Call for Papers

Material culture among Jewish communities in the East

9th – 10th September 2024

The Ben-Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East

The material shift in scholarship in the Humanities in recent decades emphasizes the myriad ways in which objects and other material expressions shape the communal, cultural and theological concepts of the societies in which they were formed. This shift also highlights the role played by objects as agents in identity construction, and in the formation of interpersonal interactions, as well as in interactions between humans and the Divine.

This conference will address issues related to the material culture of Jewish communities under Muslim rule, in their countries of origin and in the Land of Israel. The focus of this conference is based on the concept that an examination of the material aspects of various societies and cultures is vital to understanding them. Scholarly interest in material culture has increased in tandem with the lowering of interdisciplinary boundaries between diverse fields of knowledge, and also greatly due to the influence of the French Annales school of thought. Material culture has become the focus of scholarship by historians, art historians, sociologists, anthropologists and cultural historians. The study of material culture offers a glimpse into the worlds of marginal groups, such as women, children, the poor and minorities, and can also reveal significant changes which took place in day-to-day life beyond the spheres of politics and religion, such as patterns of migration and settlement, the production and marketing of food, medical treatments, means of communication, literacy levels and more.

However, we do not intend to focus solely on marginal groups. By exploring the material culture of Jews in the Muslim world, we hope to gain a better understanding of Jewish societies as a whole: women and men, rich and poor, as well as the central and marginal parts of society. Likewise, we hope to improve our understanding of the Jewish existence as a minority in the Muslim world. The conference will also employ a comparative perspective with an eye to understanding the points of convergence and divergence between the material culture of the Jews in the Muslim world and that of their Muslim neighbours; we shall also seek to compare and contrast the material culture of Jews in Christian Europe and the Muslim world.

The conference will take place during a difficult year in which Israeli society and the entire Jewish world have endured catastrophic events. Beyond the horrific loss of life, many have lost their homes, while others have had to leave them behind. Special emphasis will be given in the conference to the material world in times of crisis. We will examine the place of material culture...
during crises, and look at the influences of crisis on material culture – what people chose to take with them when being displaced and migrating, and what they chose to remember and preserve.

We invite submissions dealing with material culture in Jewish communities in the Muslim world, the Land of Israel, Ethiopia, central Asia and the Sephardic diaspora. Submissions may relate to the following, among other topics:

- Patterns of settlement: cities, quarters, streets, towns and villages; permanent and temporary dwellings and buildings; the Jewish home.
- Small items and/or the practices surrounding them: religious and ritual objects, objects of magical significance, clothing and jewelry, furniture and practical objects.
- The movement and transportation of food, spatial movements, livestock and draft animals.
- The world of the book: manuscripts, illustrated books, maps and the material aspects of books.
- The affinities between the material world and imagination (dreams, prophecies, memory) and the ways in which these worlds shape each other.
- Intercultural transitions of objects and material motifs, and their influence on material culture. Continuity and crisis: what people take with them and what they leave behind in times of crisis, flight or displacement.

Submissions (in Hebrew or English) should be sent to Ms. Haya Sigal at mbz@ybz.org.il with the subject heading “Material Culture Conference” by **March 10th, 2024**. We also welcome suggestions for thematic panels. Please include an academic CV and an abstract of no more than 250 words.