

TEACHING UNDERGRADUATES THE HISTORY OF EARLY MODERN SEPHARDIC AND EASTERN JEWS

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Teaching the history of Sephardic and Eastern Jews from the 1492 Expulsion to the Enlightenment presents both unique problems and unparalleled opportunities. The opportunities are often overlooked by those who specialize in traditional ancient, medieval, or modern topics, and do not put sufficient emphasis on early modern Jews outside Ashkenaz. It is overlooked even more by the authors of Jewish history textbooks whose focus often shifts away from these communities after the Spanish Golden Age and never really returns. Consider what they might miss. Jewish law was forever reshaped by the Spanish exile, R. Joseph Karo. Kabbalah, which was mainly a product of *Reconquista*-era Spain, was developed and spread after 1492 largely by Sephardic Jews. Sephardim, including those who were “court Jews,” were at the center of the burgeoning mercantilist enterprise in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, generations before the concept existed in Ashkenaz. They excelled in trade, mobility, political influence, Torah scholarship, literature, artistic creativity, mysticism, and many other areas. A very high proportion of the major Jewish personalities in the critical early modern centuries came from their ranks.

The problems begin with definitions. If Sepharad is Spain, what does it mean to be a Sephardic Jew after the Expulsion? For how

many generations does a Sephardic identity continue—especially if there is frequent intermarriage between Spanish exiles and local Jews? What of *conversos* who return to Judaism but have no living tradition of practice? What about the Western Sephardim who live in Amsterdam, Hamburg, and other typically Ashkenazi areas? More vexing is the question of Eastern Jewries in Asia and Africa who were not overrun by Sephardic influence. The Sephardim, usually underrepresented in teaching, are positively lavished with attention compared with these little-known Jewries. How many of us were taught about the trials and triumphs of early modern Yemenite, Bukharian, Persian, or Caucasic Jews in contrast to the centrality of Chmielnicki Revolt, Spinoza, or the Council of the Four Lands?

Another challenge in teaching Sephardic and Eastern Jewish history of this period is students’ unfamiliarity with the general background of the regions in question. While the standard courses in Western civilization may give them a context for the lives of European Jews, students often know almost nothing of the Ottoman Empire and its vassal states, Mediterranean trade patterns, or power struggles between Moroccan potentates. This unfamiliarity doubles the challenge of teaching about the Jews in those lands; but it also doubles the satisfaction when it is done well.

Finally, there is sometimes a challenge in finding appropriate readings for courses. While one or two

American institutions may have a class devoted to post-Expulsion Sephardic and Eastern Jewries, the more common situations are surveys of Jewish history, and, more rarely, the early modern Jewish history course. Fortunately, there has never been more material available in English for these purposes; so, despite the short supply of well-integrated textbooks, there is a lot that can be done with both types of teaching.

When using secondary works, I usually find that students are more engaged by biographies or monographs than by essay collections. Most available books deal with Sephardim and not with other Eastern Jewish communities. I teach at a state university, where the price of books matters a great deal to students, so I am sensitive to that factor as well. Despite the \$40 hardcover cost, however, I especially liked *A Man of Three Worlds* by Mercedes García-Arenal and Gerard Wiegers (2003), dealing with the wild life of the Moroccan diplomat and pirate, Samuel Pallache. This book shows the complex fluidity of religious, professional, and geographical identities to be found among early modern Sephardim.

That fluidity is even more pronounced in the experience of the *conversos*. The journalist Andrée Aelion Brooks presents a highly readable portrait of the sixteenth-century *conversa* Doña Gracia Nasi and her family in *The Woman Who Defied Kings* (2002), though historians may have qualms about some aspects of her presentation. I am still fond of the dated but enjoyable Cecil Roth volumes, *The House of Nasi* (1947). David Graizbord’s *Souls in Dispute* (2004) follows the movement of *conversos*

who had escaped Iberia and returned to Judaism, but ultimately chose to go back to Spain and Catholicism in the seventeenth century. Miriam

Bodian's *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation* (1997)

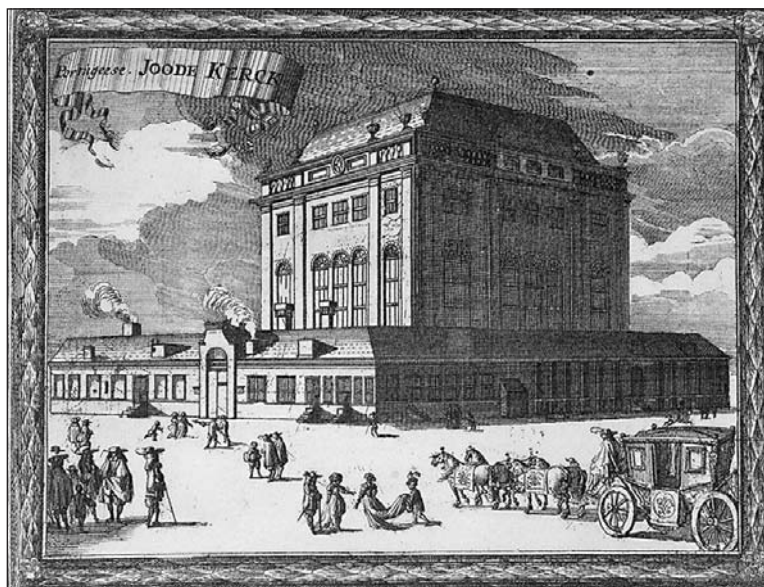
offers a useful and well-written introduction to the complex identities of the Western Sephardim. Another fine work on this community, Daniel Swetschinski's *Reluctant Cosmopolitans* (2000), has just appeared in paperback as well. Several literary works of historical importance by post-Expulsion converso authors are available in English. These include Timothy Oelman's *Marrano Poets of the Seventeenth Century* (1982), and David Slavitt's edition of Pinto Delgado's *Poem of Queen Esther* (1999).

Secondary works and lectures are effectively supplemented with documents. I especially like the recent trend to create primary source readers that incorporate extensive background. Norman Stillman's excellent *Jews of Arab Lands* (1979) is certainly the best such work for this field, though it is more than some undergraduates can handle. Lawrence Fine's *Judaism in Practice* (2001) and Marc Saperstein's *Jewish Preaching* (1989) belong to this hybrid type as well. Though neither focuses exclusively on early modern Sephardim, both contain much excellent Sephardic material. Jewish travel literature is one of the few places to find primary sources on many Eastern Jewish communities. The old standard, Elkan Nathan Adler's *Jewish Travellers in the Middle Ages* (1987), remains a

useful and very reasonably priced collection. Adler includes an excerpt from the journal of Rabbi Hayyim Yosef David Azulai (Hid"ā), a late-

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eighteenth-century traveler, but a full (if quirky) translation is now available in Benjamin Cymerman's *Diaries of Rabbi Ha'im Yosef David Azulai* (1997). On the Persian community, Vera Basch Moreen's *Iranian Jewry's Hour of Peril and*



Anonymous etching of Portuguese Synagogue, Amsterdam, 1675.
Courtesy of The Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Heroism (1987) contains useful texts.

It is worth noting that appropriate documents on Sephardic Jewry are widely available. For instance, Jacob R. Marcus's *Jew in the Medieval World* (1975) provides sources on the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry, but also such treasures as a letter on the Cairo Purim of 1524 (celebrating salvation from a dangerous Sultan); reports on Turkish Jewry in the 1550s from the German factor Hans Dernschwam, featuring an eyewitness account of Doña Gracia Nasi; and excerpts from the *Shulhan*

Arukh, among others. *Memoirs of My People* by Leo Schwarz (1943) provides material on David ha-Reubeni and Solomon Molkho, and a great piece from the Hid"ā. Franz Kobler's *Letters of Jews Through the Ages* (1978) yields

“An Invitation from Turkey to Provence” and various documents on Shabbatai Zvi, as well as some on the Western Sephardim. Even heavily Ashkenaz-centered collections, like Nahum Glatzer's *Judaic Tradition; Texts* (1982) and

Paul Mendes-Flohr and Yehuda Reinharz's *The Jew in the Modern World* (1995) contain a few items of Sephardic interest. (A third edition of *The Jew in the Modern World* with an added section on Sephardic issues is in the works.)

While we wait for the appearance of a perfect textbook that abandons the easy Eurocentric story and incorporates the

whole Jewish experience, the judicious use of documents and accessible biographies or monographs can fill many of the gaps and help to create a striking and memorable counterbalance to the Ashkenazi-centered narrative. There is certainly more material available on Sephardic and Eastern Jewries now than ever before.

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