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Living in a Multicultural Neighbourhood: Ottoman Society Reflected in Rabbinic *Responsa* of the 16th and 17th Centuries

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ABSTRACT

This chapter contributes to the current discussion on how concepts related to frontiers and identities may be useful for research on early modern urban societies. It focuses on a specific type of space – “Ottoman urban space” – and shows how this was perceived and represented by its Jewish inhabitants in the 16th and 17th centuries. The principal primary source used is the so-called *Responsa* literature, a special genre of rabbinic literature, based on a question-and-answer format. *Responsa* texts dealt with various situations and problems that confronted Jews and which were too complicated to be resolved by one individual. The issue of language has meant that for some time this source has not been used by historians. The present study sees Ottoman society as heterogeneous, comprising multiple individual and collective identities, and divided by mental boundaries which were dynamic, fluid and often permeable. The aim here is to illustrate different types of identity from the Jewish perspective, with a special emphasis on the fact that Jewishness (which may be understood in religious, ethnic, and cultural terms) was only one way of self-identification. Specifically, three types of border are explored: administrative, cultural and religious – thematic fields which are richly documented in the *Responsa* literature.

Osmanské město raného novověku lze chápat jako specifický typ prostředí, v němž docházelo k setkávání mnoha kulturních, náboženských a etnických skupin. Mluvíme-li o setkávání jednotlivců a skupin, nevyhnutelně se dostaneme k otázce existence hranic mezi nimi a také k otázce kolektivních identit. Referenční rámec tohoto příspěvku tvoří každodenní zkušenost příslušníků osmanských židovských komunit v multikulturním prostředí osmanského města v centrálních oblastech říše (Istanbul, Soluň) a druhotně i názory a interpretace židovských učenců, tak jak jsou zachyceny a prezentovány v rabínské responsivní literatuře. Tato literatura má podobu otázek a odpovědí, které se dotýkají všech životních situací a které řeší aktuální problémy, se kterými si tazatel sám nevěděl rady. Problém (jádro dotazu) je vždy vylíčen v širších souvislostech, podává detailní popis vzniklé situace, chování aktérů, někdy dokonce cituje či parafrázuje jejich přímé výpovědi. Na poli responsivní literatury se tak střetávají dva světy – svět učenců a svět „lidových“ vrstev. Přestože je tento pramen

mimořádným zdrojem informací, jeho využití zůstává v celosvětovém měřítku stále marginální, především vinou jazykové bariéry.

V příspěvku jsou pojednány tři tématické okruhy, v nichž problematika hranic a identit zaujímá centrální místo. Osmanská vláda explicitně nezakazovala (ale ani nepovolovala) činnost křesťanských a židovských soudních dvorů a autorit, pokud v případě nefiguroval muslim. Tato tichá tolerance administrativní a soudní činnosti náboženských minorit se omezovala pouze na sféru rodinného a občanského práva (sňatky, rozvody, dědictví) a nikoli na trestně-právní oblast. Rabíni jakožto představitelé soudní moci židovských komunit apelovali na důsledné využívání této tolerance a ostře kritizovali jedince, kteří vyhledávali osmanské soudy a úřady v interních záležitostech komunity. Administrativní hranice a její překračování je tedy jednou dělicí čarou mezi židovským společenstvím a okolím, její legitimita i reálná účinnost však zůstávala diskutabilní a proto neustále zdůrazňovaná.

Prostor osmanského města nabízel jeho obyvatelům množství příležitostí k vzájemné komunikaci. Přestože příslušníci jednotlivých náboženských skupin projevovali tendenci usazovat se v blízkosti svých souvěrců, nevznikaly uzavřené čtvrti s obyvatelstvem pouze jedné denominace. Bezprostřední styk Židů s muslimy a křesťany se tedy neodehrával pouze v místech obchodních aktivit, ale také neformálně „na ulici“, v nejbližším sousedství nebo i v soukromé sféře, a jeho charakter určovalo leckdy spíše sociální postavení než náboženská příslušnost. Nežidovští obyvatelé osmanského města nebyli vnímáni jednotně formou obecně přijímaného stereotypu. Mezi Židy a nežidy byla navazována přátelství, jindy ale slyšíme o nebezpečí, které číhá na každého, kdo udržuje neformální styky s nežidovským okolím.

Představa, že mezi židovskou komunitou a okolní společností existovala tlustá zeď znemožňující vzájemný kontakt, je stejně neudržitelná jako představa o kompaktnosti osmanské židovské komunity. I v ní byly přítomné různé rozdělující momenty, které jedince nebo určitou skupinu mohly odsunout na okraj židovské společnosti nebo dokonce z jejího středu vyloučit.

Conventionally, scholars have viewed the 16th-century as the zenith of the Ottoman Empire: as it expanded from Buda in the west to the Persian Gulf in the east, its political and economic power increased. The presence of an expansive Ottoman empire had a profound effect on Europe's Jewish population. In the 1490s Jews in the Iberian Peninsula were both expelled and forcibly baptised, and many left for other Christian European countries, the Americas, and the Ottoman Empire. In many cases, the latter destination proved to be the best option, and up to the 19th century Ottoman territory retained a positive image among Jews. Among the factors which made the Empire more favourable to the Jews than Christian Europe included an already significant Jewish presence, less state interference in religion, and relative security of person and property. One of the chief sources for this chapter – the writings of Rabbi Shemuel di Medina – observed the more favourable conditions in the Ottoman Empire compared to Italy,

concluding that Ottoman cities such as Salonica (today Thessaloniki) had Jewish majorities and protected Jewish culture, religion and property¹.

The Jewish influx to the regions under Ottoman rule did not abate throughout the 16th century, and the Sephardim (Spanish Jews) were by no means the only newcomers that relocated to the Empire. Ottoman urban space offered safety, commercial opportunities, and freedom to associate with co-religionists. Consequently, Jewish migration to the countryside was rarer, and the overall character of Jewish settlement remained firmly urban. Moreover, the rabbinic establishment was urban-based in its perception of the world – though it claimed a general validity and aimed to influence lives of the Jewish people in rural as well as urban areas.

‘Ottoman urban space’ was simultaneously strictly segregated and integrated. Generally speaking influences ‘from above’ – the secular and religious authorities – endeavoured to maintain firm boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims. Institutions such as Mosques and Koranic schools were clustered together and non-Muslims were debarred from entering them. On the other hand, spontaneous impulses ‘from below’ attempted to promote a fluid and less constrained everyday life. Coffee houses, for instance, were accessible to all. Unconsciously, ‘survival strategies’ were developed by citizens of a multicultural society, in an environment where strict application of Shariah law would be inconvenient for Muslims as well as others. In terms of residential structure Ottoman towns were truly multicultural neighbourhoods, and there was no institution parallel to that of the ghetto, found in Christian cities. The only restrictions that were enforced prevented non-Muslims from residing in the proximity of Muslim religious buildings. Otherwise, non-Muslims and Muslims could live side-by-side. Thus many neighbourhoods were actually multicultural, comprising Muslim, Jewish, as well as Christian elements.

One of the features of early modern European cities was the regulation of trade by the city within its borders. Town officials controlled the buying and selling of goods. The economic restrictions found echoes in the fortified character of many towns: enclosed spaces with restricted access. However, the situation in the Ottoman realm was rather different. The Jewish sources attest to considerable freedom. Of the Greek city of Ioannina it was written that:

the city [remains] open without walls, its gates opened day and night; who wants to enter enters, who wants to leave does so; it stands to reason and to sense, that the Jewish inhabitants of a certain city have no power to keep the Jews from different a city, or from this or another kingdom, from coming; on the contrary, who needs to come and trade is allowed to do so, according to his will².

The author portrays the city-borders as permeable, although their existence is not denied. It is assumed that the potential reader is familiar with the limits of the town space, and no additional clarification is found necessary. Moreover, in the eyes of the author,

the Ottoman city does not constitute an autonomous and independent unit: quite the contrary.

It seems that common ‘secular’ interest was a prime reason for Jewish merchants of Ottoman cities to stick together, and this interest could have been shared with merchants of another religion as well. This leads us to another complex issue: the question of multiple identities. An analytical tool developed by sociologist Norbert Elias, so-called “figurations”, may help us to understand various identities within larger groups³. Figurations are evolving networks of interdependent individuals, which the individual enters and leaves in the course of his lifetime. The more diverse the societies the more complex were the chains of figurations they contained. Using the concept of figurations allows us to treat the individual, with his or her multiple identities, as an active factor in society, while at the same time retaining the idea of social structure. We can imagine the multiple identities of an individual – usually linked to different kinds of collective identities – as chains of figurations.

PRIMARY SOURCES

The empirical part of this chapter is based on *Responsa* literature. The books of *Responsa* constitute a special genre of rabbinic literature. Originally these works, which take the form of a set of questions and answers, aimed to resolve specific problems and to regulate and preserve legal, religious, and social norms within the Jewish society; they also attempted to reconcile the Jewish lifestyle in a non-Jewish setting. Thus, we can classify them as religious-legal treatises – and they constitute a useful source for historians. The enquirers asked their questions either in a written or an oral form (by themselves, but frequently also through another rabbi or some literate member of the community). Although the authentic formulations might not have been preserved in the text, the key information remains traceable and enables the reader to investigate everyday life in the Ottoman realm over several centuries. Regarding authorship, it may initially appear that the *Responsa* are the product of the learned elite, but in fact, we hear also the voices of the ordinary, often illiterate and uneducated, people. Their experiences are documented and we may therefore acknowledge their ‘co-authorship’. The *Responsa* texts may be viewed as a document of a meeting of worlds – the scholars and the ordinary people.

Despite their richness and detail one has to bear in mind the limits of this type of source. Some emendations by the original scribe or later editors may be detected. They also present some interpretive challenges. To help resolve these, we may divide the text (the questions, as well as the answers) into two levels of attainable ‘testimony’. The core of the text relates to the legal, or *halachic*, dimension: the presentation of the problem to which a solution was sought. A second layer is the ‘embellishment’ of the problem – including detailed accounts of incidents, and sometimes speech. While the core usu-

ally presents a deviation from social or legal norm, or records complicated and extraordinary situations (otherwise no question would have been posed), the narrative 'embellishment' provides a window onto the everyday life of the actors.

The *Responsa* volumes used in this chapter originate from the central parts of the Ottoman Empire (Istanbul, Thessaloniki) and Jerusalem. However, questions were also submitted from other cities (such as Bitola and Ioannina), and in a number of cases the location remains unknown. As mentioned earlier, the urban-orientated range of perceptions, ideas, and opinions of the Jewish scholars deeply influenced and shaped the texts of the *Responsa*. Therefore, we can read the texts and interpret them as an outcome of the urban life experience, even if some of them deal with events beyond the town walls.

JEWISH AND NON-JEWISH AUTHORITIES IN THE OTTOMAN CITY

Ottoman law acknowledged *de iure* only Ottoman public administration and courts. Yet, in reality, non-Muslim official bodies also functioned in the city, and, though not explicitly licensed by the government, were tolerated. The state allowed non-Muslims to deal with personal and religious matters that did not involve a Muslim subject, within their own legal system; but Muslim legal authorities were superior to Jewish or Christian courts and could override their judgements. Still, some historians have argued that the Jewish population had considerable economic, social and administrative and judicial self-sufficiency⁴. But to clarify further these legal observations, we need to look at the role and powers of the Kadi, or Ottoman civil judge.

The Kadi's daily agenda encompassed a wide range of activities: he worked as a local judge, as a public notary, he dealt with various fiscal issues, and registered marriages, divorces, collective agreements of professional groups, and real estate transactions. The Kadi also represented the state authority in the town or district. All the imperial decrees sent from the capital were directed to the local Kadi, who was responsible for their local implementation.

Many Jews and Christians appealed to the Shariah court even in internal matters, which could have been very well resolved in the framework of the Jewish or Christian legislative. At a first glance, this behaviour may seem strange. The picture becomes clearer when we consider the diverse motivations of those who appealed to the Ottoman court or authority rather than to the rabbinic court. Sometimes the need for official and generally accepted approval proved stronger than the appeal of a purely Jewish settlement. On other occasions, however, the motivation was simple pragmatism, as one litigant shows:

You also know what my dear father-in-law Yakob Katalani did to me. He emptied my house and took all my belongings and goods away in containers. And also what my wife Rachama did, that is she escaped our house and went to the house of her father on the 9th of Av, when

I was praying in the synagogue. They want me to divorce her and to abandon my firstborn son, who had been born to us, and not to see him any more. What is more, they menace me and threaten me saying that they will hand me over to the non-Jews with the help of the Lady, who has a good name before the King and before the notables⁵.

The view of the greater Jewish population seems to have been an influence on rabbis. In one example a rabbi refused to perform a divorce ceremony in the presence of Muslims merely out of fear that the ordinary people would regard the ceremony as forced:

This wicked initiator [of the divorce ceremony] wanted to disregard deliberately the simple people and he enabled [the girl to undergo] *halitzah*⁶ and gave her a *get*⁷ in front of three or two messengers of the non-Jewish judge, even though I had said to those people before they came to my house: “remember, that I won’t do anything unless you send the men of the white turban [i.e., Muslims] away, for I don’t want people to think this divorce ceremony was performed unwillingly, under pressure and with a help of the non-Jews”⁸. But he paid no attention to this⁹.

Such a cautious approach to the affair indicates not only what people might have thought of this procedure, but also that the community could refuse to accept a forced divorce. Thus, the limits of rabbinic jurisdiction were set by the rabbinic discourse and the state regulation on the one hand, but on the other, by the consent of the greater Jewish community.

The Responsa texts clearly define the status of non-Jewish authorities within Jewish law: it supported the law of the secular state, unless it directly contradicted the Torah. In the Ottoman Empire, however, the legal system was a complex of several parallel institutions. In the eyes of the Jewish legal system, the Kanun – a collection of the laws issued by the Sultan – represented state law. However, the Ottoman courts and administrative bodies also upheld the religious Shariah law and custom. This created a dilemma for the Jewish authorities, which they attempted to resolve in the Responsa. In one case regarding a widow’s property, a Jewish judge wrote:

There is no need to take into account the decree of a royal judge [Kadi]; that is to hand the said house over to the brother of the deceased, for the royal law [i.e. the state laws], about which we say “the state law is valid law” [*dina de’malchuta dina*] does not apply here. These authorities administrate justice in compliance with the books of their own law [...] The rules of the authorities cannot invalidate just laws and decrees held by the holy Jewish nation, and these authorities have no power to invalidate the Christian religious law, for according to the Christian law a Christian widow is the property-owner [...] And it follows that Reuven has a right to hold this house.

The Istanbul rabbi, Moshe Benvenisti, came to a similar conclusion: “Although the King insists consistently on strict observance of the law [...] the rules applied by the authorities are not of a royal origin, but in fact these authorities decide according to their own [system of rules]”¹⁰. Although an appeal to an Ottoman court could have been justified on the grounds of the rule of *dina de’malchuta dina*, many rabbis urged members of the

community to follow and rely on rabbinic verdicts when possible. It was rare for Jewish courts to transfer litigants to Ottoman authorities. Such cases involved notorious and intractable individuals: “I dare say that one who is cruel and relentless should be handed over to the non-Jews, in order to protect the oppressed from his oppressor [...] Moreover, we are entitled to act for the sake of the oppressed, and it is stated that this is indeed our duty”¹¹. The demand for communal solidarity dictated the exclusion of elements who were considered threats to the well-being of the wider community. In general, no definitive and consistent attitude prevailed among rabbis regarding the right of a Jew to appeal to a non-Jewish authority, and this made the task of delineating a clear border between the Jewish and non-Jewish administration and jurisdiction even more complicated. Moreover, Jewish official bodies lacked effective tools for the complete consolidation of their legal proceedings, and relied to some degree on cooperation with the local authorities (for example, the imprisonment of Jewish convicts in state gaols). It was not exceptional for Ottoman judges to favour rabbinic law over royal law. One judge rejected the Kadi’s decision:

[I have] rejected [the legal decision of the Kadi] and forbade the division [of the inheritance] among the family members in the above mentioned manner [according to Shariah law], and this [manner] would be acceptable only if they asked [the Kadi] to divide [the inheritance] among them according to the glorious Shariah, [demonstrating that] they abandon [a religion], which is their confession¹².

A more surprising example of Muslim use of rabbinic law was the case of the man who looked to the Jewish legal system in order to avoid future controversies over property acquired:

Reuven owned a shop according to the law of *hazakah* and pledged it to a Turk for a certain sum of money, because a purchase was impossible according to their [Ottoman] law. The Turk told Reuven “what shall I do in case you default on payments? No Jew will come to settle in the house and no Turk will buy it”. Therefore, the Turk asked a Jew for advice and was told “Provide yourself with a contract issued according to our laws”; and so he did, and Reuven gave the purchase contract to the Turk in accordance with Jewish law¹³.

Besides the mutual agreement between the Muslim and the Jew based on Jewish law, the concern of the Muslim for finding Jewish or Muslim tenants deserves our attention. The Muslim obviously had a broad knowledge of Jewish commercial habits. This familiarity could only be attained by consistent exposure to Jewish society. This leads us in return to the notion of the multicultural character of the Ottoman urban space, which encouraged mutual knowledge of the norms of other societies.

EVERYDAY ENCOUNTERS OF OTTOMAN SUBJECTS

Jews, then, were not completely isolated within the greater Ottoman urban environment. Yet the inclination to concentrate into co-religious groupings of various sizes was understandable. The *Responsa* evidence is illustrative of everyday interaction between

societies. First, let us clarify our pre-suppositions regarding a ‘typical’ Jewish individual in a 16th-century Ottoman city. Certainly, he is a member of a nuclear and a wider family, a town dweller and a subject of the Sultan (and as such shares this quality with all the subjects under the Sultan’s rule). Undoubtedly, he belongs to some social stratum, and at the same time, he must be a member of one of the Jewish congregations¹⁴. Very likely, he has a trade or profession, and enters the local market. Perhaps he is a member of one of the Jewish or mixed professional corporations (*esnaf*). His mother tongue can be Ladino or Greek, or another language that was spoken among the Jews (and he thus also belongs to a group marked by language), but there is a great chance that he speaks also Ottoman Turkish and maintains contacts with his non-Jewish neighbours or co-workers. There are plenty of coffee houses in which to socialize, and the streets are always crowded during the day. If he is a merchant, he has many contacts throughout the Ottoman Empire and beyond. If he is a shopkeeper, he will have strong ties to the local market and to ‘his’ city. This ‘profession-based solidarity’ of shopkeepers would be outwardly manifested when they felt jeopardized by economic rivals that entered without permission into ‘their’ domain demarcated by the borders of the town. If we carried on, we would possibly find many other links between the individual and his surroundings. Each of these affiliations implies a wide range of experiences, sometimes of a different or even conflicting nature.

There was no single experience which characterised Jewish life in Ottoman cities. This is one reason why no single stereotype related to the ‘Turk’ – which we encounter in contemporary Christian European civilization – emerged in Jewish communities in Ottoman cities. In fact, Jewish perceptions of the Sultan as both institution and personality were generally positive. Rather like the European idea of ‘evil council’, Jews blamed officials and servants for misconduct, corruption or injustice, but not the sovereign. The Responsa literature affirmed the supremacy of the Sultan as divinely-authorized and with Scriptural legitimacy:

Those who do not hold our King, a great and merciful King (may his majesty be exalted and Kingdom elevated) in high regard are not worthy to come into this world. For everyone who claims for himself the name Israel¹⁵ is obliged to follow with a great awe his ordinances and fulfil his orders and decrees in the same manner as he fulfils the commandments of the Lord of the World. As [King] Solomon (may he rest in peace) wrote: “Fear God, my son, and the king, too”, and this is even more true for such great and merciful King like this, under whom we find our haven, which is the will of the Lord of the World¹⁶.

In the Responsa literature, non-Jews are often identified as friends and beloved ones. Friendships may have been genuine. An interesting example came from an observer of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem (though the story may have taken place in another Ottoman city):

One of the guest pilgrims asked me about Reuven, who was a passionate smoker of what was called in all the languages *tutun*¹⁷, all the weekdays including the nights, until he fell asleep.

He was deeply troubled on the Holy Shabbath, when the evil inclination tempted him to visit a non-Jew who smoked, to enjoy the fragrance of the smoke coming out of his mouth, and so he did and he was calmed. It followed that Reuven became his friend¹⁸, and he noticed Reuven's pleasure from the fragrance. Moreover, the non-Jew himself told Reuven on the Holy Shabbath to open his mouth and inhale the smoke, and to fill his mouth with smoke, and to emit it slowly afterwards. And this is what Reuven did every Holy Shabbath. It came to such a point that when the non-Jew saw Reuven approaching on Shabbath, he made an effort to light the smoking-machine¹⁹ in order to please Reuven, who came and sat down next to him and carried out the above-mentioned action, even though the non-Jew originally did not intend to smoke. He did so only to pay honour to his friend Reuven²⁰.

What is of great importance is that a rabbi did not see anything wrong with socializing with non-Jews, or even becoming firm friends. And given the significance attached to concepts of honour in Muslim society, the relationship between Reuven and his Muslim friend must be evidence of mutual regard and acceptance of 'the other'. Alternatively we may say that different aspects of one's identity are stressed in different situations – or different social figurations, to utilize Norbert Elias' term – according to the nature of the situation and the character of the participants in the figuration. In this particular case, the social identity outweighed the religious identity, even though the latter does not lose its significance: after all, Reuven's adherence to Jewish religious observance brought him closer to a non-Jewish neighbour.

Quite often Muslims figured as eyewitnesses in cases related to so-called *agunot* (deserted wives); such cases are especially valuable as evidence for interaction between Jews and non-Jews in everyday life. Any married woman could fall into the category of 'deserted wife', if her husband had been missing for a long period. Even if there was a valid reason to assume he had died, his wife could not be proclaimed a widow unless two Jewish witnesses confirmed the identity of a corpse as the husband. If no such testimony was available, Jewish courts were prepared to accept, under clearly defined conditions, a testimony of a non-Jew. The non-Jewish witness had to describe the situation in detail, and he had to narrate the event in front of Jews without having been influenced in favour of the woman. The very fact that non-Jews exercised readiness and capability to testify, and that a Jewish jurisdiction relied on their testimony, indicates close ties between the societies. The following story shows the initiative of a non-Jew who reported the death of his Jewish friend to his community:

It happened once that a non-Jew came to a Maskalor market [...] and told a couple of the Jews standing at the market place, that, on his way from Platamona, he encountered the body of Yakob Ezra, who was lying in a field dead, and he was obviously dead for a long time, may God avenge the blood of his friend and colleague [...] And the dead Yakob was a very good and old friend of his²¹.

Here, we can see the multiculturalism of the market place: apart from its commercial function, it was a locus of informal social interaction. The non-Jew knew exactly where

to seek out someone who would listen to his news. A similar incident recorded in the Responsa literature ran:

A certain Jew came and said “I have been in the *bedestan*²² and encountered one Turk, whom I know, and he said to me ‘Avraham, don’t you know Avraham’s son-in-law, who had a blotched face? One *emir* said to me: “I was on the same boat like him and there was no other Jew there. And the boat sank and I escaped with other few Ishmaelites. He was thrown out from the sea at one of the islands and I have recognized him and buried him”²³.

For a non-Jew’s evidence to be acceptable it would have to be clear that the deponent was offering evidence of his own volition, that he named the victim and his father, that he referred to distinguishing marks by which the body’s identity could be confirmed, and that the deponent had buried the corpse. In the case cited, the non-Jewish deponent fulfilled all the above criteria, except mentioning the father’s name. It is therefore likely that the non-Jew was aware that his information could be crucial with regard to the future of the widow. Everyday contact meant that various groups were familiar with the norms and laws of other groups, especially if friendly relations between them existed.

The following extract from the Responsa offers insights into the life of inter-city merchants, the relations between Jews and Christians and between urban and rural dwellers:

And we also ask you to explain, whether [this woman] can remarry on the grounds of these testimonies; the above mentioned Reuven was actually killed on his trade journey in the countryside. The incident happened as follows. The above mentioned Reuven travelled together with his friend, and since the day was Thursday, he slaughtered five or six hens with the intention to enter the city and spend there the Holy Shabbath. He said to his friend “Go ahead [...] and we will meet in such and such village and we will spend the Shabbath in the city”; and the friend proceeded to that village and waited for him. When he saw that he was not coming, he turned back and searched for him in all the villages, but he did not find him. So he went to the city to report that bad affair to the brother [of his friend], who started to look for him. He did not find him, and so he went to a village called Istoriplis, from where his brother departed, and walked in the house of certain non-Jewess, who knew the murdered Reuven. He asked her in a roundabout way if she had some wax or almonds to sell as always in the past and the non-Jewess replied: “I know you didn’t come to buy either wax nor almonds, but you came to look for your brother Reuven. Right now eight days have passed since my husband saw him dead on the hill called Kinoliri, his cattle grazing around him. And the *veyvoda*²⁴ saw him too, when he passed by and collected almost 3000 *levanim* in the villages”. Therefore, his brother climbed the hill, but he could not find him [...]. Another time two of us went there, with a judge and with a couple of Jews, who testified that the judge’s auxiliaries caught a Greek and wanted him to say what had happened to the Jew. The Greek replied: “I know nothing, I just went once to tend the cattle, and a Greek called Jorgo Lionei came up and warned us against climbing the hill called Kinoliri and against tending the cattle there, for he saw there a murdered Jew, and cattle grazing around him. Do not pass through that place, so that no harm and no loss may happen to you from the *veyvoda*”. And this Greek Jorgo Lionei is a husband of the above mentioned non-Jewess, who testified on his behalf to the brother of the victim²⁵.

It appears that the villagers knew the fate of the Jew, but refrained from reporting it to the authorities, since they could have been interrogated in the connection with a murder. Note that the victim's brother, after an unsuccessful search for his sibling, decided to visit a very specific Greek woman who worked as a local shopkeeper, expecting to receive useful information on passers-by. The remark made about the local official and tax collector is of high importance. Since the corpse disappeared, there was no tangible evidence of Reuven's death. Therefore, the more reliable eyewitnesses were available, the more likely it was that the victim's wife would be proclaimed a widow. In this respect, a testimony passed by a local authority representative, whose presence in the locality at a given time was held indubitable, was extremely valuable.

JEW AS 'THE OTHER': STRATEGIES OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION/INCLUSION

Up to now, we have explored aspects of Jewish experience in a largely non-Jewish environment. There were, however, internal borders within the Jewish community; there were cases in which the Jewish community saw some of its members as 'others'. This usually occurred in cases of apostasy, or a transgressing of the secular rules, which was punishable by excommunication. The implications of excommunication, apart from social degradation inherent in the denial of public services and membership of the synagogue, also included economic sanctions. Members of a congregation, and sometimes even the Jewish population in the city or region, were forbidden to purchase products which were subject to *halachic* regulations, such as wine, dairy products, or bread, from an excommunicated person. He was an outcast from Jewish society, and his word was devalued in the eyes of the Jewish judiciary. Yet, theory aside, the wishes of the congregation were crucial: if a local rabbi decided to excommunicate a certain transgressor of social or legal norms and the congregation itself refused to follow his decision, the individual in fact remained within the borders of the congregation as a full member.

An extreme case of religious deviation was conversion – mainly to Islam, but sometimes also to Christianity. Although we would expect an individual, who abandoned Judaism, to leave the Jewish congregation, it was not uncommon for converts to stay in the community, maintaining contacts with their Jewish families. Paradoxically, in some cases the representatives of the Jewish congregation appealed to the local Ottoman authority, asking them to persuade converts to move²⁶. The individual stories contained in the *Responsa* texts suggest that social and economic factors were most important in cases of conversion. Apostates, for instance, were sometimes held in higher regard by the Ottoman authorities than practising Jews:

An apostate frightened Reuven and denounced him [to the authorities]. He told him that unless he gave him 500 florins, he would inform on him to the Muslims, and say he had cursed the King and his religion [...] When Reuven saw the catastrophe falling upon him, he went to the friends and begged them to pacify and bribe the apostate [...] they went as Reuven wished, and succeeded in pacifying him with a bribe of 4000 *levanim*²⁷.

With a new religious status, a convert gained a higher social position, which accorded him an advantage over the members of Jewish community. However, despite the fact that the Ottoman authorities considered conversion to Islam to be irreversible, there were opportunities for former Jews to return to the old faith. Jewish law enabled this; moreover, the expansion of the Ottoman Empire made it easy for former Jews to relocate and reintegrate themselves into the Jewish community:

A year after the great plague [Mordechai Gim'ah] went to the city of Safed (may God soon rebuild and renew it in our days) and he embarked the ship together with Yehoshua de Yanko, and he found there also Yosef Amigo, who was in these days a Turk. When he got to Safed, Dona Sol la Galdita, mother of the above mentioned Yosef, came over and when she came near to the city, her son Yosef met her halfway, and she wailed, breaking her head with two stones, [saying] she had no children any longer and remained childless. Her son Yosef tried to comfort her, asking her to stop crying, [promising] he would become a Jew, but she replied, better he would die because of the apostasy like his brother Yakob. She came to the house of her two daughters, where all these mourned for her son Yakob, who had died here in Thessaloniki²⁸.

While we do not know if the apostate returned to his former religion, it is significant that it was considered to be a viable option.

The Responsa texts also refer to conversion to Judaism. In most cases, the converts were servants (mostly Muslim) in Jewish households. Ottoman law, of course, forbade this practice, but even the most severe sanctions could not eradicate it completely. Less frequently, we also encounter sincere converts to Judaism, who reportedly abandoned their possessions and families in order to become members of the Jewish community: “[t]his man was a righteous convert [to Judaism], and he had given up all the wealth, property, and pleasures in order to hide under the wings of the Divine presence, and those who mock him deserve a severe punishment”²⁹. Unfortunately, the sources remain silent about the background of such individuals and about the details of their conversion. What seems clear, however, is a resolute rabbinic order to accept the convert without hesitation; nevertheless, once again successful integration into the community depended on the nature of each congregation and the elasticity of its symbolic borders.

Sometimes a Jewish congregation consciously built its collective identity on a common history, language and family relations that could not have been shared by the rest of the city’s Jewish population. This is especially true for the Iberian Peninsula Diaspora and their descendants, who portrayed themselves as a unique ‘Spanish nation’, in opposition to other Jewish ethnic and cultural groups (Ashkenazic Jews, Romaniots, and Jews from the Arab provinces)³⁰. The “Spanish nation” was, admittedly, far from homogeneous. It embraced those Jews who left Spain in 1492 for other European countries as well as Portugal, where Jews were tolerated until the late 1490s when forced baptism was introduced. Many of the “New Christians”³¹ consequently left Portugal. Some of the

expellees headed directly to the Ottoman Empire; some reached the Ottoman realm only after a period in the European Christian countries. What made the choice of the Ottoman Empire even more attractive was the fact that the *anusim* (those forcibly baptised) could freely return to Judaism there. The position of the *anusim* in the Jewish community was, however, ambivalent. Sometimes they were denigrated by other Jews; at other times they were recognised as full members of the Spanish nation. A legal case brought before Rabbi Shemuel di Medina forced him to draw a distinction between Jews and their former co-religionists:

Reuven has died and left behind all his property in the hands of the Jewish court, until his heir comes to claim it. But the heir lives in Portugal as a non-Jew, and there is a Jewess called Leah standing in front of us, who is a sister of the above-mentioned heir, whose father was a non-Jew, and she raises a legal claim upon the inheritance left by the above mentioned Reuven. She maintains that her brother and a relative of the deceased should be considered dead, since he lives as a non-Jew, and that she is the only legal inheritor, and all the rights and issues related to her brother are to be transferred to her [...] The answer: I believe the case is clear, for the heir had an opportunity in the past few years to return to the Jewish law [...] Apparently, the legal decision stands as follows: the inheritance passes to his sister for the above-mentioned reason, that is, as if the heir had died [...] The inheritance [...] passes to this woman called Leah, who is a Jewess and stands in front of us, and maintains a truly Jewish lifestyle. And we do not need to wait for a removed relative, for such relative could have come during the past couple of years, but this did not happen, and as such he lost all the rights as an heir [...] Even though in the case of levirate marriage we recognize those *anusim* as Jews [...] in property issues they are not to be taken into account [...] and in our case [...] since they could have come, but they did not, he is not to be called a Jew or brother in the question of property³².

Here Rabbi di Medina was clearly cautious in declaring *anusim* separate from the Jewish community. Only when he had to solve a question of property ownership, did he deny the Christian relatives of the deceased their inheritance rights.

CONCLUSION

Borders existed within the Jewish community, but at any moment these borders were liable to alter, or even disappear, when such action was considered to be essential for the wider community. These alterations to inner and exterior frontiers decided by Jewish congregations could be formal or informal. Meanwhile, relations with the wider Ottoman urban population ranged from cordial to hostile, depending on specific circumstances and personal experiences. As a result, we encounter multiple images that correspond to multiple experiences and to the heterogeneity of the Ottoman urban population. In this respect, we should consider also the role of the individual's own experiences and the way this helped to shape his perceptions of the environment. Ultimately, individuals were able to select the most suitable image or conception, and apply

it to the appropriate circumstance: this characterised Jewish life in the ‘multicultural neighbourhood’ that was the Ottoman city.

NOTES

- ¹ R. Shemuel di Medina, *Shu"t Maharashdam*, IV, 434, a reprint of the Lvov edition from 1862, undated. Rabbi Shemuel di Medina (Maharashdam, 1506/7- 1589) worked in Thessaloniki. He was an outstanding Torah scholar and his legal decisions have had far-reaching impacts on Ottoman Jewry and beyond.
- ² R. Shemuel di Medina, *Shu"t* cit., IV, 407.
- ³ N. Elias, *The Court Society*, Oxford 1983, p.18.
- ⁴ H. Gerber, *On the History of the Jews in Istanbul in the 17th and the 18th centuries*, in “Pe'amim”, 1972, 12, pp. 27-46.
- ⁵ R. Shemuel di Medina, *Shu"t* cit., III, 214. The lady mentioned here is probably Dona Gracia Mendez, a very rich and influential Jewess with access to the royal harem and to the Palace.
- ⁶ *Halitzah* is a name for a ceremony connected to the levirate marriage, in which the brother of the deceased husband refuses to marry the childless widow, and thus enables her to marry somebody else.
- ⁷ *Get* is a divorce document presented by a husband to his wife during the divorce ceremony.
- ⁸ Literally *umot ha-olam*, the nations of the world.
- ⁹ R. Shemuel di Medina, *Shu"t* cit., III, 93.
- ¹⁰ R. Moshe Benvenisti, *Sefer Penei Moshe* (reprint of the Istanbul edition from 1669-1713), II, 116.
- ¹¹ R. Shemuel di Medina, *Shu"t* cit., IV, 378.
- ¹² A. Cohen, *Jews in the Moslem Religious Courts. Society, Economy and Communal Organization in the XVIth Century Documents from Ottoman Jerusalem*, Jerusalem 1993, document no. 424. This legal decision was issued by Ebu's Su'ud Efendi, who worked as a royal judge during the reign of Süleyman I and Selim II.
- ¹³ R. Shemuel di Medina, *Shu"t* cit., IV, 352.
- ¹⁴ Some confusion may arise over terminology. Herein *Congregation* relates to a religious and administrative unit with a rabbi, synagogue, and secular leadership at its centre, often congruent with a certain fiscal unit. The aim of achieving fiscal control meant that congregations were well-defined and autonomous collectives. *Community* is taken to mean the overall Jewish population of the town, irrespectively their belonging to one or another congregation. In some Ottoman towns there was an official Jewish community encompassing all the congregations, in head of which was a supra-congregational court.
- ¹⁵ i.e. a Jew.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 124.
- ¹⁷ i.e. *tütün*, tobacco.
- ¹⁸ Literally “beloved”.
- ¹⁹ i.e. a pipe.
- ²⁰ R. Nisim Haim Moshe Mizrahi, *Admat kodesh*, Bar Ilan Responsa Project version 11 on CD-ROM, I 4.
- ²¹ R. Shemuel di Medina, *Shu"t* cit., III, 35, the text does not allude to the non-Jew's religious affiliation.
- ²² *Bedestan*, or bazaar, was a covered marketplace in the city-centre, typical of Oriental urban architecture.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 70. In Hebrew sources, the term *emir* indicates an upper class Ottoman Muslim.
- ²⁴ *Veyvoda* was lower-ranking governor appointed by the central government.

- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 75.
- ²⁶ A. Cohen, *Jews* cit., document no. 119.
- ²⁷ R. Shemuel di Medina, *Shu"t* cit., IV, 359.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, III, 59. The Responsa literature has no data on conversions to Christianity within the Ottoman Empire.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, IV, 354. The said Avraham Mindo became a tax collector and another Jew aimed to deprive him of this function. This behaviour was condemned unreservedly by the rabbi.
- ³⁰ The term *uma* (nation), which was used to designate the Spanish nation, differs from the term used to designate the Jewish nation as a whole, i.e. *am Yisra'el* (the People of Israel). This linguistic distinction deserves a broader elaboration, but this is not our aim here.
- ³¹ Sometimes the derogatory term *marranos* (swine) was, and still is, used. In Jewish sources, they are called *anusim* (those, who were forced to do something against their will).
- ³² *Ibid.*, 315.

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