

The Jewish World of the Sixteenth Century, Part 1

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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 15th century, Johannes Gutenberg prints Bible
- 1522 Martin Luther's *95 Theses* were printed
- 1525 R. Joseph Caro, in Safed, published the most authoritative Jewish legal code: *Shulkhan Arukh*
 - Previous centuries would have been copied by hand and slowly disseminated through Jewish world
 - 1565 *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
- 15th 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

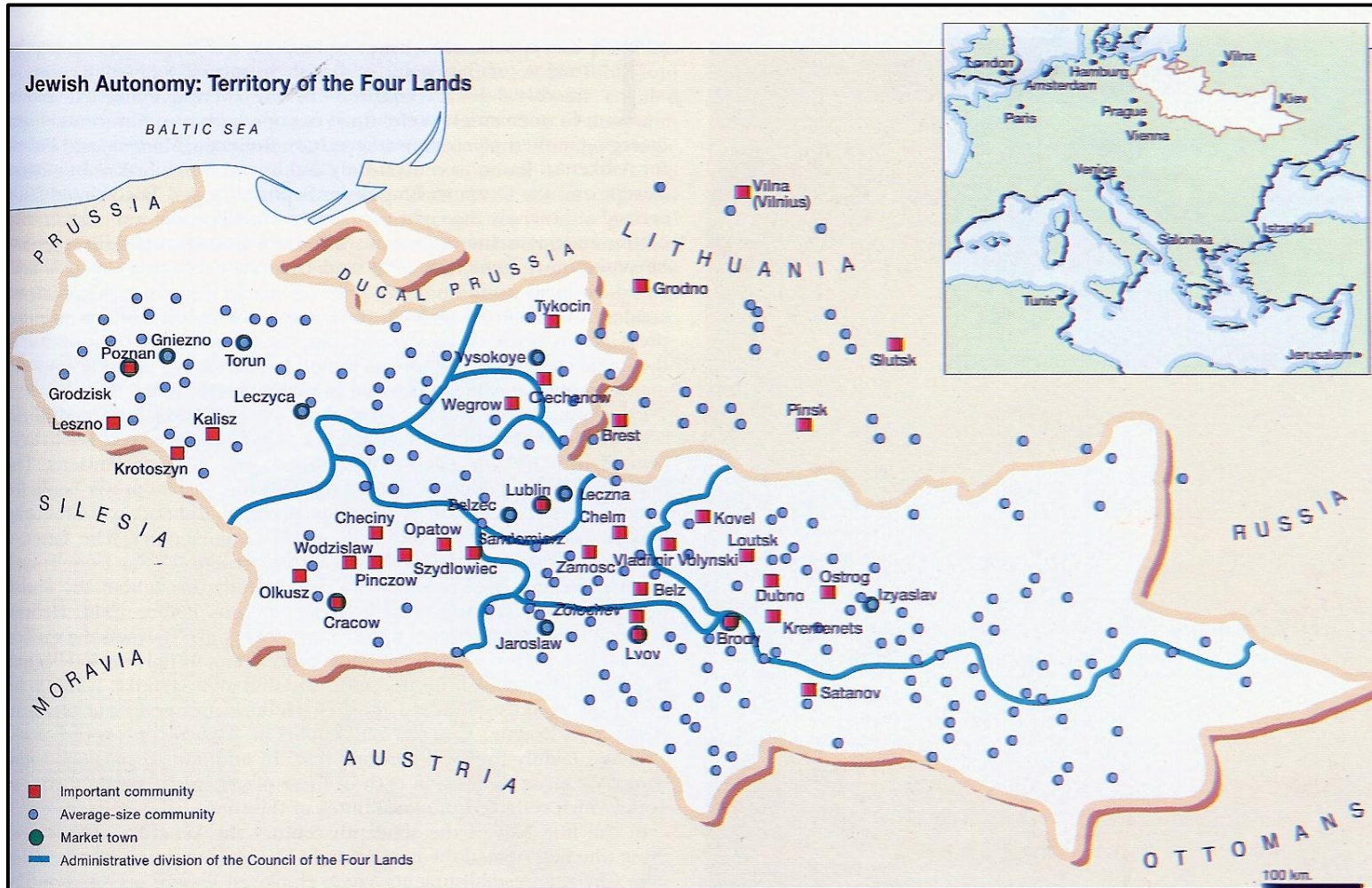
Decline of the Rabbinate

- 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, *kehilot*, 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 *qahal*

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 16th 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