Looking Backward and Forward: Rethinking Modernity in the Light of Early Modernity

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Abstract
Given its composite nature, *The Cambridge History of Early Modern Judaism* cannot easily stake out a single authoritative position on what early modern Jewish culture and society means in its totality. Taking as a whole the variegated perspectives presented elsewhere in this volume, and despite the strong hands of the editors in organizing a coherent exposition of the period, it is virtually impossible to expect one unified viewpoint to emerge. Without some notion of what the whole represents, however, one is hard pressed to suggest in what ways this epoch is continuous or discontinuous with the period that follows it — that is, the modern period itself.

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

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THE CHALLENGES OF WRITING A HISTORY OF EARLY MODERN JEWRY

Given its composite nature, *The Cambridge History of Early Modern Judaism* cannot easily stake out a single authoritative position on what early modern Jewish culture and society means in its totality. Taking as a whole the variegated perspectives presented elsewhere in this volume, and despite the strong hands of the editors in organizing a coherent exposition of the period, it is virtually impossible to expect one unified viewpoint to emerge. Without some notion of what the whole represents, however, one is hard pressed to suggest in what ways this epoch is continuous or discontinuous with the period that follows it – that is, the modern period itself.

As a mere contributor to this large collection of essays, and having published a book that purports to offer a broad interpretation of the entire period,¹ I would like to venture beyond the particular portraits offered by my distinguished colleagues and suggest how I would map this entire period. With this blueprint in mind, I might then be in a better position to offer some additional reflections on the meaning of modernity in the light of early modernity. But first, it might be useful to suggest why there have been so few attempts in the past to offer an overarching synthetic interpretation of the early modern period that transcends the particular narratives of specific regions, personalities, or themes.

The reluctance to offer a comprehensive, transregional portrait of Jewish culture and society in early modern Europe is attributable, I have argued,

¹ David B. Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton, 2010). While I have drawn heavily from parts of this book in writing this chapter, some of my formulations here represent a further stage of my thinking, stimulated in part by the numerous reactions to the book during the past several years.
to at least three major challenges which have inhibited others from attempting to do seriously what only one historian has previously attempted. I refer to Jonathan Israel who first offered a comprehensive portrait of the entire period, arguing for the first time that early modern Jewish history needed to be understood as a distinct epoch, distinguishable from both the medieval and modern periods.²

Prior to the appearance of Israel’s book, historians of the Jewish experience, such as Heinrich Graetz, Simon Dubnov, Jacob Katz, Shmuel Ettinger, and Ben-Zion Dinur, had focused almost exclusively on the periodization of the modern period. Graetz even considered the so-called dark ages for Jews to be not the European Middle Ages—which he viewed more positively, along with other nineteenth-century historians—but the period immediately preceding the emancipatory era—that is, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. This position was first challenged by Salo W. Baron in a classic essay as early as 1928. While Jacob Katz focused primarily on the period now conventionally called “the early modern,” he never utilized the term, nor did he display any awareness of an early modern era genuinely distinct from the Middle Ages.³

For Baron, and later Gershom Scholem and Yosef H. Yerushalmi, certain “modern” developments could actually be located in European Jewish societies long before the Enlightenment and Emancipation. Baron located modernist tendencies among the Italian and Dutch Jewish communities adumbrating—but long preceding—those of German Jewry in the era of Mendelssohn and the Berlin Haskalah. Scholem saw an incipient modernity in the challenge to normative Judaism posed by the Sabbatean movement, while Yerushalmi labeled conversos returning to the Jewish fold in the seventeenth century as the first modern Jews.⁴ But Jonathan Israel


⁴ On Baron’s position, see his *Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York, 1937), II, 205–10; and III, 139 n. 13. This was elaborated upon by his student Isaac Barzilay in “The Italian and Berlin Haskalah (Parallels and Differences),” *Proceedings of the American
was clearly uninterested in merely locating the origins of modernity in an earlier era or in tracing the process of modernization back to its earliest beginnings. He attempted instead to describe an autonomous early modern era whose distinguishing marks were not identical with those of the modern.

Proceeding beyond the partial and limited reflections of his predecessors to offer the first comprehensive portrait of social and intellectual developments in the early modern era across the European continent, Israel’s accomplishments were obviously formidable. He produced a fascinating and wide-ranging narrative, offering an impressive mastery of detail while situating the Jewish experience within the contours of western civilization as a whole. The challenge Jewish historians have faced since the appearance of this book is how to question some of its conclusions without necessarily dislodging its well-deserved and influential position in scholarly literature. While Israel had made an important case for a distinct early modern period for Jewish history and ably described its economic and political foundations, his understanding of Jewish culture was deficient in many respects when he first published his book in 1985. Subsequently, the new explosion of scholarship over the last three decades has made his reconstruction appear even more out-dated and incomplete. Israel’s characterization of Jewish social and cultural history as primarily reflective and derivative of general trends located in non-Jewish society also requires revision and re-evaluation. The history of Jewish society and culture in early modern Europe is more than a mirror of the Christian world and needs to be described more accurately and more comprehensively than Israel has done. It also needs to be viewed simultaneously from both an external and an internal perspective.

The second challenge is that offered by historians who prefer to speak about the early modern period exclusively from the vantage point of a particular region or locality they study. I refer to such works as the history of Italian Jewry in the Renaissance by Robert Bonfil; Gershon Hundert’s overview of Polish–Lithuanian Jewry in the eighteenth century; the comprehensive portraits of western Sephardim in Amsterdam offered by Yosef

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*Academy for Jewish Research* 29 (1960–1), 17–54. On this position, see Adam Shear, “The Italian and Berlin Haskalah’ Revisited,” in Shmuel Feiner and David Ruderman, eds., *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 6 (2007), special issue on “Early Modern Culture and Haskalah – Reconsidering the Borderlines of Modern Jewish History,” 49–66. For more on Baron’s position, see below. On Yerushalmi and the modernity of the *converso* experience, see Yosef Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto* (New York, 1971), 44. On the modernity of the Sabbatean movement, see, for example, Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays in Jewish Spirituality* (New York, 1971), 140–1.
Kaplan, Miriam Bodian, and Daniel Swetschinski; or the synthetic essays of Yosef Hacker on the Jews of the Ottoman Empire — to mention only a few examples. The overarching assumption of their work and that of others is that Jewish history in this period can best be reconstructed on a regional or micro-level. Its variegated histories, according to this perspective, are radically singular, diverse, heterogeneous, lacking common features that might link them together. The general thrust of these recent narratives of early modern Jewish history is to ignore, or even to deny, the possibility that a distinct early modern pan-European Jewish cultural experience can ever be meaningfully described. Without invalidating the important work of writing local and regional histories, I wish to assert that such a broader description is possible and necessary.

The third challenge is the one posed by both European and world historians who have grappled with the slippery term “early modernity.” There is, for many historians, some discomfort in relying on this fashionable and convenient label for designating the period from the end of the Middle Ages to the modern age, which is commonly evoked but never clearly defined. Thus, in the oft-quoted words of Randolph Starn: “Early, partly, sometimes, maybe modern, early modern is a period for our period’s discomfort with periodization.” There is also the more formidable challenge in overcoming the teleological progression from pre-modern to modern which the term “early modern” surely implies. The notion of early modernity has been easily linked to the paradigm of modernization that so long dominated historical writing, where “modern” is deemed capitalistic, industrial, urban, individualistic, bureaucratized, secular, disenchanted, and scientific, while the pre-modern has been deemed feudal, preindustrial, agrarian, religious, and magical. Early modernity is, then, that in-between period that displays some, albeit not all, nascent characteristics of modernity, such as secularization, rationalization, individualization, the rise of the middle class, as well as new scientific discoveries. Such an understanding of early modernity as a critical stage of the triumphant

5 See Robert Bonfil, Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy (Berkeley, 1994); Gershon Hundert, Jews in Poland—Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century: A Genealogy of Modernity (Berkeley, 2004); Yosef Kaplan, An Alternative Path to Modernity: The Sephardic Diaspora in Western Europe (Leiden, 2000); Miriam Bodian, Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation: Conversos and Community in Early Modern Amsterdam (Bloomington, 1997); Daniel Swetschinski, Reluctant Cosmopolitans: The Portuguese Jews of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam (London, 2000); and, for example, Joseph Hacker, “The Chief Rabbinate in the Ottoman Empire in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries” [Hebrew], Zion 49 (1984), 225–63. In the appendix to my Early Modern Jewry (214–20), I discuss especially the work of Robert Bonfil, Yosef Kaplan, Moshe Rosman, Gershon Hundert, David Sorkin, Shmuel Feiner, and Lois Dubin.
march of civilization from one stage of development to an allegedly higher one is obviously inadequate.  

When the label “early modernity” is employed by world historians confronting the radical diversity of the regions they study, their comparative search for elements common to all societies often appears superficial and reductive, and even a distortion when viewing the entire globe, either explicitly or implicitly, from a Europeanist perspective. I wish to find a way to overcome the so-called early modern muddle in writing specifically about the Jewish experience.

Beyond these three challenges, one might even question on a more basic level the need for the historian to offer elaborate schemes of periodization in the first place. Any attempt at periodization invites the detailed criticisms of specialists eager to discredit any facile generalizations about the past. We undoubtedly live in an age where periodization schemes have gone out of fashion since they suggest an effort to essentialize, and it is much easier and more certain to focus on the particular than the sweeping explanations of larger historical units.

PROPOSING THE MARKERS OF A TRANSREGIONAL EARLY MODERN JEWISH CULTURE

In light of the above, proposing the need for a bold construction of Jewish cultural history in the early modern period might appear to be highly unrewarding. In presenting this agenda, nevertheless, I wish to claim that historians, in search of useful knowledge, are required at times to step back from their narrow studies, to explore the wider and deeper meaning of an elusive historical past, to uncover not merely a Jewish history specific to a Polish context or an Italian or Ottoman one, but a history of the Jews and their cultural legacy as a whole. There is clearly a potential danger in such an endeavor of distorting or misconstruing the past by imposing upon it the preoccupations of the present. Yet the project of describing a transnational Jewish culture in early modern Europe still remains useful in linking, in some sense, disparate communities and, more significantly, disparate historiographical traditions rarely in contact or in conversation with each other.

Accordingly, I wish to describe, as best I can, the larger patterns of cultural formation affecting early modern Jewry as a whole. Cultural


7 I treat these historians in the appendix to Early Modern Jewry, 220–6.
formation for me implies more than “pure” intellectual developments, a history of Jewish ideas, literary texts, and authors. Rather my focus is on the study of the interconnections between intellectual creativity and the political, social, and technological conditions shaping Jewish life in this era. Thus, my focus is on neither a series of readings of individual authors nor even an examination of the general trends of literary production with which Jewish intellectuals were engaged, but rather a broader exploration of ideas and intellectual achievements in their social and political contexts.⁸

In searching for larger patterns, I do not expect to efface the specificities and singularities of the subcultures of Jewish life that other historians have carefully described. Nor do I intend to offer a new master narrative superseding their own individual interpretations. Instead, I propose only another interpretive layer, a perspective on their work that emphasizes connections, contacts, and conversations over time and across specific localities. In this I am especially indebted to the work of Jerry Bentley and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, among others, and their employment respectively of the related concepts of cultural exchange and “connected” histories in addressing the meaning of early modernity for world history at large. These concepts might indeed provide a useful vocabulary in speaking about the variegated Jewish experiences of the early modern period. Connected histories recognize and appreciate disparate local traditions and cultural developments rather than obscuring or obliterating their uniqueness. By defining this era on the basis of intense communication and exposure to other groups and communities, the historian might be better able to speak about a common cultural experience while recognizing the perpetuation of distinct regional and local identities. Accordingly, like Subrahmanyam, I wish to highlight the dialectical relationship between local conditions and continental or even global patterns, and to acknowledge the possible tension between them, but also to insist that looking at the local and specific from the perspective of connected histories is useful and productive in reconstructing this multi-faceted period.⁹

⁸ I would be the first to acknowledge my preference for intellectual/cultural history over social history and the history of everyday life, or urban history over the history of rural Jewish settlement. By stating this preference, I acknowledge my own strengths and limitations. And I do not suggest these other histories are any less significant. But I would argue that the five categories I describe below do not apply only to intellectuals and elite groups in Jewish society. In speaking about mobility, communal cohesion, knowledge explosion, rabbinic crisis, and mingled identities, I speak of phenomena with wide-ranging impact on elites and non-elites alike.

⁹ Jerry H. Bentley, “Early Modern Europe and the Early Modern World,” in Charles H. Parker and Jerry H. Bentley, eds., Between the Middle Ages and Modernity: Individual and
fragmented by disparate localized narratives neither satisfies intellectually nor adequately describes the larger picture that might emerge if the sources and their modern-day reconstructions are allowed to connect and to speak with each other.

I consider five elements which might allow me to describe the era as a whole. Each element needs to be examined over the entire period and across regional boundaries to assess its significance as a marker of a newly emerging Jewish cultural experience. These categories overlap, but to my mind they offer us a most promising beginning in speaking about a connected early modern Jewish culture. They also offer an outline for charting an agenda for the future study of the field.

I would be the first to acknowledge that these markers are tentative at best, that they may even describe inadequately and incompletely the larger landscape I wish to define, and that some of the factors affected some people more than others. Nevertheless, I have yet to discover a better way of characterizing the formation of a common Jewish culture whose constituent parts were connected to each other in the early modern period. For the time being, they represent for me the most meaningful rubrics in speaking about the shared historical experience of early modern Jewry. Perhaps these five factors should be regarded as primarily tentative proposals, certainly open-ended and preliminary to the further discussion, research, and interpretation that my own reconstruction might hopefully generate. I have no objection if these five elements are corrected, revised, and expanded in the future, based on new insights from other fields or new research on specific localities still inadequately studied by scholars up to now.10


Moshe Rosman (“Early Modern Mingling,” Jewish Review of Books [Fall 2010], 31–2) has rightfully suggested a sixth element which I think deserves serious attention: the iteration of new expressions of traditional texts and forms. This element might be subsumed partially under the rubric of “knowledge explosion,” and is related to the new printing of traditional literatures – legal and homiletical. But it also deserves more scrutiny in its own right. Clearly one of the great weaknesses of contemporary scholarship in this period (and in others) is its lack of serious attention to rabbinic learning and literature on the part of cultural historians. Rabbinic literature is often studied by legal specialists hardly attuned to the context of broad cultural developments. There are
I propose accordingly the following five primary components of the early modern experience for Jews:

1. An accelerated mobility leading to enhanced contacts between Jews and other Jews of differing backgrounds, traditions, and even languages, and between Jews and non-Jews; the strains and stresses these contacts engendered leading both to rapid cultural change and reactionary conservatism. I have in mind the mobility of large numbers of émigrés expelled from their places of origin and forced to seek refuge in new and alien environments, a condition especially noticeable in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but less so in the eighteenth century. But I also refer to the mobility of individuals, especially secondary elites, peripatetic scholars, book dealers, peddlers, restless intellectuals, a relatively constant movement noticeable throughout the entire period and in almost every Jewish community of early modern Europe.

2. A heightened sense of communal cohesiveness throughout all Jewish settlements, reaching an apex in the remarkable Council of Four Lands, the overarching self-government of eastern European Jewry as a whole. Such communal structures often reveal a striking tendency: the increasing decline of rabbinic authority and the rising power of lay oligarchies, although local variations need to be carefully noted. They also raise the intriguing question of the extent to which their existence was a direct function of the conscious policy of the political states that supported them.

3. A knowledge explosion precipitated by the technology of the printing press, but also by other factors such as a growing interest in Jewish books on the part of Christian readers, an expanded curriculum of Jewish learning, and the conspicuous entrance of Jewish elites into the university. This general transformation, more than all the others, seems to be constant and repercussive throughout the entire period and needs to be seen in relation to the factors of mobility and social mixing already mentioned above.

4. A subsequent crisis of rabbinic authority, engendered by many factors, including the previous three, and often expressed through active messianism, mystical prophecy, radical enthusiasm, and heresy. While manifest throughout the entire period, it is most acute in the late
seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and leaves its mark in some way on all Jewish communities. It also precipitates a counter-reaction on the part of the rabbinic establishment which we might refer to as the emergence of a united front of “orthodoxy,” a term conventionally associated in Jewish history with the nineteenth century.

5. The blurring of religious identities, a factor intimately connected to the previous one, and most prominent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I refer specifically to the emergence of the conversos and their attempts to re-enter the Jewish community; the boundary crossings of Sabbateans between Judaism, Islam, and Christianity; the paths of individual Jewish converts to Christianity; as well as the complex uses of Judaism among Christian Hebraists in their own searches for Christian authenticity and identity. This factor is clearly more visible in the West than the East but, given the vast international networks of converso merchants and messianic enthusiasts, the expansive presence of both individual converts and Christian students of Judaism from Amsterdam to Krakow and Prague, and its ultimate significance in redefining Judaism and Christianity and their relationship to each other, this factor is surely as significant as the others.

In singling out only these five factors, among many others, I am fully aware that I have left myself open to criticism. One might wonder whether these factors emphasize too strongly radical change and disruption over constancy and continuity within early modern Jewry, and, in so doing, give too much weight to cultural developments more prevalent in the West than in the East. To a certain extent this point is valid, but one might consider as well that, in reflecting primarily on the periodization of early modern Jewish history, it is quite natural and expected to emphasize change over continuity in describing the distinctive features of an era, setting it apart from both the previous one and the one to follow. This would account, for example, for why I have not chosen to single out women and gender in this account. The subject is certainly significant in its own right but, within the context of a chapter on periodization, as opposed to a full history of the period, it is less so; the most significant changes in the status of Jewish women emerge in the modern, not the early modern era.

These five features, although they vary in intensity and frequency throughout this long period and over a vast continental terrain, do capture, to my mind, a sense of the whole in relation to its parts. Mobility, communal cohesion, a knowledge explosion, rabbinical authority in crisis, and a muddling of religious identities clearly transfigure the culture and society of Jews living across Europe in early modern times. By employing
the notions of connected histories and cultural exchange, I hope I have found a useful way to speak about Jews in early modern Europe, recognizable to other early modern historians and comparable with their national and regional historical narratives.

These common conditions also point to a consciousness of a world-wide 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 in an unprecedented way, enlarging the horizons of Jews even in the most remote and isolated of regions. The followers of the messianic figure Sabbatai Zevi (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 precipitated 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, 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 leaders everywhere were forced to deal with a new reality that destabilized the long-established boundaries demarcating one religion from the other.

Accordingly, these markers signal both a distinctive age and a distinctive cultural experience for all 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 the various Jewish subcultures of Europe and the Ottoman Empire. 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 being 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.
THE JEWISH ENLIGHTENMENT: AN OUTGROWTH
OF EARLY MODERNITY

Viewing the cultural world of the Jewish Enlightenment (known as the
Haskalah) from the perspective of the structural changes highlighted above
raises some interesting questions about the conventional periodization of
the second half of the eighteenth century as the actual beginning of modern
Jewish culture and society. Why indeed, from the perspective of early
modern Jewish history, is the ideational world of the Haskalah traditionally
perceived as a radical break from the past, iconoclastic in shaping a new
secular consciousness, a new intellectual elite, and a new construction of
Jewish identity?\textsuperscript{11} How novel and revolutionary was its intellectual
production? From the perspective of the dynamic intellectual universe of the
sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the eighteenth century in Jewish
thought seems rather unspectacular in the novelty of its formulations
and in the intensity of its contacts with the outside world. Its significance
lies rather in its radical impact within the political, social, and pedagogic
spheres, not necessarily the intellectual/cultural, even when one considers
such exceptional thinkers as Moses Mendelssohn or Solomon Maimon. If
one compares how thoroughly up-to-date and how genuinely aware such
early modern writers as Azariah de’Rossi, Joseph Delmedigo, or Simone
Luzzatto were of their immediate intellectual surroundings with the rela-
tively limited cognizance of their counterparts some 150 years later, the
contrast is truly striking.

Note a similar sentiment from Paul Hazard in his classic book regarding
European culture in general:

The daring utterances of the \textit{Aufklarung}, of the age of light, pale in insignificance
before the aggressive audacity of the \textit{Tractatus theologico-politicus}, the amazing
declarations of the \textit{Ethics}. Neither Voltaire nor Frederick II ever came near the
ungovernable anti-clerical, anti-religious frenzy of Toland and his like. Had Locke
never been born, d’Alembert would never have penned the “Discours prelimi-
naire” to the \textit{Encyclopedia}.\textsuperscript{12}

Very much in step with Hazard’s position was the young aforemen-
tioned Salo W. Baron, writing in the first edition of his \textit{Social and Religious
History of the Jews} in 1937. Hidden in a footnote, he wrote: “Compared

\textsuperscript{11} This is the view, for example, of Shmuel Feiner in \textit{The Jewish Enlightenment}
(Philadelphia, 2004). In his more recent work, \textit{The Origins of Jewish Secularization in
Eighteenth-Century Europe} (Philadelphia, 2010), he expands his depiction of intellectual
and social life beyond the Haskalah and into the first half of the nineteenth century.

\textsuperscript{12} Paul Hazard, \textit{The European Mind 1680–1715}, trans. from French J. Lewis May
with Leone Ebreo and Spinoza, the sage of Dessau [Mendelssohn] appears to be more of a medieval apologist than a modern secular philosopher. The Mendelssohnian school, by programatically republishing in 1794 Azariah de’ Rossi’s Light of the Eyes, symbolized its indebtedness to the Italian pioneers.”

And, earlier, he categorically stated: “But all the fundamental tendencies of the Haskalah, such as secular learning, a ‘purified’ Hebrew tongue, historicism and the revolt of the individual against communal power, had become more and more marked in Italy and Holland long before Mendelssohn.” 13 Baron apparently had second thoughts about the notion of an Italian or Dutch Haskalah since he removed any traces of it in the later edition of his multi-volume history, and, beside the brief comment cited here, he failed to develop his insight any more.

The Israeli historian Jacob Katz in his own classic account of the beginnings of modernity, Out of the Ghetto (1973), and Baruch Mevorah, in the well-known critical review of Azriel Shohat’s study of the intellectual world of early eighteenth-century German Jewry, had seemingly put Baron’s unsubstantiated inclination to rest in their clear-cut distinction between the cultural life of early modern Jews and that of the Haskalah. For Katz, the real innovation of the Haskalah was its ideology of change and reform of Jewish culture and society, based on his own conviction that ideologically articulated shifts in conscious thought are the landmarks of historical change. Since the earlier patterns of intellectual and cultural changes were not ideologically driven, they had less significance in the process of Jewish modernization. 14

Katz’s position has subsequently been challenged in recent historical writing over the issue of whether cultural change is only or primarily driven by ideology, and more generally for his own Germanocentricism in understanding modern Jewish history. 15 Nevertheless, Yosef Kaplan has

13 Salo W. Baron, A Social and Religious History of the Jews (New York, 1937), III, 139 n. 13. For more on Baron’s position, see also note 4 above.
14 Jacob Katz, Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation 1770–1870 (Cambridge, MA, 1973); Mevorah’s review of Azriel Shohat’s, Im Hilufei ha-Tekufot appeared in Kiryat Sefer 37 (1961–2), 150–5. For Katz’s lack of clarity regarding an early modern period, see n. 3 above.
15 See Jacob Katz, ed., Toward Modernity: The European Jewish Model (New Brunswick, 1987), especially the essay by Todd Endelman. See also Jonathan Frankel and Steven Zipperstein, eds., Assimilation and Community: The Jews in Nineteenth-Century Europe (Cambridge, 1992); and Pierre Birnbaum and Ira Katznelson, eds., Paths of Emancipation: Jews, States, and Citizenship (Princeton, 1995), especially the introductions to each of the last two volumes. One should also note how each collection is a response to and a refinement of the preceding volume.
generally followed Katz’s position regarding cultural change in articulating his own understanding of Dutch Jewish culture of the seventeenth century. Kaplan mentions Baron’s proposal of a Dutch Haskalah but discounts it because Dutch Jews offered no conscious ideology as an alternative to traditional faith and praxis. Although Dutch Jews created a thoroughly unique environment, claims Kaplan, one distancing the realms of the sacred from the secular, characterized by constant cultural and social interactions with non-Jewish society, and based on “an invented tradition,” this was not a Haskalah and should not be connected with the momentous changes of the later period. Kaplan adds that, despite the innovations of this seventeenth-century society, the intellectual elite was basically conservative and cautious, with respect to both religious and scientific thought.

Perhaps it might be appropriate to reconsider the refreshing audacity of Baron’s youthful reflection. Kaplan’s emphatic rejection of the notion of a Dutch Haskalah needs to be considered with two additional observations. Conservatism, as we now know well from the study of nineteenth-century orthodoxy, is just as much an ideological response to modernity as bold or radical reform and innovation are. Moreover, one should not consider the cultural climate of seventeenth-century Amsterdam in isolation from its Italian counterpart. When these two cultural experiences are viewed side by side, it is clear that the Italian is less conservative, more innovative and daring in its formulation of Jewish thought and in its dialogue with the non-Jewish world. Since both of these communities were essential pieces of the larger cultural landscape shared by all early modern Jews, the Dutch experience should not be considered in isolation but in relation to what transpired in Italy both before and during its “golden age.”

16 Kaplan, *An Alternative Path to Modernity*, 1–28, esp. 26. But compare his significant reservations about Katz’s approach in “The Early Modern Period” (see n. 3 above), where he argues that Katz hardly acknowledged an early modern period distinct from the medieval and failed to integrate the larger structural changes in early modern Europe into his own internalist view of Jewish historical development.

EARLY HASKALAH, EARLY MODERNITY, AND HASKALAH RECONSIDERED

The complex relationship between an early modern Jewish culture and the Haskalah is further obscured by the positions of Shmuel Feiner and David Sorkin regarding a so-called early Haskalah. For both historians, for somewhat different reasons, it is useful to divide the history of the Jewish Enlightenment into two distinct periods: a period roughly falling between 1720 and 1770, called the early Haskalah, and the Haskalah proper beginning in the 1770s and 1780s. For both historians, the earlier period had primarily an intellectual and religious coloring, whereas the later period focused more on reforming Jewish society through an emphasis on social and political activity. In Feiner’s view, the early maskilim were itinerant intellectuals, physicians, men of traditional Jewish learning primarily from Germany, Poland, and Lithuania, who devoted themselves to the construction of a rational view of Judaism, grounded in humanism and an appreciation of the natural world. In their common agenda to expand the intellectual borders of Judaism without undermining traditional Jewish norms, they emerged as an enthusiastic new republic of letters, a secondary elite who, through the publication of their Hebrew works, contributed to the enlargement of Jewish cultural horizons and paved the way for – while not necessarily being connected to – the later ideological movement of the 1770s and 1780s. Feiner even stressed that Mendelssohn himself, in contradistinction to his disciples, was actually not a member of this later group.18

Informed by their definition of an “early Haskalah,” it might be useful to suggest the following proposition: Jewish cultural history during most of

the eighteenth century, at least until its last decades, needs to be situated within the early modern period— that is, not as a precursor or early stage of the Haskalah, nor interpreted through the lens of later Haskalah developments. The early maskilim, so designated by Shmuel Feiner and David Sorkin, have a long pedigree. They emerge centuries earlier in ways quite different from their medieval counterparts, as products of the knowledge explosion generated by the printing press and by the universities of early modern Europe. These early maskilim of the eighteenth century, predominantly Ashkenazic Jews, are a familiar manifestation of an already fully developed phenomenon of Jewish intellectual life. Jewish scholars without ideological agendas other than to educate themselves and their students more broadly in multiple disciplines, and to integrate and reconcile this knowledge within the framework of Jewish tradition were part and parcel of the cultural profile of early modern Jewish elites, both primary and secondary, from at least the sixteenth century.¹⁹ The early maskilim simply followed the well-trodden steps of such luminaries as Judah Messer Leon, Azariah de’ Rossi, Solomon ibn Verga, Judah Moscato, Abraham Portaleone, Tobias Cohen, Simone Luzzatto, Menasseh ben Israel, Orobrio de Castro, and many others. While Italy of the late fifteenth century represents the point of origin of this new type of hakham kohel (“universal sage”), the term used to describe boldly this new Jewish scholar in the first book printed in the lifetime of its fifteenth-century author, Judah Messer Leon, the image and the actual writings of these scholars were known throughout Europe both in their own time and during the eighteenth century.²⁰ The Maharal’s defiant criticism, emanating from distant Prague, of Azariah de’ Rossi’s provocative reading of the aggadah in Mantua in the sixteenth century,²¹ or Isaac Satanov’s republication of

¹⁹ Compare the profiles of the intellectuals collected in David Ruderman and Giuseppe Veltri, eds., _Cultural Intermediaries: Jewish Intellectuals in Early Modern Italy_ (Philadelphia, 2004), especially my introduction, with the early maskilim of Feiner and Sorkin. The only significant difference is that the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century figures were more learned in languages other than Hebrew, especially Latin, and more catholic in their intellectual interests than their later eighteenth-century counterparts.


²¹ See Lester Segal, _Historical Consciousness and Religious Tradition in Azariah de’ Rossi’s Me’or Einyim_ (Philadelphia, 1989), 153–61; and Robert Bonfil, “Some Reflections on the
Rossi’s *Me’or Einyayim* in 1794, are two dramatic manifestations of the impact of the cultural agenda of the *bakham kolel* across space and time.\(^{22}\)

If the early Haskalah is best understood as an organic part of early modern Jewish culture, can we speak of its latest phase as a modern phenomenon? In my estimation, the primary ingredient of a modern Jewish culture, distinguishing it from the early modern, is the changing political landscape of western and eastern Europe as it affected the Jews, the impact of enlightened absolutism on Jewry policy, the political debates and limited successes of civil emancipation, and the subsequent use and misuse of Jewish minorities as tools of nineteenth-century nationalism. In dating the beginning of modern Jewish history to *c.* 1782, and classifying anything before it as early modern Jewish history, I know I am certainly following in the footsteps of many historians, from Simon Dubnov on.\(^{23}\) But through my new reiteration, I hope to underscore the Haskalah proper as primarily a political, pedagogic, and programmatic movement committed to transforming Ashkenazic Jewish culture. Following Shmuel Feiner in this manner of thinking, Mendelssohn was more an early modern Jewish figure than a modern one, although the image created by his followers transformed him into a modern cultural icon.\(^{24}\) When the Haskalah was institutionalized and politicized, following David Sorkin’s terminology,\(^{25}\) it became a modern

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\(^{24}\) But compare François Guesnet’s assessment of Mendelssohn, in “Moses Mendelsohn’s Tätigkeit als Fürsprecher,” as a new-style Jewish leader willing to address the political forum of public opinion. See also Guesnet, “The Turkish Cavalry in Swarzędz, or: Jewish Political Culture at the Borderlines of Modern History,” in Feiner and Ruderman, eds., *Early Modern Culture and Haskalah*, 227–48.

phenomenon and no longer an early modern one. Accordingly, the real pioneers of the Haskalah were those offering a political agenda of Jewish modernization, men such as Naftali Wessely and Isaac Euchel, and not Mendelssohn. The year 1782, of course, was not only the one in which Emperor Joseph II issued his edict of tolerance but also the year of publication of Wessely’s famous ideological manifesto of the Haskalah movement, his *Divrei Shalom ve-Emet* [Words of Peace and Truth].

Following Sorkin’s early reading of the transformation of German Jewish culture, the Haskalah was, for the most part, a German-Jewish development from its beginnings, emerging primarily out of a condition of cultural deprivation, of inequity, and of a sense of intellectual inferiority and a deep-seated need to catch up with a world that had passed Jews by.²⁶ The Haskalah was an attempt by Ashkenazic Jews, first in Germany and later in eastern Europe, to acquire what other European Jews had enjoyed for centuries. The ideological program of the Haskalah was relevant to Jews who themselves lacked the cultural opportunities available to their coreligionists in other European communities. In such places as Italy, the Netherlands, or England, such ideological advocacy was generally unnecessary and thus relatively absent.

**VIEWING THE MODERN ERA IN THE LIGHT OF THE EARLY MODERN**

Up until this point I have focused on the continuities and discontinuities between early modern Jewish culture and the Haskalah in its various phases. But modernity, as I have already indicated, is a larger and more complex phenomenon than the Haskalah movement alone. For many historians, modernization is neither primarily about the flood of new ideas nor about educational and cultural agendas, but about political, legal, and socio-economic processes. Roughly at the same time as the appearance of Wessely’s educational pamphlet, the French and American revolutions in the West and the partitions of Poland in the East took place. And generally within the same time frame, European states experienced, to varying degrees, intense urbanization and industrialization, the aggressive consolidation of national economies, and the break-up of an older estate system of privileged and powerful groups upon which mercantile governments had relied. The emergence of the public sphere, of partial or sometimes full political and legal emancipation, of the development of democratic electorates and modern citizenship, of political parties, nationalist ideologies, and more suggests a rapidly changing social and political

universe where new pressures were being placed on Jewish individuals, their families, and their collective institutions and leaders. This is not the place to describe these processes in detail but only to point to a radically different political and social reality for Jews that sharply contrasted with the processes we have carefully traced in early modern Europe.

Underscoring the difference between our period and its successor, however, should not blind us from observing the obvious continuities between the two. We have already mentioned the intellectual linkages between early modern Jewish intellectuals and the early maskilim. Accelerated mobility, the dissemination of printed books, pamphlets, and newspapers, the diminution of rabbinic authority, and the blurring of religious identities are primary factors for Jewish culture both in the early modern and modern periods. Even the condition of communal cohesion we have pointed to in describing early modernity was never fully eroded in the modern era. No doubt, political emancipation and the civic pressures of the new modern states precipitated the fragmentation of Jewish collective life to a greater degree than in the past. Nevertheless, as Birnbaum and Katznelson emphasize, modernization created new forms of communal cohesion as it destroyed old forms. The rabbis still remained a force to contend with in the nineteenth century and beyond as they discovered new ways of influencing their constituencies; the organized Jewish community was hardly a spent institution; and even assimilated Jews continued to identify themselves as Jews ethnically and religiously.27

Thus, the transition that Jacob Katz once called “out of the ghetto” was never about a clean break between one era and the next, and no historian who attempts to distinguish one period from another should expect any neat and uncomplicated partitions between them. When we add to this mix the complex regional variations, the variegated political, economic, and social structures of each locality in which Jews lived, and the cultural, linguistic, and religious differences originating in the specific environments to which they were exposed, then the presumption that one can delineate the general contours of any epoch or differentiate it decisively from another might indeed be called into question.

I still remain convinced, however, as I have argued from the start, that the exercise in which I have been engaged serves worthwhile ends. One such result is to undermine once and for all a view long entrenched in modern Jewish historiography of an inevitable one-dimensional and one-directional path from servitude to emancipation, from communal solidarity to disintegration, from ghettoization to citizenship, and from a normative

tradition to radical assimilation. This trajectory, labeled by Jonathan Frankel as the bipolar focus of nationalist historiography, originating in the writing of Simon Dubnov, has long dominated the way the process of modernization has been described. It is no doubt a specifically Jewish instance of the flawed paradigm of modernization, one which posits the triumphant march of civilization from the inferior condition of a traditional pre-modern society to a more superior modern one.28

The term “early modernity,” if taken literally, as I have mentioned earlier, preserves the false dichotomy between tradition and modernity and the implied teleology of a supposed progression from one to the other by simply introducing an intermediate stage between the two. Thus “early modernity” might be taken to denote a kind of inevitable transition from the allegedly backward condition of medievalism to the more advanced one of modernity. When shorn of its literal meaning in designating an early stage of modernity and utilized solely as a neutral label for demarcating a specific epoch in history, neither medieval nor modern, the construction of an early modern period of Jewish history might still allow us to overcome the polarizing tendencies of the “nationalist” approach. Early modernity contains elements conventionally labeled both medieval and modern; its overlapping characteristics defy reduction to either one pole or the other. By locating prominent trends usually deemed modern in the early modern period, such as mobility, knowledge explosion, or heresy and orthodoxy, while recognizing the novelty of later developments such as the politics of the modern state, the sharp juxtaposition between traditional/pre-modern and modern is blunted. A more nuanced and more profound understanding of constancy and change ultimately emerges. Those who would see the modern world as a sweeping transformation or the Haskalah as a radical break from the past, a kind of revolution shattering the old while ushering in the new, might indeed reconsider such extreme dichotomies when examining the three centuries preceding the late eighteenth century. In aligning the early modern with the modern, carefully tracing the evolution of one to the other, while discerningly noting their convergences and divergences, the myth of a radical modernity itself is called into question.


My own discussion here parallels nicely the rich and perspicuous reflections of Andrea Schatz, “‘Peoples Pure of Speech:’ The Religious, the Secular, and Jewish Beginnings of Modernity,” in Feiner and Ruderman, eds., Early Modern Culture and Haskalah, 169–87, esp. its opening section entitled “Beginnings,” 170–8.
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