Medieval Jewish Religion, Culture, and Practice

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- Problem of Diaspora: “Of” or merely “in” the wider society?
- Divergent Jewish traditions and their contexts.
- Divergent intellectual traditions in Islamic and Christian lands.
- Gender norms and practices
- Initiation (for boys) into Torah
- Appropriation, Polemic Parody?

Problem of Diaspora: “Of” or merely “In” the Wider Society?

- A broad problematic in the study of any diaspora.
- To great extent, focus on diaspora means attention to the experiences in the “host” society (enslavement, segregation and the African American experience; status, economic restrictions, persecution, for Med. Jews.
- Frequently tell us much about the “host” society’s values, structures, politics.

Divergent Jewish traditions and their contexts

- Jews in Medieval society lived in a variety of social contexts:
  - Mediterranean Islamic/Arab societies
  - Christian societies of Northern Europe
  - Byzantine Empire, Eastern Europe (toward the end of the M.A.s, Persia and elsewhere)
- Can see divergences in:
  - Intellectual developments
  - Gender norms and practices
  - Other features
- Footnote: Ashkenaz, Sepharad
Divergent Jewish intellectual traditions in Islamic and Christian lands (i)

- In the Islamic (and post-Islamic, e.g., Spain) lands
  - Talmud is a prolegomenon to a complete education
    (See, e.g., presuppositions in Maimonides’ Guide; curriculum handed out 11/27)
  - Rational theology and Greek philosophy (Platonic and Aristotelian) studied and had an impact
  - Influence also of grammatical studies (Qur’anic studies)
  - Poetry, stylistics, esthetics, modeled on Arabic-language culture.

Divergent Jewish intellectual traditions in Islamic and Christian lands (ii)

- In the Ashkenazic lands
  - Bible, Talmud, law substantially made up Jewish education
  - Rashi (1040–1105) and Tosafot (a “school” including Rashi’s grandsons) reflect both the internalist focus, and (esp. Tosafot) some features of wider Christian intellectual tradition (scholastic dialectic)
  - Some perpetuation of older Palestinian Jewish poetic tradition (piyyut)
  - A period of peshat (i.e., contextual interpretation) in 11th-12th centuries
  - Scholars of So. France, 12th C onwards (e.g., Ramban = Moses b. Nahman = Nahmanides) harmonize these tradition

Gender norms and practices

- Medieval Christian world:
  - Greater public visibility
  - Monogamy (“ban [herem] of R. Gershom,” 960-1028)
  - Ideal of child marriage (for boys and esp. girls) (Tosafot)
  - Greater openness to divorce

- Medieval Islamic world:
  - Ideal of seclusion
  - Accepted polygyny (negotiable in marriage contracts)
  - Marriage between girl in teens and older man
  - Less openness to divorce
Seclusion (or not) of women

- **Maimonides** on communal norms (12th C. Egypt)
- **Responsum** of Kalonymus of Lucca (10th C, in Mainz, to Moses of Arles)

Initiation (for boys) into Torah

Appropriation, Polemic, Parody?

- Appropriation: use of borrowed cultural elements—sometimes knowingly—for internal purposes (e.g., philosophy in the Islamic world)
- Polemic: using elements of “host” culture for critical, combative purposes (e.g., in *peshat* interpretation in Christian world)
- Parody: knowing and combative use of important symbols of the “host.”
  - E.g., imagining Haman as hanged on a cross.
  - Iconography in depicting the initiation into Torah
Iconography and Parody?

Initiation into Torah:
Leipzig Mahzor Ms. Vollers 1/02, 13/14th C.
http://david.juden.at/images/69_Keil.jpg

Adoration of the Magi:
MS. LUDWIG VII FOL. 25v, Regensburg 11th C.
http://www.getty.edu/art/collections/images/72234957.jpg