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ARTICLES

Babylonian Jewish Society: The Evidence of the Incantation Bowls
Simcha Gross, Avigail Manekin-Bamberger

Since their discovery, the Jewish Babylonian Aramaic incantation bowls have typically been understood to represent “popular” Jewish religious practice that stood in marked contrast with the scholastic rabbinic elite. As a result of this characterization, the usefulness of the bowls for understanding Babylonian Jewish society and the position of the rabbis within it has remained largely unexplored. With the continued publication and study of the bowls, however, the dichotomy between the world of the learned elites and the masses allegedly responsible for the bowls has become increasingly difficult to maintain. This article argues that the Jewish Babylonian Aramaic incantation bowls do not constitute a single corpus; rather, they were produced by different groups of scribes, some of whom consistently employed recognizable Jewish literature from a variety of genres and eschewed non-Jewish invocations. Moreover, we demonstrate how some bowl scribes invoke in an unprecedented manner not only rabbis of the distant past but also local rabbis, the rabbinic class, and even rabbinic academy heads. This evidence suggests that some bowls scribes had greater intellectual and social proximity to the rabbis, rendering a more complicated depiction of Babylonian Jewish society.

Authors, Collators, and Forgers: Recovering Rabbinic Culture in Late Medieval Avignon
Pinchas Roth

This article explores the works of four Jewish intellectuals who lived in or near Avignon at the end of the fourteenth century: Isaac de Lattes, Joseph Kimhi, Eliezer Crescas, and Jacob Salomon. Each of these authors wrote a different type of rabbinic book, shedding light on shared themes and concerns that dominated their city. Their works express—sometimes explicitly, but often implicitly and through their very structure—deep-seated anxieties about the state of Jewish knowledge and communal memory in late medieval Provence. Their concerns with the construction of identity, magic, patronage, and the preservation of knowledge all set the stage for the enigmatic Moses Botarel. Shameless self-promoter and ingenious literary forger, Botarel served as a mirror of the achievements and vulnerabilities of late medieval rabbinic culture in Provence.
A Weary Child Grown Insolent: A Case Study of a Reworked Zoharic Story
Omri Shasha

The story explored in this essay represents an example of an integrated zoharic tale—that is, a series of kabbalistic homilies integrated into an organizing narrative frame. One of the interesting aspects of this genre is the interlacing of narrative and homily. There are zoharic stories in which the narrative layer serves as a frame story and nothing more, meaning there is no significant relationship between the story and the contents of the homilies delivered within it. In other cases, however, a connection between narrative and homiletical layers is forged through the linguistic and thematic affinities between the two textual strata. Only in a handful of cases are these affinities profound and comprehensive, sometimes fundamentally constructing the meaning of the text and constituting an indispensable key for understanding it. This article analyzes a single zoharic story that exists in two variant-versions. Uncovering the relationship between the story’s two versions offers a rare glimpse into the editing and reworking of a zoharic text. We see how the story was transformed from a relatively short and simple narrative into a story rich in literary sophistication and thematic complexity, along with profound connections between narrative and homiletical layers. Studying these processes sheds further light on the literary mechanics of zoharic stories as well as the character of their textual development, yielding, among other things, insights into the composition and editing techniques of the zoharic authors.

Host Desecration, Conversos, and “Philosemitism”: Father António Vieira’s Sermons at Santa Engrácia
Claude B. Stuczynski

This article analyzes three sermons given by António Vieira in the church of Santa Engrácia (Lisbon) during the commemoration ceremonies for a host desecration allegedly perpetrated by a Converso in 1630. How could an ardent advocate of the New Christians such as Vieira, who is perceived as the embodiment of early modern Iberian philosemitism, agree to deliver homilies in such a notorious anti-Jewish and anti-Converso hub? Although these sermons were part of a homiletical tradition developed in Santa Engrácia around the profanation of the Eucharist, I will argue that they provide a novel means to understand Vieira’s pro-Converso and pro-Jewish approach, usually understood through his prophetic and mercantilist writings.

The Queen of Herbs: A Plant’s-Eye View of the Sephardic Diaspora
Sarah Abrevaya Stein

This ethnobotanical, historical study explores modern Sephardic Jews’ abiding affection for ruta graveolens, rue, or ruda (as it is known in Ladino). Folkloric writing on ruda has emphasized the immutability of Mediterranean Jewish folkways, but ruda has a history that reveals how a plant can further a particular diaspora—not the Jewish diaspora from biblical Israel, nor the Sephardic diaspora from medieval Iberia, but the Jewish diaspora from the modern Ottoman Balkans. Ruda offers a fresh perspective on the caterwaul of change engulfing modern Sephardim, refocusing attention from politics to the intimate, tactile, and gendered.
The First Genocide: Antisemitism and Universalism in Raphael Lemkin’s Thought
James Loeffler

When did the first genocide take place in history? In theory, a universal crime transcends time and space. In practice, the moral imagination demands a specific origin story. In this article, I explain how and why Raphael Lemkin chose to locate genocide’s archetypal origins in the early Christian martyrdom at the hands of the ancient Romans. That choice emerged from a dramatic public confrontation with Catholic antisemitism in interwar Poland. Haunted by the charge of Jewish moral parochialism, after the war Lemkin fashioned a cosmopolitan narrative for his discovery of genocide. Today, scholars are consumed by debates about the historical and conceptual relationship between the Holocaust and other genocides. Yet we cannot move forward in that endeavor until we retrieve Lemkin’s Polish Jewish past.

A World of Weak Eternities: Modern Jewish Thought, the Political, and the Interwar Quest for Immortality
Asher D. Biemann

Interwar Europe saw a deep yearning for eternity among Jewish and Christian thinkers. This yearning also included a renewed attention to the difficult concepts of immortality and resurrection, which took on moral meaning akin to repentance and repair. Beginning with Karl Löwith’s famous critique of Heidegger’s Being and Time through Rosenzweig’s eternity philosophy, this essay reads the Star of Redemption in concert with the writings of Max Scheler, Hermann Cohen, Leo Baeck, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, Martin Buber, and Ernst Cassirer, situating Rosenzweig’s work within an interwar “eternalism,” in which eternity appeared as a worldly concept resisting historical pessimism and the politics of fate. As such, the concept of eternity functioned less as a flight from history and worldly politics than as a conscious critique of historical time and the power of finitude. This restores meaning to Löwith’s assertion that politics as an endeavor of humanity needs the horizon of eternity, while the same horizon of eternity, for Cohen and Rosenzweig, offered also a vision of perpetual peace.