The Jewish World of the Sixteenth Century, Part ב

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Review

• Purpose of the lectures
  – Introduce a flavor of the first century of the “early modern” period in Jewish history
  – Identify several key events that have shaped Jewish history since that time

• Approach
  – Background to the sixteenth century
  – The Jewish world in four chapters
    • The expelled Iberian Jews (the Sefardim)
    • The new Kabbalists
    • Rabbis and intellectuals
    • The eastward expansion (Poland)
Review (continued)

• Medieval Jewish history
  – Followed Islamic expansion and often remained after contraction
  – Invited to participate in Western European economic expansions
  – Often expelled when economic value (or religious acceptability) declined

• Sefardim
  – Jews and their descendents expelled from Spain and Portugal
  – Moved throughout Ottoman Empire and Mediterranean Europe
  – Brought with them a distinct culture that exists to this day
  – Mixing of Jews and conversos led to weakened Jewish identity

• Kabbalists in Safed
  – Built on esoteric mystical tradition
  – Innovated thinking about the nature of God
  – Began the "popularization" of Kabbalah that exists to this day
Rabbis and Intellectuals

- **Background**
  - Since 500 CE or so, Rabbinical Judaism has been normative
  - Rabbis as sole authoritative interpreters of Jewish law and Jewish texts
  - Generally act without formal authority structure
  - Understanding that rabbis "in the field" will obtain expert judgment for "hard problems"

- Rabbis can and do disagree & disagreements become basis for different customs

- Jews were (and in Orthodox communities today, are) expected to choose their rabbi and not "go shopping"
Impact of Printing

• Mid 15\textsuperscript{th} century, Johannes Gutenberg prints Bible
• 1522 Martin Luther's 95 \textit{Theses} were printed
• 1525 R. Joseph Caro, in Safed, published the most authoritative Jewish legal code: \textit{Shulkhan Arukh}
  – Previous centuries would have been copied by hand and slowly disseminated through Jewish world
  – 1565 \textit{Shulkhan Arukh} printed in Venice
  – Copies travelled quickly and widely
  – Authority now moved from the rabbi to the text which was available to literate, well-to-do Jews
• Kabbalah printed late century became far more widely known
• Jews published in languages other than Hebrew: Yiddish, Ladino, and contemporary languages
Christian Influences

• Christian Hebraists had been there for centuries before printing
  – Some to better understand origins of Christianity
  – Some to "disabuse" Jews of traditional Jewish texts
  – Some to better proselytize Jews

• 15\textsuperscript{th} century Christian Hebraists
  – Giovanni Pico della Mirandola aimed to Christianize Kabbalah
  – Johann Reuchlin learned Hebrew to "revitalize" Christian theology

• Christians now in a position to comment on Jewish texts in an informed, scholarly way
Jewish Savants

• Many Jews were now in a position to include much besides Jewish tradition in their thought
  – Yohanan Alemanno, Abraham Yagel wrote encyclopedic books including eclectic sources
  – Jewish Italian Kabbalists self-consciously went outside Jewish tradition for confirmation
  – Sefardim brought an appreciation of Maimonides' philosophical approach to knowledge
  – Dutch Jews included many former Conversos who had Christian texts as part of their tradition

• Jews were, for the first time, being accepted into European universities
Communal Leadership

• Jewish communities have always had lay and clerical leaders
  – Usually with a strong mix of both groups
  – Lay leaders (usually economic) provide material sustenance
  – Rabbis provide legal and ethical guidance
  – Conflicts not unusual
  – Rabbis, through Jewish courts, had power of excommunication (kherem)

• Ethnographic histories suggest that rabbis were strong during Medieval period in Europe and Asia
Decline of the Rabbinate

• In Western Europe, Sefardic & Ashkenazic, rabbinical authority declined in 16th century
  – Much less so in Eastern Europe and Ottoman Empire
  – Growing economic strength of laity
  – Successful competition to interpret Jewish tradition
  – Secular authorities more willing to grant communal power to friendly lay leaders

• Took place in multiple locations
  – Italy (Padua, Florence, others) both with and without ghetto structures
  – Amsterdam, late 16th, throughout 17th centuries
  – Germany (Friedburg, Frankfort), rabbinical contracts forbade excommunication without permission of the lay leadership

• By end of century economic elites held communal power through much of Western Europe
The Council of Four Lands

- One of the most important unknown organizations in Jewish history
- The central body of Jewish authority in Poland from 1580 to 1764
- Met in Lublin, Poland
- Four lands were: Greater Poland, Little Poland, Russia (Ruthenia) and Volhynia (near Austria)
- Provided autonomy for the largest population of Jews in the world
The Territory of the Four Lands
History of the Period

• In 1569, Poland and Lithuania unified and annexed The Ukraine
• Many Jews were sent to colonize these territories & thrived economically
• Polish nobility/landowners and Jewish merchants became business partners
  – Jews became involved in the wheat export industry
  – Built and ran mills and distilleries
  – Transported grain to the Baltic Ports and shipped it West
  – Received wine, cloth, dyes and luxury goods, which they sold to Polish nobility
  – Middlemen and intermediaries with the peasants
• Created new villages and townships, *shtetls*
  – 52 communities in Great Poland
  – 41 communities in Lesser Poland
  – 80 communities in The Ukraine
Jews in Poland

• Constituted a separate legal group
• Partly subordinated to royal jurisdiction
• Had own self-government and courts
• Operated freely in all areas of social and economic life
• Pyramidal self-government structure of Jewish communities
  – Base was formed by local kehilot
  – Founded by Jewish settlers based on royal charters
  – Provided for establishment of a synagogue, a cemetery, and necessary institutions of a community
The Provinces

• Lands consisting of nearby kehilot
  – Wielkopolska (Greater Poland)
  – Małopolska (Little Poland)
  – Wołyń (Volhynia)
  – Ruś (Red Russia)

• Representatives of kehilot met at Jewish regional councils
  – Summoned by heads of local communities
  – Members were prosperous representatives of the community, eminent Talmudists, and rich commoners
The Council (Va'ad)

• 1580, kehillot, communities and lands became subordinated to the Council of Four Lands
• Phenomenon on a European scale
• No similar institution of Jewish central self-government existed in any other state of Europe
• The parliament—Va'ad Arba Aratzot—founded in Lublin
• To improve the system of distributing taxes it was necessary to establish nation-wide Jewish representation
• Probably set up by rabbis from the largest Polish cities: Krakow, Poznan, Lviv and Lublin.
Jurisdiction

• Amount of taxes, fiscal charges and court fees for judges
• Changes in the local organization of *kehilot*
• Issues of communities and the judiciary, religious and educational matters
• Economic problems of the Jewish population
• Intervention in safety issues of Jews
• Maintaining contact with foreign countries
Structure

- Council had 50 representatives or more
- Judiciary— the Tribunal of the *Va'ad*—was modeled on the Crown Tribunal
  - Members were rabbis and laymen
  - Elected its own Speaker, usually a rabbi
  - Sat during the Council’s sessions.
- Rabbinical court guided by norms of Talmudic legislation
  - Norms often admitted of various interpretations
  - Assistance of the great rabbinical assembly was necessary to clear up disputed points
  - Jews were forced to create, in addition to the lower communal court, a higher court of appeals
  - Especially necessary whenever important litigations occurred between two *kehilot* or between a private individual and a *ḳahal*
Decline of the Council

• 18th century Council operations became more limited
  – Sessions took place less regularly
  – One of the last important congresses was held in 1753
• 1764, Polish Diet ordered Jewish general congresses to be discontinued
• Reason was that the Council had failed to deliver collected taxes
• Poland was in decline during the period, and was partitioned among Russia, Austria, and Prussia
• New political reality was unfavorable to the existence of such central autonomous bodies as the Council.
Summary

• 16th century was a time when rabbinical authority declined
  – Printing press permitted rapid, non-ideosyncratic spread of knowledge of Jewish texts
  – Movement of people, especially Sefardim with unique knowledge of Christian culture
  – Identity of Jews as intellectuals in the broader community
  – Rabbis lost ground to lay leaders in influence
Summary (continued)

• In East Europe—Poland—Jews controlled their own destiny for nearly two centuries
  – Vast majority of Jews in the world
  – Good relations with Christian royalty and nobility
  – As with Ottoman Empire, when non-Jewish culture was expanding and dynamic, Jews were welcomed and valued
  – In Poland took the form of structured autonomy, virtual independence
  – When Poland declined, Jewish life declined as well
Conclusions

• Beginning of 16\textsuperscript{th} century was the end of the medieval Jewish experience in Europe, Asia
• Experiences following the Iberian expulsion created a dynamism for much of Jewish world
• Development of the mystical tradition provided a new spiritual enthusiasm
• Mobility of people and spread of knowledge loosened the authority of tradition
• Autonomy of Polish Jews provided an entirely new relationship between Jews & Christians
• End of the 16th century, Jews were clearly and irreversibly moving into the modern world