newly acquired faith were often in doubt. The surest path for the more intellectually inclined was to become a so-called expert in Jewish affairs, a living testimony of the fallacies of the Jewish and the truths of the Christian faith. In assuming the role of Hebrew teacher and authority in Jewish texts, the convert often found himself in an uncertain and uneasy relationship with the Christian Hebraist who presumed to acquire a similar role by virtue of his consummate learning in Judaism.

The full history of all four groups is still to be told. We have considerable inquisitional testimonies about conversos who could adopt and discard different religious identities either out of conviction or lack of it, or for economic motives. There is scattered evidence of Jewish collaboration with radical Christian groups and rich documentation of Jewish converts and their ambiguous identities in early modern Germany, Great Britain, and elsewhere. The complex writings of Christian Hebraists, especially kabbalists who appropriated esoteric Jewish notions in reconstructing their own Christian identities, reveal even more. This fluid and ambiguous state of religious affiliation among all of these groups, and their constantly changing combinations and collaborations represent a central feature of early modern Jewish culture. These new expressions of religious and cultural identity surely reflect the weakened and fragile state of the Jewish and Christian

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communities and their religious leadership by the seventeenth century as well as the prominent search for spiritual meaning among members of both faiths in an unstable social and political climate.

## Some Final Thoughts

Here then are the five elements which might allow us to describe the early modern period as a meaningful chronological unit for Jewish cultural history. These factors also helped to create, I would contend, a genuine consciousness of belonging to a worldwide Jewish community transcending local or regional boundaries. Mobility made Jews intensely aware of Jews from other lands and from other cultural settings. Complex communal organizations administering increasingly expansive areas, such as those in eastern and central Europe, naturally facilitated and encouraged constant contact and engagement with their counterparts across Europe and beyond. The printing presses broke down cultural barriers, enlarging the horizons of Jews even in the most remote and isolated of regions. The Sabbateans created complex networks of emissaries and followers over vast areas. Their campaign to organize a movement extending from the Middle East to the far corners of the West evoked in turn strong oppositional structures of rabbis and communal officials who were equally intense in a common cause against the 'heretics' crossing political and cultural borders. The mixed identities of conversos, (p. 667) Sabbateans, Christian Hebraists, and individual converts, whatever their actual number and wherever they lived, posed a universal threat to those protectors of the communal norms and upholders of traditional praxis and belief. They were menacing to the very foundations of the entire Jewish community, and its leadership everywhere was forced to deal with a new reality destabilizing the long-established boundaries demarcating one religion from the other.

Accordingly, the markers described in this chapter signal both a distinctive age and cultural experience for Jews living in the early modern era as well as the presence of a vast community linked by common values, common circumstances, and common challenges to its very existence. These shared experiences emerge against a reality of cultural, social, and political diversity among Jewish sub-cultures. Early modern Jewish life was predicated on profound local and regional differences reflected in distinct languages, customs, political structures, and ritual life. But within this heterogeneity of recognizable local traditions and practices, there emerged a clear sense of connectedness. Jews were members of Polish, German, Ottoman, sephardic, and Italian communities while simultaneously in contact with and aware of their affiliation with Jews everywhere. In times of crisis and stress, such as that engendered by the Sabbatean heresy, this feeling was especially magnified.

Through a thorough examination of these markers across time and space, it might be possible to grasp more fully the unique nature of the Jewish cultural experience in early modern Europe, an experience both unique to the Jewish communities across the continent and simultaneously one shared with other European peoples. Finally, through the project of describing an early modern Jewish culture, we are in a better position to understand the modern era for Jews, its continuities and discontinuities with the period that precedes it. At the very least, historians of the modern Jewish experience can no

longer study their period in isolation from what immediately preceded it. Mapping early modern Jewish culture provides an invaluable context and perspective for appreciating what modernity actually entailed.

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### Notes:

(1.) This chapter relies heavily on my own recent interpretation of this period entitled *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton, NJ, 2010). It can also be read profitably with my recent bibliographical essay, 'Early Modern Jewish History', *Oxford Bibliographies Online: Jewish Studies*, (2012), which refers amply to recent scholarship on each of the five sections that follow below and more. Accordingly, I have annotated this chapter very lightly.

(2.) Since my own dating of early modernity differs from that of the rest of this volume, it requires a word of explanation. If mobility, the radical shifts in population, and the subsequent displacement and restructuring of Jewish life they engendered represent primary factors in the shaping of Jewish culture in this era (as I argue immediately below), then 1492 represents a plausible beginning, although one should acknowledge that the first waves of ashkenazic migration from Germanic lands can be dated even much earlier.

I also recognize the impact of the Renaissance and Reformation on the construction of early modern Jewish culture in suggesting this dating. Accordingly, mobility first set in motion on a large scale in 1492, together with the impact of the Renaissance and the Reformation on Jewish culture and on Christian attitudes towards Judaism, all suggest the beginnings of a new and distinctive era of Jewish culture emerging by the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. The end of this era for Jewish culture, as I describe it, more or less corresponds with the chronology of this volume so it is not argued here, but see my more elaborate discussion in *Early Modern Jewry*, ch. 6, where I consider it fully in relation to the beginnings of the Haskalah and the inception of the modern era for Jews.

(3.) Jacob Katz, *Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages* (New York, 1961) (retranslated and expanded by Bernard Cooperman (New York, 1993)).

(4.) Simon Dubnov, *Weltgeschichte des jüdischen Volkes von seinen Uranfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (10 vols., Berlin, 1925–29); Salo W. Baron, *The Jewish Community: Its History and Structure to the American Revolution* (3 vols.; Philadelphia, 1942–48).

(5.) Elhanan Reiner, 'The Ashkenazic Elite at the Beginning of the Modern Era: Manuscript versus Printed Text', in Gershon Hundert, ed., *Jews in Early Modern Poland-Polin*, 10 (1997), 85–98; Elhanan Reiner, 'The Attitude of Ashkenazi Society to the New Science in the Sixteenth Century', *Science in Context*, 10 (1997), 589–603; and Elhanan

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Reiner, 'Transformations in the Polish and Ashkenazic Yeshivot during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and the Dispute over Pilpul, (Hebrew)', in *Ke-Minhag Ashkenaz ve-Polin: Sefer Yovel le-Chone Shmeruk* (Jerusalem, 1989), 9-80.

(6.) I cannot offer full references here but see, for example, the following, beginning with Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah 1626-1676* (Princeton, NJ, 1973); Matt Goldish, *The Sabbatean Prophets* (Cambridge, MA, 2004); Moshe Idel, 'One from a Town, Two From a Clan, the Diffusion of Lurianic Kabbala and Sabbateanism: A Re-evaluation', *Jewish History*, 7 (1993), 79-104; Jacob Barnai, *Shabta'ut: Hebetim Hevrat'i'im* (Jerusalem, 2000); and Yehudah Liebes, 'Sabbatean Messianism', in Yehudah Liebes, ed., *Studies in Jewish Myth and Jewish Messianism* (Albany, NY, 1993), 93-106.

(7.) On this, see Michael Heyd, *Be Sober and Reasonable: Science, Medicine and the Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden, 1995).

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