

## Ottoman Jewry

# Christians and Jews in Muslim Societies

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# Ottoman Jewry

*Leadership, Charity, and Literacy*

*By*

Yaron Ayalon



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*To Yuval and Omri*

*The most wonderful boys, brothers, and friends*





# Contents

Preface IX

List of Figures and Tables XII

Abbreviations XIII

**Introduction** 1

- 1 Who Were Ottoman Jews? 3
- 2 Ottoman Jewish History: the State of the Field 5
- 3 What This Book Does Not Do 16
- 4 Book Structure 17

**1 Ottoman Jewry, Origins and Growth** 20

- 1 One Overplayed Letter 22
- 2 The Sephardim Arrive 27
- 3 The Textile Industry and the Decline of Safed 39
- 4 Ottoman Jews and the Environment 42

**2 Ottoman Jewry, Opportunities and Crises** 51

- 1 Demography and Economy 51
- 2 The Environment, Again: Jewish Settlement Patterns and the Little Ice Age 56
- 3 Izmir and Aleppo 64
- 4 Hardships and Prophecy 69
- 5 Expanding Opportunities in the Eighteenth Century 84

**3 Communal Leadership, Rabbis, and Others** 93

- 1 Rabbis in the Existing Scholarship 95
- 2 Jews in Ottoman Society 108
- 3 The Frankos Affair 116
- 4 Toward a Model of Communal Leadership 121

**4 Poor Relief and Communal Authority** 139

- 1 Foundations of Jewish Charity 140
- 2 Public Charity 144
- 3 Semi-public Charity 152
- 4 Private Charity 156
- 5 Why Give? 160
- 6 Charitable Societies and the Weakening of Communal Authority 164

<b>5</b>	<b>Education, Reading, and Rabbinical Authority</b>	<b>176</b>
1	Education	177
2	Intellectual Circles	182
3	The Inner Circle and Its Library	187
4	The Value of Books	200
5	The End of Knowledge Monopoly	208
	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>218</b>
	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>221</b>
	<b>Index</b>	<b>247</b>

## Preface

This story begins, of all places, by a urinal in the expansive bathroom of a restaurant in Abu Ghosh, an Arab village outside of Jerusalem, in early 2004. My family and I convened there for a sumptuous meal of Middle Eastern delicacies to celebrate the invitation I had received from Princeton's Department of Near Eastern Studies to interview for their graduate program as a shortlisted candidate. Joining us for the meal was Mark Cohen, a professor at Princeton and a family friend who, I knew, would have a say in my acceptance to the doctoral program. At the end of the meal, I excused myself to take care of my business, as did Mark. "You should come to Princeton to work on Jews in the Middle East with me" he told me then, "I can even get you more funding if you do, and you can still write about the Ottoman period." Having had little interest in Jewish history until that point, that brief conversation with Mark got me thinking. By the time I made it to the interview a few weeks later, I had already made up my mind.

In August of that year, I moved to Princeton to begin the doctoral program in Near Eastern Studies, and Mark became my academic advisor. It was through my work with him, and with other professors in and outside that department, that I managed to write a dissertation about Jews in the Ottoman Empire and their dealings with natural disasters. My fascination with studying human societies' responses to calamities in an Ottoman context took me to archives and libraries in several countries. It produced several articles and, eventually, a monograph based in part on my dissertation. The book you are now holding is not that book. Rather, the present work is an expansion of parts of the original dissertation, buttressed by copious research into additional sources and new research questions. It builds upon the many lessons I have learned from Mark and from the first book.

Many people deserve my gratitude for helping this project take shape, by providing ideas, pointing me to sources, offering advice and much-needed criticism, or even supporting my academic career along the way. At Princeton, Michael Cook served as my second advisor and has continued to support me with invaluable advice in the years since. Norman Stillman got me my first job at the University of Oklahoma while all academic positions evaporated due to the 2008–9 global financial crisis. In 2011, Ken Stein brought me to Emory University, where I had ample time and space to wrap up writing of my first book, while teaching courses on Jewish history that offered me the opportunity to further think about and develop the principal arguments for this book. In 2013, Kevin Smith welcomed me as my department chair at

Ball State University in Indiana, where I spent 6 years as an assistant professor, teaching courses on Middle Eastern, Jewish, and world history that further informed my research. Finally, in 2019 Tim Johnson, then the dean of the School of Languages, Cultures, and World Affairs at the College of Charleston, hired me to lead the Jewish Studies Program, a department-chair position that demanded nearly eighty hours a week during its first two years and left little time for research or writing. The Covid pandemic only made that worse. For a few years, Tim was not only my boss but also my neighbor. His encouragement and advice, including via hours of socially distanced conversations over beer on my porch, offered the support I needed to see this project through. The generous funding the Charleston Jewish community has provided our program has made taking time away from Charleston to complete this project possible.

More than anything, this project was informed by my work as the Ottoman Empire sectional editor for the *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World* (EJIW). In 2008, Norman Stillman, the executive editor of EJIW, invited me to join the team of editors. While that work entailed hours of tedious editing and rewriting, and produced much frustration at colleagues whose sloppy writing did not resemble anything they had ever published, editing EJIW taught me much about the state of the field, and eventually informed many of the ideas and arguments of this book. Two individuals deserve special gratitude for a decade and a half of friendship: Sasha Goldstein-Sabbah, now at Groningen University, who was the acquisitions editor at Brill when I started working on EJIW. And Maurits van den Boogert, now the Chief Publishing Officer at De Gruyter Brill and then the acquisitions manager overseeing EJIW. Maurits had eyes on this book years before its content ever took shape; when it was finally ready to be considered for publication, he took the time to read and offer extensive and critical comments that made this book significantly better. Sasha has become a family friend and a great partner in thinking about the history of Jews in the Arab world. An ad-hoc reading group for parts of this book she convened in the Hague in April 2024 contributed last-minute yet significant changes to the text.

Over the years and along the way, I have benefitted from the friendship and support of many, indeed too many to mention here. Alan Verskin and I started graduate school together. He has remained a good friend who has more than once saved me from pursuing embarrassing scholarly ideas. Others have contributed directly or indirectly to this project, via conversations and comments offered to preliminary versions of this work, published as articles, presented at the Middle East Studies Association and Association for Jewish Studies (AJS) conferences, or discussed at various panels. They include Yaron Har'el, Devin Naar, Julia Phillips Cohen, Matthias Lehmann, Tamir Karkason, Devi Mays,

Adriana Brodsky, Lior Sternfeld, and the many others who attended panels, roundtables, and the annual Sephardi/Mizrahi caucus meetings at the AJS.

At the College of Charleston, Joshua Shanes welcomed me and has been a good friend and wonderful source of advice since before I began working here. Until he passed away in January 2023, my predecessor as program director Marty Perlmutter provided critical guidance that allowed me to manage both an academic department and work on this and other research projects. And Ashley Walters and Chad Gibbs, who joined our program after my arrival, have been great colleagues who have continuously reminded me (and others) what productive scholarship and engaging teaching should look like. Perhaps unaware of it, they too have pushed me to finally get this project done.

This project would not have come to conclusion without the support of my parents, Ami and Yael, my brother Gil, his wife Sophie, and their daughter Noga – the most recent addition to our family. Although they all live an ocean away in Israel and we only get to see each other once or twice a year, their ongoing support and constant encouragement has made several job transitions and completing this book significantly less frustrating. My father, who taught Middle East history at Tel Aviv University for over 3 decades, read earlier versions of this book's chapters – as he did of my first book – and provided very useful comments. My wife Keren, who has been my partner in this long journey of nearly two decades, deserves utmost praise for her patience with a husband who often prefers the company of books or computer screens to that of people, works at odd hours when most people tend to sleep, and wakes up when for others half a day has passed. My boys Yuval and Omri have shown immense bravery in dealing with a father who had to disappear for a week or two every now and then to focus on writing, and who at times was intellectually and emotionally less accessible. The final stretch of this project, involving diligent editing and proof reading, was made significantly easier thanks to the loving attention of our dog Shoko, who has added much light to our lives, and who sat patiently for hours next to me as I completed work on this book.

All in all, sixteenth- or eighteenth-century Ottoman Jews may take center stage in this story, but its true heroes are my family, near and far, who have tolerated this work and its author's commitment to it for far too long. For them, I am forever grateful.

# Figures and Tables

## Figures

- 1 The Ottoman Empire XIV
- 2 Rulers of the sixteenth century, from left: Shah Tahmasp I of Safavid Iran (r. 1527–76), Sultan Süleyman I of the Ottoman Empire (r. 1520–66), and Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (r. 1519–56) 48
- 3 The port of Salonica in the late 19th century 54
- 4 Shabbetai Şevi (1626–76) 74
- 5 The title page of the second edition of *Sefer Ro'ey Yisrael* (Jerusalem, 1904), which bound the writings of Rapha'el Shlomo Laniado, his son Efrayim, and Yehudah Kaşin, and which includes an extensive account of the *frankos* affair 119
- 6 The Ibn Ezra synagogue in Cairo. The synagogue was the primary scene of charity collection and distribution in Ottoman Jewish communities 145
- 7 Title page of the first printed edition of Yosef Karo's *Shulḥan 'Arukh* (Venice, 1565) 203

## Tables

- 1 Authors whose works Yosef Karo cited or mentioned in his *Beit Yosef* or *Avkat Rokhel* 193
- 2 Authors whose works Shmu'el de-Medina cited or mentioned in his *Shut. Maharashdam* 194
- 3 Authors whose works Ḥayim Benveniste cited or mentioned in his *Shut. ba'e ḥayye* or *Knesset ha-gedolah* 195
- 4 Authors whose works Avraham ha-Levi cited or mentioned in his *Shut. ginat veradim* 197
- 5 Authors whose works Eliyahu Yisra'el cited or mentioned in his *Kol Eliyahu* or *Ugat Eliyahu* 198

# Abbreviations

ACCM	Chamber of Commerce Archives, Marseille
AT	Arba'ah Turim
BOA	Presidential Ottoman Archives, Istanbul (formerly Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi)
BT	Babylonian Talmud
EJ	Encyclopaedia Judaica
EJIW	Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World
Even	even ha-'ezer
Ḥoshen	ḥoshen ha-mishpat
IJMES	International Journal of Middle East Studies
JT	Jerusalem Talmud
M	Mishnah
MT	Mishneh Torah
NA	National Archives, London (formerly PRO or Public Record Office)
Oraḥ	oraḥ ḥayim
s	siman (notation of chapters/questions in responsa collections)
ShA	Shulḥan 'Arukh
Yoreh	yoreh de'ah



FIGURE 1 The Ottoman Empire  
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