

Matthias B. Lehmann, *Emissaries from the Holy Land. The Sephardic Diaspora and the Practice of Pan-Judaism in the Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2014), pp. 352.

by Roni Weinstein

From the 1720s to the 1820s, a Jewish institution located in Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire, oversaw an international fundraising activity for the poor of the Holy Land. Matthias Lehmann's fascinating book is dedicated to the analysis of this institution, and the human and communication networks enabling its activities. No less important and interesting are his observations on major characteristics of Jewish culture from the late sixteenth up to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and their contributions to modernization processes within the Jewish world. The Ottoman context seems to play a major role in this regard.

The institution in charge of raising charity for the poor Jews of the Holy Land, of transferring it and organizing the work of rabbinic emissaries, was established in 1720, following an unexpected crisis in Jerusalem. A significant group of Ashkenazi immigrants without economic backing had arrived to Jerusalem in the previous years, headed by Judah HeHasid. The growing debts they incurred led to the destruction of the Ashkenazi synagogue of Jerusalem and of its courtyard (see Lehmann, p. 27). Since the Ottomans referred to minority groups as 'collectives,' the debts were to be paid by the entire Jewish community of Jerusalem. So, the Jewish leaders in Istanbul intervened and negotiated a payment arrangement with the Sultan.

Naturally, this was not the first case of charity raising for the Holy Land, or for a community in the Mediterranean basin. Precedents could be found in community networks for ransoming Jewish captives, or for other cases mentioned in testimonies from the Cairo *genizah*.<sup>1</sup> The innovation in the case discussed here lies in the amount of money transferred, the solid institutional mechanisms – that went on for an entire century – the geographical range, the number of emissaries involved and the sophisticated network employed for the

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<sup>1</sup> See Eliezer Bashan, *Captivity and Ransoming in Jewish Society in Mediterranean Lands: 1391-1830* (in Hebrew), (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan UP 1980), (which Lehmann fails to mention); Shlomo D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 5 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press 1967-1993).

money transfer. So, Lehmann is completely justified in considering the institution headed by the ‘Istanbul Officials’ as a sign of Jewish modernity.

The primary sources Lehmann utilizes are diverse and contribute to the wide perspective of his book (see p. 9). They range from hundreds of letters sent by the Istanbul officials, sermons, literature in praise of *Eretz Israel* (the Holy Land), rabbinical responsa and travelogues – mainly the famous one by Rabbi Haim Yosef Azulai (known under the acronym *HaChidah*). This variety of sources enables Lehmann to confront various testimonies. Here again, there are precedents of historical research on rabbinical emissaries from the Holy Land, especially the comprehensive work of Yaari. As regards this, Lehmann’s description of Yaari’s work as biased by the author’s presumed Zionist leanings, and by his being one of the Israeli ‘national historians,’ seems ungrounded.

Part of the discussion of *Emissaries from the Holy Land* is dedicated to the analysis of the institutional and financial mechanisms for fundraising and money transfer. This is indeed an important theme, which was already debated by several historians that dealt with Sephardic international networks.<sup>2</sup> What makes the reading of this book enjoyable and worthwhile is Lehmann’s choice not to confine himself to this issue, broadening the perspective to dedicate most of the book to the way this institution and its functioning reflected important processes of change in the Jewish world on its way to modernity. The sub-title already declares it: ‘The Sephardic Diaspora and the Practice of Pan-Judaism’.

The Sephardic diaspora, with its widest geographical setting extending from Europe and the Mediterranean basin to the Ottoman world, and even ‘the New World,’ stood at the basis of international charity raising. Its main communities were located in major cities of the Ottoman Empire – such as Istanbul, Edirne, Salonika and Damascus – from where the same networks of commerce, rabbinical learning, book printing and family ties were activated. Sephardic elite families of these major communities and cities were well acquainted with one another and could rely on personal ties of trust in case of fundraising for the poor of the Holy Land. In this wide and extensive mechanism, the Ottoman

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<sup>2</sup> Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 2009); Jonathan I. Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism, 1550-1750*, (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1998); *Atlantic Diasporas: Jews, Conversos, and Crypto-Jews in the Age of Mercantilism, 1500-1800*, eds. Richard L. Kagan and Philip D. Morgan (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2009).

Empire played a dominant role. It was not a coincidence that the center of the activity relied on the Ottoman capital, and on the political connections with the Sultan's court. Furthermore, it seems that the methods for raising money adopted in the Jewish context followed those that the Empire applied when raising taxes in its provinces.

The impressive extent of the activity – what the author aptly characterizes as *pan-Judaism* – almost entices a discussion on the global aspects of Jewish history during the early modern period.<sup>3</sup> Lehmann is naturally aware of this but unfortunately avoids further elaboration. Perhaps, some parameters of Jewish activity would be better understood by a comparative discussion of, for instance, the activity and solidarity that existed in other minorities too, such as the Greeks and the Armenians.

One of the fascinating aspects of fundraising and the emissaries' activity is the Pan-Judaism perspective. Unlike the fragmentary and localistic attitude, practiced for several centuries by medieval Jewish communities, here one can see that a change is starting to take place in several Jewish diasporas, leading to collective activity on regional basis, shared by communities with common cultural characteristics (such as language, or Halakhic heritage).<sup>4</sup> It is an extension and enlargement of the loyalty on ethnic basis (Italian, Ashkenazi, Sephardic, Maghrebi). The activity of the Istanbul Officials takes this process one step further and, according to Lehmann, attempts to create a Pan-Jewish solidarity and activity that transcended ethnic identities.

Such an innovative concept redefines the patterns of Jewish solidarity and the linkage to past traditions (which set the previous loyalty to Halakhic lore on an ethnic basis). Solidarity is defined mostly as relating to a collective that shares the same destiny, rather than the acceptance of Halakhic and rabbinical authority: "Thus communities like Bayonne and Bordeaux [constituted by former Iberian *conversos*, whose adherence to Halakhic mode of life was partial at best – R.W.]

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<sup>3</sup> See Lehmann, p. 31, where he indicates a similar and contemporary crisis among the Jewish and Armenian communities in Jerusalem.

<sup>4</sup> Roni Weinstein, *Kabbalah and Jewish Modernity* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization 2016); David Sorotzkin, *Orthodoxy and Modern Disciplinary: The Production of the Jewish Tradition in Europe on Modern Times* (Heb.), (Tel-Aviv: Kibutz Ha-Meuhad 2011); Elchanan Reiner, "On the Roots of the Urban Jewish Community in Poland in the Early Modern Period," *Gal-Ed. On the History and Culture of Polish Jewry* 20 (2006): 13-37; Joseph M. Davis, "The Reception of the "Shulhan 'Arukh" and the Formation of Ashkenazic Jewish Identity," *AJS Review* 26/2 (2002): 251-276; Dean Ph. Bell, *Jewish Identity in Early Modern Germany: Memory, Power and Community*, (Aldershot Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007).

continued to be part of the regular circuit of rabbinic emissaries traveling to Western Europe even though some of their leaders openly defied rabbinic authority. In fact, they sometimes exceeded the expectations of the emissaries and showered them with great honor, even though, it would seem the *sheluhim* [Hebrew for ‘rabbinical emissaries’ – R.W.] represented a rather different world: the world of rabbinic traditions” (p. 139). In this sense, it presents a proto-national notion of identity related to shared collective experiences and expectations, rather than the adherence to a divine choice (‘the chosen people’) or religious sanctity. Here as well, it points to the sixteenth century as the epoch when these processes of change started to take place, thanks to the codification project of Rabbi Joseph Karo that compiled (alongside the glosses of Rabbi Moses Isserles) what was intended to be a book of law for the entire Jewish people.<sup>5</sup>

The wide horizon of this Sephardic world stands in sharp contrast to the Ashkenazi patterns, that instead disregard ethnic solidarity and the Pan-Jewish perspective. The money raised in Ashkenazi communities in Poland and Eastern Europe continued to be directed only to the Ashkenazi poor of the Holy Land. Their financial network was distinct, and they tended not to accept the Sephardic emissaries (even though these emissaries had helped the Ashkenazi community in Jerusalem during its 1720 crisis).

The emissaries were not involved only in financial activity. In their passages from various geographical and cultural milieus they served as presenters of rabbinical authority. This perspective is widely discussed in the writings of Rabbi Moshe Hagiz, one of the major examples of a new and more authoritative rabbinical figure. The question of the role and authority of rabbis unavoidably leads Lehmann to further discuss Orthodoxy and the place of religious tradition in a changing society, after the crisis caused by the Sabbatean movement (see for instance p. 143). The wide literature composed in the Iberian Diaspora in this period testifies to the urgent need for reorientation in religious practice, and not less so to create theological distinctions. The emissaries would play an important role in this respect, as agents and carriers of diverse cultural traditions: “As rabbinic emissaries traversed various lands and continents representing the putative center of the Jewish world, their travels delineated a shared space that

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<sup>5</sup> Roni Weinstein, “Research of Jewish Law (Halakhah) between Yeshiva and Academy – The Case-Study of Rabbi Joseph Karo” (in Hebrew), in *Migrating Knowledge: Selected Articles*, eds. Rivka Feldahi and Gal Hertz (forthcoming).

transcended geographic distance and tied Jewish communities in different places to one another and to the Land of Israel. At the same time, their extensive journeys also made the emissaries into agent of cultural change, mediating between different cultural practices and set of cultural knowledge that they encountered as they interacted with Jews and non-Jews in a myriad of different contexts. Thus, the emissaries played an important role in facilitating the exchange in information and knowledge in what we might call the “contact zone” between different Jewish cultures and, indeed, between the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds” (p. 108).

In their activity, the Istanbul Officials refused to accept rabbinical interference or to acknowledge the Halakhic instructions as binding. This aspect paves the way to a larger discussion on the place of the Jewish Law (*Halakhah*) in the early modern world. It certainly suggests an alternative reading of the marginality of the Halakhah in directing Jewish life, different from the one common among academics and in the Orthodox milieu.

Lehmann’s book is a substantial contribution to our understanding of the deep yet gradual processes of change that the Jewish world underwent in the early modern period. It is supported by a diverse range of documents, succeeding in opening a wide perspective and discussing different Jewish diasporas. Moreover, the emissaries and their activity provide the starting point for a meta-narrative on the Jewish society of the early modern period. One may argue that Lehmann’s work would have benefitted from a deeper discussion of parallel changes in the non-Jewish context (especially in the Ottoman world) and during the sixteenth century more generally. This said, the book is well-written and constitutes a highly recommended reading.

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