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The Formation of Ottoman Sephardic Communal Identity in the Levirate Marriage Discourse

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The Formation of Ottoman Sephardic Communal Identity in the Levirate Marriage Discourse

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Satisfaction of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

by

Binyamin Cohen

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2014
The Dissertation of Binyamin Cohen is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication in microfilm and electronically:

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2014
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pathbreaking scholarly work guided me from the early stages of my research. Lastly, I am ever in debt to my M.A. adviser Professor Joseph Ziegler for his inspiration and guidance. As a true teacher, Professor Ziegler taught me the historian’s craft and the professional’s conduct, both by telling and showing.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Formation of Ottoman Sephardic Communal Identity in the Levirate Marriage Discourse

by

Binyamin Cohen

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, San Diego, 2014

Professor John Marino, Co-Chair
Professor David Goodblatt, Co-Chair

In the aftermath of the expulsion in 1492, the Sephardic expellees in the Ottoman Empire developed a unique interpretation of levirate marriage (yibbum), a commandment obligating the brother of a man who has died without an heir to marry the deceased’s widow. Heavily influenced by Iberian kabbala, the emerging Ottoman Sephardic yibbum
discourse emphasized the extreme importance of reproduction and evinced an egalitarian social imagination.

How can we explain the unique qualities of the expellees’ yibbum discourse? In the past, scholars explained the emergence and nature of postexilic kabbalistic discourses by arguing that the expulsion was a traumatic catastrophe that led the desperate expellees to develop messianic theology. Others argued that the increased mobility of the expellees brought together previously isolated kabbalists in new intellectual communities that produced novel religious discourses. I suggest we shed additional light on the yibbum discourse, in particular, and the relationship between the expulsion and the turn to kabbala, in general, by approaching the expellees not merely as traumatized or passive recipients of the kabbalists’ cultural production, but instead as agents shaping a communal and spiritual identity to suit their new social context.

Deprived of established social structures and institutions, the impoverished expellees developed kabbalistic discourses that directly addressed their social predicament. These discourses displayed an egalitarian sense of communal identity and emphasized the extreme importance of the expellees’ few assets, their offspring. In this context, the turn to kabbala after 1492 was not an attempt to avoid the harsh realities of the expulsion or a top-down dissemination of elite theology, but rather a communal effort to directly address the diasporic realia.
Introduction

The summer of 2011 was an odd time in Israel. Unlike most of the oddities Israel has to offer, this one was not directly related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. News reports showed images of Israeli streets that were missing the familiar smoldering shell of what used to be a city bus. Rather, these streets, so familiar to news consumers, were now swarming with a multitude of Israelis protesting against what they perceived as severe social injustice. The hot topic on every street corner was the rising cost of living, especially the high food and real-estate prices. In short, the protestors blamed government policies that benefitted a small number of affluent families that controlled the lion’s share of the Israeli economy. This was an unusual outcry of a middle class in despair.

One of the protestors’ most interesting arguments was that by betraying the middle class, the State of Israel betrayed one of its fundamental tenets, namely, a sense of communal solidarity. In what turned into a trendy discussion topic, activists, journalists, and politicians mourned the loss of communal solidarity or arvut hadadit. However, the rationale governing this discourse varied. Some argued that communal solidarity was a foundation of Zionism, and others decried the loss of an essential Jewish quality. Despite the disagreement, both theories seemed to agree that communal solidarity was the reason for the survival of the Jewish state “against all odds.”

In the midst of the protests, Minna Rozen, a prominent Israeli scholar of Ottoman Jewish history, wrote an insightful op-ed essay in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz. Rozen disagreed with the argument that social justice and communal solidarity are essential ingredients in an Israeli, Zionist, or Jewish identity:

Anyone who is tired of a government that pretends to protect the bedrock of our existence while smashing it into dust [and] anyone who thinks that this [i.e., social injustice] is a new invention that can be uprooted through protests and strikes, I have bad news [for them]. It will not be easy. The political culture of the Jewish people in the Diaspora is an extensive fabric whose moldy threads and stitches are no different than those of the fabric of our lives in the State of Israel.

The political culture in the Diaspora has always excelled in concentrating communal capital in the hands of a very small group of families whose heads have fostered close relationships with the non-Jewish authorities and have made sure to sustain a few conditions: (a) their representatives will dominate communal leadership, and (b) direct taxes will be as low as possible and indirect taxes as high as possible.

The social services with which the Jewish community provided its members were precisely those services that the protesters now demand from the Israeli government: education, health, and justice. Traditionally, the lay oligarchy had a clear interest in keeping the [cost of the] first two as low as possible while placing the burden of the cost on the shoulders of the general community. How did the rich keep their power? What caused the poor to accept this burden? The rich told the poor that their connections with the gentile authorities were protecting the community.

The similarities are clear. The threats of the gentile authorities were replaced by the threat posed by neighboring countries. The domination of the wealthy lay oligarchy, imbalance between direct and indirect taxation, the renouncing of responsibility by the establishment for sustaining social services—all of these did not change. So, what have we learned today? Is social irresponsibility a part of our DNA? . . . Inherent in each of us are cowardice and courage, selfishness and

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3 This is a reference to Benjamin Netahanyahu’s press conference, given on Sept. 24, 1996, a day after the decision to open the Western Wall tunnel. The Palestinians claimed the tunnel was dug under the Dome of the Rock and, therefore, endangered it. The opening of the tunnel’s northern exit was followed by weeks of riots in the West Bank that took the life of more than one hundred people. At the time Netnayahu famously declared that the Western Wall is the “[bed]rock of our existence,” hinting at what he perceived as a strong Jewish connection to the site compared to a questionable tie between the Dome of the Rock and Islam.
empathy for others and their needs. Cowardice and selfishness are not [ingredients in] a recipe for survival but for decay. Just as we were soldiers and established a state, so can we be citizens of a society built on a foundation of justice and mutual respect. Only such a society is a sustainable society.

In other words, Rozen argues that communal solidarity and social justice are not historical facts and can be seen in Jewish history only through a modern nostalgic lens. However, Rozen locates one exception to the rule, namely, the generation that founded the State of Israel in 1948. After reading this op-ed piece, I realized that the period I am studying, the aftermath of the expulsion from Spain, is a sociocultural anomaly very similar to the early years of the State of Israel in its social context and imagination.

Both periods witnessed an increased mobility of traumatized impoverished European Jewry that headed to a predominantly Muslim Mediterranean region in the aftermath of a cataclysmic disaster. David Ben Gurion famously commented on the stream of Holocaust survivors to the land of Israel: “The extinguishing diasporas that convene in Israel are not yet a nation, but a great multitude [erev rav] and dust of man [avak adam], without a language, without education, without roots.”

Ben Gurion’s words, though far from being an objective description of the incoming remnants of European Jewry, aptly represent a contemporary perception of the arriving Holocaust survivors. In addition, Ben Gurion’s words are reminiscent of a contemporary description of the Sephardic expellees:

[They] are bewildered in a land not their own . . . among people whose language they did not understand . . . they have not yet recovered from what befell them during their exile . . . their fear of death and the terrors of the sea . . . men arrived

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4 David Ben-Gurion, *Yihud ve-yiud: Devarim al bithon yisrael* (Tel Aviv: Ma’arakhot, 1971). Whether they were indeed “human dust” or not is a debatable question, of course. Whether this was the ethos that governed the Israeli interpretation of the Holocaust for many decades is not.
without wives and women without husbands . . . they were beset by poverty and travail, want and famine and loneliness.5

Both periods, therefore, witnessed a mass migration of traumatized Jewry that experienced a material and identity crisis. In addition, both periods gave birth to a relatively egalitarian social imagination manifested in early Israeli collective identity and in postexilic kabbalistic production. Finally, in both cases, the egalitarian social imagination lasted for about two generations until a polarized hierarchical community led by a lay oligarchy replaced its relatively level predecessor.

The similarities are striking, yet what should we make of them? Although learning from one’s mistakes is an admirable trait, it is not the historian’s trade. Although lacking the divinatory powers of a crystal ball, the past is a useful tool when thinking about the important traditions that shaped modern Jewish culture. Indeed, studying a particular era that displayed sociocultural developments so similar to those plaguing the State of Israel in the twenty-first century is an excellent tool to use.6

The contemporary Israeli identity crisis is an important matter to think about. The modern Israeli discourse about communal solidarity is only one symptom of a comprehensive and profound identity crisis couched by a dramatic struggle over the

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6 By this I do not refer to the notion common to Gershom Scholem and his peers that modern events open up new opportunities to understand the past and in particular kabalistic symbols. “In a generation that has witnessed a terrible crisis in Jewish history, the ideas of these medieval Jewish esoterics no longer seem so strange, we see with other eyes [italics mine], and the obscure symbols strike us as worth clarifying.” Gershom Scholem, On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism (New York: Schocken, 1970), 3. What Scholem suggests here is that the experience of the Holocaust supplied his generation with “other eyes” or adequate means to understand kabbala that previous scholars could not have had. In fact, before the Holocaust Scholem saw the work of Franz Kafka as an eye-opener of this sort. Scholem, On the Kabbalah, 12. I do not claim that the current social context in Israel enables an understanding of 16th-century kabbala but that the latter may be used to reflect on the forces that shaped the former. For more on this, see Moshe Idel, Old Worlds, New Mirrors: On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 113–19.
Determining Israeli identity is of crucial political importance in an age when strong voices in mainstream Israel seek to define it by advocating rebuilding the Temple, annexing the West Bank, or swearing allegiance to the Jewish state as a condition for citizenship. In fact, recently this identity crisis received an institutional, political manifestation when a right-wing party (Israel Beytenu) insisted on, and succeeded in, including in the coalition agreement with the Likud leadership party an article in which Likud committed to establishing an “administration for Jewish Identity” (!) within the Ministry of Religious Services. This ongoing identity drama significantly affects a highly charged political discourse of global ramifications. In this context the dissertation is a useful aid for the perplexed and the concerned, who possibly may improve their understanding of the different traditions that fashion and fuel the current identity crisis that endangers the “bedrock of our existence.”

The topic of the dissertation is the nexus between communal identity and social context. The research examines Ottoman Sephardic communal identity in the aftermath of the expulsion from Spain as it was manifested in the interpretation of the commandment of yibbum. The unexpected expulsion of Iberian Jews from their homeland in 1492 detached them from a land that nurtured a flourishing and complex Jewish culture for hundreds of years. The social context of the impoverished expellees, who had also lost many family members, changed dramatically when they were deprived of established social structures and institutions. In the absence of a dominant Ottoman

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7 And, of course, American Jewish identity is directly related to this matter. For example, consider the founding of the liberal, pro-Israel lobby J-Street in 2008 and the publication of Peter Beinart’s *The Crisis of Zionism* in 2012.

8 “An administration for Jewish identity will be established in the Ministry of Religious Services. [The administration] will support different activities pertaining to this matter,” available from the Knesset website: http://www.knesset.gov.il/docs/heb/coalition2013_1.pdf.
Jewish congregation and significant intervention by the Ottoman authorities, the
Sephardim were relatively free from external influences, Jewish and otherwise, and able
to construct a new egalitarian communal identity.

The dissertation examines the relationship between the expellees’ *yibbum*
discourse and their efforts to rebuild their communal identity in three parts comprising
eleven chapters. The first part includes three chapters. Chapter 1 situates the thematic and
focused exploration of the Ottoman Sephardic *yibbum* discourse in a broader historical
context. The chapter locates the dissertation in the broader history of Iberian Jewry in the
years leading to 1492 and its aftermath in Portugal, Italy, North Africa, and the Ottoman
Empire. I examine the expellees’ trades, culture, social organization, and relationship
with their host cultures. The chapter ends with a short review of Iberian kabbala, its
centers, themes, and genres.

Chapter 2 presents the phenomenon that set me on the path to examine the
Ottoman Sephardic communal identity through its *yibbum* discourse. I examine the
Ottoman Sephardic beliefs in hybrid offspring, mythical progenies created through
demonic copulation. Before the expulsion, the hybrid was believed to have been created
by disembodied evil spirits that embodied themselves by using human wasteful
emissions. However, in the aftermath of the expulsion, the Ottoman Sephardim came to
believe that the creating agent was the emitter himself, now identified as the hybrids’
father. In addition, the Ottoman Sephardic hybrids were believed to have posed a greater
threat than ever before as it was believed that they empowered the cosmic evil in its
struggle with God, thus threatening the existence of the Jewish people and the world. The
chapter shows how a discussion of the contemporary *yibbum* discourse supplies critical
historical context and methodological tools to contextualize the Ottoman Sephardic beliefs in the hybrid offspring.

Chapter 3 situates the dissertation in interconnected scholarly contexts. Its first section examines the historiography of the proliferation of kabbalistic activity among the expellees. This is the immediate scholarly context of the Ottoman Sephardic yibbum discourse, which incorporates significant elements of Iberian kabbala. The first section of this chapter presents two gaps in the historiography of the kabbalistic turn; namely, that scholarship did not examine the phenomenon from a social perspective and that scholars did not consider the general population of expellees as agents of change who affected the turn to kabbala in a significant way.

The second section locates the dissertation in a methodological context by examining scholarly opinions concerning the relationship between social context and cultural production. Here I offer two methodological tools that later I use to fill the historiographical gaps mentioned above. The first tool, the methodology of social imagination, explores the intersection between the cultural and the social by exposing the imagined social constructs underlying religious discourses. Scholarship concerning popular culture equips us with the second methodological tool, namely, the means to evaluate how the general community affected the kabbalistic discourses produced by its elite members. Together, these tools enable an examination of how the real and the perceived social context affected religious expression during a crucial period in Jewish history.

The third section explains the historiographical significance of the dissertation’s temporal boundaries. The section presents scholarship that examined the first half of the
sixteenth century in a somewhat biased fashion that obscured its dramatic sociocultural developments. This section demonstrates the need to examine contemporary social imagination to enhance the understanding of this formative period in Ottoman Jewish history and Jewish early modernity in general.

The five chapters that comprise the second part examine the Ottoman Sephardic interpretation of levirate marriage. Chapter 4 presents the commandment’s biblical, Talmudic, and medieval discourses, showing that the early modern discourse was not a simple adoption or continuation of old customs but rather a unique phenomenon. Chapter 5 examines the logic underlying the practice of yibbum (levirate marriage). It shows that early modern Ashkenazic and Sephardic thinkers differed on whether to observe yibbum and in their understanding of the commandment’s purpose. Ashkenazic thinkers, in the rare cases when they accepted yibbum, saw it as a means to commemorate the childless dead and reconstitute a nominal lineage. Ottoman Sephardim, on the other hand, saw the commandment as a way to recreate an embodied link in an interrupted blood line through physical, and not just symbolic, reproduction. They sought to reconstitute an embodied lineage—either the childless dead himself or an exact replacement of his unborn son—and through it to recreate a lost demographic structure and communal identity.

Chapter 6 examines the logic of halitsa (levirate divorce), a ritual untying the bond between the widow and her brother-in-law. The discourse of halitsa presents the characteristic Ottoman Sephardic interpretation of levirate marriage by emphasizing metempsychosis as a means to maintain a continuous and unique embodied lineage. The Ottoman Sephardim perceived halitsa as a method to release the husband’s soul trapped in the widow’s womb and consequently to embody a disembodied soul as it is reborn to a
different family. Though an inferior alternative to *yibbum* because it did not keep the soul in its original family, *halitsa* was seen as preferable to the alternatives, namely, remaining trapped in the widow’s body or roaming the world of the living in a state of disembodiment unable to enter the afterworld. Together Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 present a social imagination that emphasized the extreme importance of producing a particular heir, maintaining a continuous lineage, and safeguarding the integrity of the Jewish people’s social fabric.

Chapter 7 examines different alternative explanations for the unique levirate marriage discourse of Ottoman Sephardim and particularly for its concern with the integrity of lineage and of the demographic structure of the Jewish people. Some scholars point to a concern with retaining the widow’s inheritance in the husband’s family line as the logic that governed the contemporary interpretations of levirate marriage. Others suggest that the phenomenon’s unique characteristics may be explained by the manifestation of a postexilic empowered woman who had emerged from the Sephardic diasporic experience. Some primary sources, however, suggest that interest in the dead husband’s commemoration and post-mortem well being shaped contemporary ideas of *yibbum*. Although these explanations offer some convincing arguments, they do not adequately address the fact that concerns over the demographic structure of the Jewish people is the common denominator of all interpretations.

Variations of the transmigratory-kabbalistic interpretation of *yibbum* existed in Iberia well before the expulsion and in sixteenth-century Italy. Some medieval Italian and Byzantine kabbalists presented the transmigratory interpretation as well. Therefore, it could be argued that the Ottoman Sephardic interpretation was a continuation of medieval
trends or that the expellees simply adopted established local traditions and did not develop a unique discourse.

Chapter 8 addresses the aforementioned counterarguments in two ways. First, it shows that the medieval transmigratory interpretation differs from the expellees’ discourse in the exposure of the general public to the kabbalistic interpretation, the logic governing this interpretation, the clarity of its message, and its influence on the halakhic discourse.

Second, the chapter shows that the contemporary Italian discourse varied from its Ottoman counterpart in several ways. The strong position of Ashkenazic communities and religious tradition in Italy constructed a radically different discourse than its Ottoman Sephardic counterpart. The Italian halakhic discourse developed as a dialectic between the incoming Sephardic tradition and the indigenous (Ashkenazic and Italian) trends.

In addition, the Italian discourse was heavily influenced by rational philosophy. In Italy, expellees and indigenous Jews sought to reconcile the Iberian transmigratory interpretation of *yibbum* with rational philosophy. However, efforts to resolve the tensions between rational philosophy and the transmigratory logic of *yibbum* began in Iberia before 1492. The philosophical-transmigratory interpretation was another medieval Iberian interpretative tradition available for the Ottoman Sephardim. The Ottoman Sephardic lack of interest in the philosophical-transmigratory interpretation shows that the adoption of the transmigratory interpretation by the Ottoman Sephardim was a manifestation of agency rather than a passive continuation of old trends.

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9 In addition, the *yibbum* discourse included attempts by Italian Jews to support the thesis of *prisca theologia*, namely, that a single theology exists that is present in all religions and was given by God to man in antiquity. See Chapter 8 “External Influences I: Yibbum and Metempsychosis in a Philosophical Context.”
Last, the Italian discourse was affected by the European religious-political context. The great importance of polygamy and yibbum to European politics propelled an increased European interest and a deeper involvement in Jewish theology and custom. In contrast, the Ottomans were accustomed to levirate marriage and polygamy and, in general, allowed the expellees greater freedom to fashion their communities, religiosity, and communal identity.

The three chapters that comprise the third part contextualize the social imagination exposed in the second part. This part examines the social context that couched the development of the yibbum discourse. Chapters 9 and 10 examine the expellees’ social context during their departure and resettlement in the Ottoman Empire. The expellees’ social structures were shattered due to the loss of family members, material possessions, and the community elite who converted to Christianity or were pauperized as a result of the expulsion.

At the same time that the expellees suffered human, material, and social losses, they were freed from an overbearing othering Christian host culture. The Ottomans, unlike their Iberian Christian counterparts, did not intervene in the daily life of the expellees in ways that significantly affected their social context. In addition, the expellees lacked the influence of indigenous Ottoman Jewry (the Romaniotes), itself internally displaced after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453. Much like the expulsion from Spain, this traumatic displacement shook the social structures and weakened the communal identity of the Romaniotes. The diasporic predicament of the Sephardic

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10 By othering I mean a way of defining self-identity (of an individual or a group) through the stigmatization of another person or group, by mentally classifying them as “not us” or “others.”
expellees, therefore, gave rise to a severe identity crisis. The expellees addressed this crisis by fashioning an egalitarian communal identity that emphasized one of their few assets, their offspring.

Chapter 11 consists of three sections. The first section shows that the egalitarian, organic social imagination that animated the logic of yibbum was a staple of the kabbalistic discourses of the expulsion generation. I demonstrate this point by briefly examining a related discourse, namely, the Cordoverian logic of the interconnectedness between God and his people. In the second section, I establish the connection between social context and imagination. I do so by presenting reports from the expellees describing their responses to their social predicaments. The reports show that the urge to develop an egalitarian social structure by means of marriage and procreation characterized the general population of the expellees and was not limited to the closed circles of elite kabbalists. However, to prioritize marriage and procreation, the expellees had to let go of old, social taboos, thus leveling the hierarchical social structures of the past. Last, the chapter examines the end of the postexilic, formative period of Ottoman Sephardic history that stretched from the expulsion to the arrival of the Portuguese conversos in the middle of the sixteenth century. It was then that change in Ottoman Jewry’s social make up led to a less egalitarian and exceedingly polarized social structure and imagination.
Part I: Historiography and Methodology

Chapter 1

Iberian Jewry to the Expulsion of 1492 and Its Aftermath

The dissertation examines the relationship between the Ottoman Sephardic yibbum discourse (examined in Part II) and the social context (examined in Part III) in the aftermath of the expulsion from Spain in 1492. This chapter provides the broader historical context for my thematic and focused exploration of the Ottoman Sephardic interpretation of levirate marriage by surveying the history of Iberian Jewry up to 1492 and then their experience in Portugal, North Africa, Italy, and the Ottoman Empire after the expulsion. I examine the commerce, culture, and social organization of the Sephardim in the diaspora and their relationship with their host cultures. The chapter ends with a review of Iberian kabbala, its centers, themes, and genres.

Toward Expulsion: Iberian Jewry Before 1492

The Jewish presence in the Iberian Peninsula dates from the first century of the Common Era and continues for fifteen hundred years. Very little is known of the beginnings of this community. More extensive information is available beginning with the establishment of the Visigothic kingdom in the sixth century. Recently converted to Catholicism, the Visigothic kings sought to reunite the kingdom by various methods, including the persecution of the Jewish minority. The Visigoths segregated the Jews and forced them to convert. Jews who refused to convert were expelled from Iberia. The

11 Where not stated otherwise, see Encyclopaedia Judaica, s.v. “Spain” and sources quoted there.
decrees of the Seventeenth Council of Toledo (694) caused an end to a period of a substantial Jewish presence in the Visigothic kingdom by ordering that Jews were to be enslaved to Christian masters. Those who were not enslaved fled, leaving the kingdom free of openly practicing Jewish communities.

The Muslim conquest of Iberia in 711 encouraged many Jews who had fled during the Visigothic persecutions to return and reconstitute an active communal life in the peninsula. During the period of the Umayyad Caliphate (c. the 8th to 11th centuries), Iberian Jews enjoyed economic prosperity and relative freedom of settlement and employment. The economic and intellectual success that followed detached the Iberian Jewish world from the sages in Babylonia who until then had served as its intellectual and religious authorities. In addition, the success created a leadership stratum of elite courtiers that posed a threat to rabbinic authority.

The eleventh century saw the decline of the Umayyad dynasty and the establishment of various Berber and Arab principalities in Iberia. These developments increased the demand for Jewish courtiers who were trained in secular culture and sought to harmonize religious and secular studies, as well as to immerse themselves in their Muslim surroundings.

In addition, the eleventh century witnessed the advance of the Reconquista. Faced with the Christian advancement, the Iberian Muslim rulers of Seville approached the Almoravid Berber sect for help. The Almoravids then settled in Andalusia and forced the local Jews to convert to Islam. In some cases, conversion could be avoided by paying ransom. In 1146 an even more fanatic Berber sect, the Almohads, was far less inclined to make exemptions, began its conquest of Muslim Spain. In the process, the Almohads
ended the flourishing Jewish life in Andalusia by completely forbidding the practice of the Jewish religion.

With the deterioration of caliphate Jewry, the previously insignificant Jewish presence in the Christian north greatly increased. Jews in the newly conquered Christian lands were treated better than their Muslim neighbors, were authorized to stay in their old quarters or settle in towns evacuated by Muslims, served in the Christian armies, received land, and served as courtiers. The crown’s intervention in their daily affairs was minimal. They were organized in independent political units (*aljama*) with full administrative and judicial autonomy but under the supervision of a royal functionary. The Jewish communities controlled their communal affairs and appointed rabbis and other officials. They had the legal authority to settle disputes within the Jewish community, including potent enforcement mechanisms. They were authorized to excommunicate, fine, and even issue death sentences.

Jewish courtiers functioned as tax farmers, lawyers, and diplomats and served as the leaders of the communities. At times the middle and lower classes found that this communal organization did not serve their best interests and beginning in the thirteenth century, these classes demanded representation in the community’s leadership. The intra-communal disputes involved interconnected theological, philosophical, social, and political problems. The clearest example of these disputes was the Maimonidean controversy, the argument over the place of Western philosophy in Judaism. These disputes signified the reexamination of Jewish identity by questioning the influence of knowledge that was perceived as essentially non-Jewish, which had been introduced into
the community primarily by the elite courtiers. This reaction marked an inward, popular movement that was further propelled by the declining status of the courtiers.

Although the monarchy saw the Jews as a positive element, it never perceived their presence as natural or risk free. This fact is apparent in the numerous attempts to separate the Jewish and Christian communities during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. For example, in Aragon forcing Jews to convert was not allowed; however, Christians who converted to Judaism risked the death penalty and the confiscation of their property. In Aragon, Jews and Christians were not allowed to live in the same house. Jews were not allowed to have Christian slaves and had to wear a special sign identifying themselves as Jews. In Castile, Jews were ordered to grow their hair long and were not allowed to be called by the honorary title “Don.” They were not authorized to hold public office, to lend money, or to work as tax farmers. Jewish physicians were not allowed to treat Christians. In this context it is clear that the internal autonomy, freedom of movement, and success of the elite courtiers did not reflect an age of complete freedom or harmony with the Christian host culture.

The Jews’ legal attachment to the king and their separate quarters increased the hostility of the general public toward them during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Jews were considered “slaves of the king” (*servi regis*), a legal category placing them under the authority of the king rather than under municipal, noble, or ecclesiastical authority. Protected by the king, the local Jews were doubly estranged from their Christian neighbors. They were perceived as agents of the central government and, therefore, there was much discord between the Jews and the lay and religious local authorities. In addition to the antagonism mentioned above, the Jews resided in special
neighborhoods and thus constituted a foreign entity within the urban Christian community. Given their perception as agents and their separate quarters, the Jewish communities endured a rocky relationship with the burgher class and the Catholic Church that included persecution, forced conversion, and massacres.

As the hostility toward Iberian Jewry increased, blood libels and host-desecration accusations became more frequent. Particularly harmful were the sermons of Ferrand Martinez, the archdeacon of Ecija (under the authority of the archbishop of Seville), who threatened to excommunicate Christians who associated with Jews and preached that those who kill Jews will be absolved by the king and by God. Martinez also sought to influence legal proceedings involving Jews. With the death of the king in 1390, the accession of Henry III—who was then a minor—and the death of the archbishop of Seville, Martinez’s activity went unchecked by either royal or papal authority. This escalation culminated in the massacres of 1391.

In June of 1391 the Jews of Seville were either sold into slavery or massacred. Synagogues were turned into churches, and Christians settled in abandoned Jewish quarters. Later that month the riots spread to Toledo, Madrid, Cuenca, Burgos, and Cordoba. In July the riots reached Valencia and the Balearic Islands, and in August the Jews of Barcelona, Gerona, and Tortosa became victims of the spreading violence. The results were devastating. In addition to the thousands murdered, about 200,000 Jews were forced to convert; others fled from Iberia to North Africa and the Land of Israel.\(^\text{12}\)

Another result was that the new centers of Iberian Jewry were rural, small, and weak. The social stratification changed because the majority of those who converted were the elite. Consequently, the influence of the middle and lower classes increased in these centers, and communal leadership moved from the courtiers to the merchants, artisans, and shopkeepers.

The violence of 1391 gave birth to a large, liminal group of conversos who belonged to both religious groups but were not full members of either group. Although forced conversions began well before 1391, they had not occurred in such magnitude and therefore did not blur the lines between Iberian Jews and Christians. The Jewish community perceived the conversos with contempt and sympathy. The compassion of many emanated from their concern for family and friends perceived as *anusim* (i.e., forced ones) and thus still a part of the Jewish community. Others understood that conversion did not cancel one’s utility to the community. On the other hand, some saw the conversos as traitors to the Jewish community and religion. Iberian Jewry had financial reasons to resent the conversos in addition to religious ones. Many of the new Christians did not change professions when they changed religions. Consequently conversos performed functions traditionally fulfilled by Jews, diminishing the economic opportunities and the prospects for social mobility for Iberian Jews. The decrease in economic opportunities for Iberian Jewry was already in play in the fourteenth century when a growing urban Christian middle class began to supplant and marginalize Iberian Jews. The Christian majority also questioned the utility of sustaining a Jewish minority in Andalusia, the eastern coast, and Catalonia. Martin Goodman, Jeremy Cohen, and David J. Sorkin. *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 175.
within the Iberian Christian polity. Therefore, the close of the fourteenth century witnessed an Iberian Jewish society of diminished size, variety, and social mobility and one of dwindling participation in trade and civil service.

The Christian majority faced a similar dilemma concerning the conversos. The Christians would not accept the conversos as equals; doing so might have diminished their superior social and economic status. On the other hand, they sought to prevent the return of the new converts to the Jewish fold. Artificial efforts to remake the lost ethnic boundaries and separate the conversos from the Jews failed. As tensions intensified, the Christian majority came to project a cohort of old and new stigmas on the conversos. By the middle of the fifteenth century this process produced rising tension and a cohort of theories regarding the indelible nature of the Jewish ancestry of the conversos.

The unsolvable converso problem set the Christian majority and Jewish minority on a path toward increased tension and more frequent conflict. The mass conversion of 1391 facilitated an ongoing process of non-coerced conversions that further blurred the ethnic lines and escalated tensions. Conversion lost much of the stigma associated with it and turned into a practical and viable option as it was impossible to completely shun the converts. Furthermore, an established community of conversos was able and willing to ease the potential convert’s transition to the Christian or crypto-Jewish life. This was a significant difference from the traditionally hostile attitude of Christians and Jews toward Jewish converts. In addition, crypto-Judaism was a prevalent phenomenon. Thus, it was now possible to convert for material gain yet still practice Judaism to a certain degree or claim to do so with a certain level of reliability.
Medieval Iberian Jewry could endure an atmosphere of religious tension as long as they prospered and trusted that the local authorities could keep matters from escalating. This was clearly the case with the conversos who petitioned for official recognition of their “purity,” attained the highest levels of authority in religious and secular institutions, and formed effective diplomatic and mercantile networks.\textsuperscript{13} In addition to advancing their social status and commercial interests, the conversos worked to curtail religious persecution and prevent the spread of the inquisition.\textsuperscript{14}

The fifteenth century witnessed an escalation of Christian hostility toward the Jewish minority, a process that climaxed with the expulsion of 1492. In 1469 the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella created a united kingdom that perceived the blurring of ethnic lines as a great threat to its stability. The monarchs addressed this matter by inviting the Inquisition to act within their kingdom in 1480. In the decade that followed, about seven hundred conversos were burned at the stake, and more than five thousand conversos were readmitted to the Christian fold after suffering various punishments. The continuous persecution and the intellectual, social, and geographical segregation of Jewish communities point to the expulsion in 1492 as the climax of a gradual process of the separation of Iberian Jewry from its Christian Iberian host culture.

The expulsion occurred after Ferdinand and Isabella realized that to achieve religious unity they must purge the significant Jewish minority. On March 31, 1492 the edict of expulsion was signed in Granada ordering the expulsion of all Jews from the


Kingdoms of Castile and Aragon by July 31. Under the edict, Jews were promised royal protection for the three-month period before the deadline. The punishment for any Jew who did not convert or leave by the deadline was death without trial. The punishment for a Christian who sheltered Jews was the confiscation of all belongings and hereditary privileges.

**The Expulsion of 1492**

In May 1492 the expellees began a protracted exodus to the Ottoman Empire. At the time of the expulsion, Iberian Jewry numbered around 300,000. In 1492 approximately 150,000 to 170,000 left Spain to avoid conversion. A relatively small number of expellees (c. 10,000) moved from Aragon to the kingdom of Navarre and Italy. The majority of the expellees (c. 100,000 to 120,000) moved from Castile to the kingdom of Portugal. Another 20,000 to 40,000 settled in North Africa. Only a minority of Iberian Jewry (c. 8,000) went directly to the Ottoman Empire where they settled in the southern Balkans and Anatolian port towns. Throughout the first half of the sixteenth century many more Sephardim joined this minority to form the most important early modern Sephardic center. In what follows I explore the experience of the expellees at their destinations.

**In Portugal** At the time of the expulsion, Portugal was a rising power that competed with Spain for political and economic influence in the North Atlantic. The Portuguese king João II (d. 1495) welcomed Spain’s Jewry to Portugal where around

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100,000 to 120,000 expellees found safe haven in a relatively prosperous land with a significant Jewish community and a familiar culture.

In 1497 the Portuguese king Manuel I married the infanta Isabella of Aragon (eldest child of Ferdinand and Isabella and presumptive heiress to the Spanish throne). As a precondition to the marriage, the Spanish monarchs demanded that all Jews in Portugal be banished. In response the Portuguese king gave the Jews eleven months to convert or leave the realm. The majority of the Jews were in the process of leaving when, fearing the loss of revenue, Manuel prevented them from leaving and forced them to convert. The king’s intervention in 1497 prevented local Jewry from leaving and cancelled any hope that those who had been expelled from Spain would return to their homes. In 1498 the kingdom of Navarre, the last Iberian realm that accepted practicing Jews, succumbed to Spanish pressure and expelled its Jewry. Thus the 1497 forced conversions and the 1498 expulsion ended the significant Jewish presence on Iberian soil.

By 1499 the conversos were officially forbidden from leaving Portugal. Similar to the case of Spain in the aftermath of 1391, the presence of a significant converso element caused increasing tensions between Portugal’s old and new Christians. The conversos remaining in Portugal were confronted with growing persecution. In 1506 anti-converso violence erupted in Lisbon that left two to four thousand conversos dead. The Portuguese national inquisition, founded in 1536, was the institutional manifestation of

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this trend. Consequently, many of the second generation conversos chose to flee the kingdom to the Mediterranean, northern Europe, and new world colonies.

**In North Africa** For centuries Andalusia and the Maghreb constituted one political and cultural unit. During the Reconquista, North Africa attracted fleeing Iberian Muslims and Jews. Between 1492 and 1502, North Africa was the main non-Christian destination of the expellees. It was there that many of the Sephardim experienced years of tribulation before arriving in the Ottoman Empire (or until the Empire expanded to include their lands).

Scholars estimate that 20,000 to 40,000 expellees fled to North Africa from June 1492 until the middle of the sixteenth century. The migration was gradual but peaked in 1492, 1497 (after the forced conversion of Portugal’s Jewry), and 1536 (after the founding of the Portuguese national inquisition). Andalusian Jews came to North Africa through Cádiz and Gibraltar while their Castilian brethren came through Valencia or Cartagena. The majority of the expellees came to North Africa from Malaga and Mallorca. Malaga’s Jewry was in especially poor shape. After the Catholics took Malaga in 1486, they dispersed indigenous Jewry around Castile. By the time Malaga’s Jews were rounded up for their final expulsion from Iberia, they had already lived the life of expellees for six years.

The expellees settled along the Atlantic and the Mediterranean shores from Safi and Agadir in the North Atlantic to the Algerian commercial hub of Tlemcen and its port city Oran. In the northern inland, Fez was a popular trading center that provided Jews

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with a relatively high level of protection.\textsuperscript{20} When the northern commercial centers were no longer able to accommodate additional expellees, many refugees moved inland and to rural districts that lay on the southern edge of the Atlas, the Rif, and the mid-Atlas mountains; the Tadla plains; the high Atlas; and the Sous. Many settled in regions under Christian control, namely, in Agadir in the southwest, Safi, Azemmour and Mazagan in the west, Arzilla and Ceuta in the north, and Oran on the northwestern coast of Algeria.\textsuperscript{21}

The indigenous North African Jewish communities varied.\textsuperscript{22} Some Jews had inhabited the region for centuries and reflected its characteristic dress and customs and employed the Arabic language in ways similar to those of their Muslim neighbors. Other communities were made up of European Jews from Iberia, Mallorca, and France that settled in North Africa after the mass conversions of 1391 and the French expulsion of 1394. By the time of the expulsion from Spain, the indigenous Maghrebi and European Jews occupied separate cultural spheres rather than a homogenous indigenous culture.\textsuperscript{23} This state of affairs facilitated the relatively swift incorporation and even dominance of the expellees’ Sephardic culture and liturgy.

The indigenous North African Jews had a troubled relationship with their host culture. After the fall of the Almohads (1269), the Jewish communities experienced relief from persecution and began a slow recovery. The Almohad repression had left local Jewry in a state of material degradation and intellectual impoverishment from which they had not fully recovered by 1492. In addition, the Jews of North Africa were the only

\textsuperscript{23} Hirschberg, Jews in North Africa, 13.
religious minority in the land. Consequently, their environment was significantly less pluralistic or tolerant. The North African political authorities invested much effort and creativity in imposing Muslim restrictions against religious minorities. Jews were severely restricted from moving out of their designated quarters and were not permitted to wear normal shoes. They were forced to walk barefoot or wear special shoes or sandals made of straw. Although it can be argued that Jews served North African rulers in a variety of official capacities, they shared these positions with other weak and marginalized groups such as eunuchs or slaves.

The North African Jewish communities that received the expellees were affected by regional political turmoil. Frequently the Jews became victims of popular, military, and political violence. For example, in 1438 the Jews of Fez were expelled from their neighborhoods and forced to settle in a Jewish quarter. Within a few years the community managed to recover from the trauma of the forced displacement. However, in 1465 the recovered community was on the brink of annihilation after an especially aggressive massacre. The Maghreb wars were the dominant element in the increasing political uncertainty in North Africa. These were battles in a struggle for the control of the Maghreb that lasted for decades and involved North African powers (either individual political units or local coalitions), the Ottomans, and invading Europeans (Spanish or Portuguese).

North African Jews experienced violence, were torn from the general public and resettled in newly founded Jewish quarters, and forced to convert to Islam. They were

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24 Sephardic Jewish Diaspora, 15–16.
25 Ray, After Expulsion, 66.
caught between several feuding factions, were heavily taxed by all of these factions, and suffered with all the inhabitants of the region from famine and disease. It was not until the middle of the sixteenth century that the region achieved a reasonable level of stability. Their precarious position made it difficult for North African Jews to make a living and sustain their trading network. Consequently, the indigenous communities were weak and outnumbered by the Sephardic expellees who thereby achieved cultural dominance. 

Moving to North Africa did not free the expellees from Christian influence. During the fifteenth century and at the turn of the sixteenth century, the Spanish and Portuguese sought to protect their trade routes and acquire new territories in the Mediterranean. The Portuguese erected several forts along Morocco’s Atlantic coast in the 1470s and 1480s. Portugal had significant interest in West Africa due to its central position along a new route to India and the Far East. In 1471 Portugal settled the coast of modern-day Ghana. Spain attacked Maghrebi cities throughout the fifteenth century. Ferdinand even attained papal recognition for his efforts as a crusader. 

Due to their conquests in North Africa, the Spanish and Portuguese reencountered expelled Iberian Jews. The result of the encounter between Iberian Christians and Jews in North Africa was not a series of persecutions as might have been expected. North African Jews were able to develop important relationships with their Muslim and Christian neighbors that were essential for their survival. The main reason for the difference between the experiences of Iberian and North African Jewries is that violence in the


27 Ibid.
Maghreb was not primarily religious or ideological but rather a result of general and regional political and social tensions.\textsuperscript{28}

The expansion of Portugal and Spain to the regions where the expellees found safe haven enhanced the protracted nature of their separation from Christendom and reintroduction to the Mediterranean world.\textsuperscript{29} From the early stages of the Reconquista in the eleventh century, the Jews were a liminal, bicultural, politically neutral minority group of significant linguistic skills and international connections that mediated between the advancing Christians and the Muslim periphery. This trend continued after 1492 as the expellees and conversos followed their Christian Iberian neighbors to the Mediterranean region, Africa (North and West), and the New World. The expellees occupied the margins of the Iberian colonial presence where they served as envoys, translators, money lenders, merchants, artisans, and political representatives. The expellees’ liminality enabled them to maintain ties with the Iberian economy and culture and their Iberian contacts. These frontier areas offered Jews not only unparalleled economic and professional opportunities but also a lax and fluid environment that allowed a measure of autonomous life.

Indeed, indigenous and Iberian North African Jewry assisted the Christians in the occupation of Safi (1508) and Azemmour (1513), as well as in the defense of Safi (1511 and 1539). Despite Jewish support, the Christians’ treatment of their Jewish subjects was ambivalent. Some sold their Jews into captivity. This was the case in Oran and Tripoli

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
(1509–10), Tunisia (1535), Tlemcen (1541), and Mahdia (1550). Others accepted the Jewish presence yet sought to contain it in Jewish quarters. Some encouraged Jewish settlement in their realm and employed them as commercial and political agents.

The patterns of Jewish migration in the region followed a course according to the needs of Iberian Christians. Iberian Jews and conversos were found on the Christian frontier where their economic and linguistic skills enabled them to prosper as middle men in spite of adverse treatment and destabilizing developments—that worsened over time—in their host cultures. However, from the middle of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese interest in the region waned and the Portuguese national inquisition became more powerful. Consequently, the persecution of conversos and Jews in Portuguese domains increased. As Portugal and Spain scaled down their presence in the region, so did the Jews and conversos. The former made the Ottoman Empire the leading center of the eastern Sephardic world, and the latter did the same for the western Sephardic diaspora in northern Europe.

In Italy Italy was the third major destination of the expellees, especially the port towns of Naples and Genoa that were on the maritime routes that served the expellees leaving Aragon. There was little potential for settlement in these destinations, and the

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30 Abitbol, Sephardic Jewish Diaspora, 10.
31 Ray, After Expulsion, 67.
32 As Ray notes, “It was not until the close of the century that the policies of religious conformity and exclusion overtook the Jews operating on the fringes of the Portuguese world. As the anti-Jewish policies of Lisbon and Madrid became implemented even in the farthest reaches of their empires, professing and crypto-Jews alike began to sever their ties with Iberia and relocate to the new Jewish centers of northern Europe.” Ray, After Expulsion, 46.
expellees that arrived were rejected by the Christian majority or by local Jewish communities.33

In general the Italian attitude toward the expellees was far worse than what they were used to in fifteenth-century Iberia. The fifteenth century witnessed periodic popular violence against Italian Jews and renewed agreements with the regional states for protection, a cycle that increased as the Italian Wars escalated. Indigenous Italian Jews were less than enthusiastic about supporting their brethren, fearing the incoming wave of expellees would exacerbate an already tense situation.34 Italian Jewry also was not able to accommodate the expellees for financial and structural reasons. Financially, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Italian Jewry was pushed toward small-scale banking and trades. Thus, dwindling financial resources did not allow the indigenous communities to absorb many expellees. Geographically, Italian Jews were forced outside of the big cities into small villages and towns.35 At the same time the small towns constantly received a stream of incoming Jews from France and Germany in addition to the Italian Jews who were pushed out of the big cities. Thus, indigenous Jewry did not occupy large urban centers capable of settling many of the Iberian expellees. Italian Jewry was too weak to support the Iberian expellees who therefore rarely received permanent sanctuary

34 The Italian Wars were a series of conflicts from 1494 to 1559 that involved most of the city-states of Italy, the Papal States, most of the major states of Western Europe (France, Spain, the Holy Roman Empire, England, and Scotland) as well as the Ottoman Empire. Originally arising from dynastic disputes over the Duchy of Milan and the Kingdom of Naples, the wars became a general struggle for power and territory among the various participants.
35 Ray, After Expulsion, 46.
in Italy. Consequently, the expellees were forced to endure protracted suffering on their way to the Ottoman Empire, North Africa, or back to Iberia.\footnote{For Rome as an exception to this rule, see Renata Segre, “Sefardic Settlements in Sixteenth-Century Italy,” \textit{Mediterranean Historical Review} 6 (1991): 112–37.}

\textbf{In the Ottoman Empire} Settlement in the Ottoman Empire was not the natural, easy, or immediate choice of the expellees but rather a consequence of the inability of many to settle in Portugal, North Africa, or Italy. Together with small groups of Iberian Jews who had arrived there since the mid-fifteenth century, the expellees formed the largest, wealthiest, and most important Sephardic center in the early modern world.

Scholars estimate that between 1492 and 1510 more than thirty thousand expellees settled in the Ottoman Empire. The expellees arrived by two main routes: (1) through Italy, the Balkans, and Anatolia with some continuing on to Syria and the Land of Israel or (2) through Portugal, North Africa, Egypt, the Land of Israel, Syria, and Anatolia.\footnote{Eliezer Bashan, “The Rise and Decline of Sephardi Communities in the Levant: The Economic Aspects,” in \textit{The Sephardi Heritage II}, ed. R. D. Barnett and W. M. Schwab (Northamptonshire, UK: 1989), 349.} The expellees settled in hundreds of locations, mostly in urban centers of mercantile or financial significance. The populations of the emerging communities numbered from as few as two dozen people to as many as twelve hundred.\footnote{Joseph Hacker, “Spanish Jewry in the Ottoman Empire in the 15th–18th centuries” in Abitbol, \textit{Sephardic Jewish Diaspora}, 29.} Most of the expellees settled areas unoccupied by indigenous Jews, namely, in Salonika, Valona, Patras, Edirne, and Bursa.\footnote{Halil Inalcık, “Foundations of Ottoman-Jewish Cooperation,” in \textit{Jews, Turks, Ottomans}, ed. Avigdor Levy (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 7.} For example, in Salonika there was no Jewish population in 1489, yet by 1519 it was the home of seventeen thousand Jews. Nine thousand Jews lived in Istanbul on the eve of the expulsion whereas by 1535, they numbered forty thousand.\footnote{Hacker, “Spanish Jewry in the Ottoman Empire,” 27–28.}
Up to 1453 the Jewish presence in the Ottoman Empire was relatively small.\textsuperscript{41} The centers of pre-1492 Ottoman Jewry were Adrianople, Smyrna, and Salonika, where Jewish communities prospered as early as the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{42} The indigenous Ottoman Jews were the Romaniotes and Karaites that lived in pre-Ottoman Anatolia and the Balkans.\textsuperscript{43} Indigenous Jewry suffered considerable persecution under the Byzantine Empire and perceived the Ottomans as liberators. From the fourteenth century onward, a constant stream of European Jews supplanted the indigenous groups.\textsuperscript{44}

The Ottoman Empire turned into the leading, early modern Sephardic center as a result of several historical developments. Two of the main developments were the 1453 conquest of Constantinople and the migration of Iberian Jews after 1492. Another central development in turning the Ottoman Empire into the leading Sephardic center was the Ottomans’ continued expansion toward North Africa and Europe and especially the conquest of Egypt and the Land of Israel in 1516–17.\textsuperscript{45}

Before 1391 there existed in the Land of Israel small communities of Mustarab (Arabized Oriental Jews), Italian, Ashkenazic, Sephardic, and North African Jews. The years after 1391 witnessed a modest migration of Iberian Jews who had felt rejected or betrayed by their host culture. Some of these early immigrants sought to appease God’s wrath by rebuilding a Jewish presence in the Land of Israel. The 1453 Ottoman conquest

\textsuperscript{41} Haim Gerber, \textit{The Jews of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: Economy and Society}, (Jerusalem: 1982), 10–11.
\textsuperscript{43} Karaite Judaism is a Jewish movement characterized by the recognition of the Torah alone as its legal authority. It differs from mainstream Rabbinic Judaism, which considers legal decisions codified in the Talmud and subsequent works to be authoritative interpretations of the Torah.
\textsuperscript{44} Daniel Goffman, “Jews in Early Modern Ottoman Commerce,” in \textit{Jews, Turks, Ottomans}, 16.
of Constantinople increased the latter tendency and even generated messianic hopes as some perceived the demise of the Byzantines as an omen signaling the imminent arrival of the messiah.

The expellees of 1492 settled the Land of Israel in larger numbers than they did before the expulsion yet did not constitute a significant element of local Jewry until the second decade of the sixteenth century. The town of Safed is an exceptional case because a significant Sephardic community existed there as early as 1504. Economic improvement in the aftermath of the Ottoman conquest in 1516 drew more Iberian expellees. Consequently, in the 1520s the Sephardim came to dominate local culture, religion, and politics.

Iberian Jews settled in Egypt even before the expulsion yet in growing numbers only afterward. Until the Ottoman occupations of Egypt in 1516 and Syria and the Land of Israel (in 1517), these areas were part of a Mamluk sultanate. The ethnic make up of Egyptian Jewry was varied and included Mustarab, North African, Ashkenazic, and Sephardic communities. The Mamluk Jewish community was, at least in theory, a central organization headed by a nagid (lit., a prince or leader). However, the institution was cancelled after the Ottoman conquest and replaced with an organization in the Ottoman fashion of ethnic communities.

The expellees’ settlement in the Ottoman Empire was a protracted and circuitous process. The expellees continued their migration within the Ottoman Empire for economic reasons or as a result of forced relocation.\(^\text{46}\) Also, many second-generation

exiles moved to Italy, France, and the Low Countries as the economic opportunities in the Ottoman Empire decreased during the second half of the sixteenth century. 47

Many of the expellees chose to remain in Iberia; others regretted their choice to leave and returned to Iberia before crossing the border. Still others chose this path as a result of horrific experiences in exile. In addition, the policy of the Spanish monarchy made it easier for the struggling expellees to choose conversion and return to Spain. The monarchs repeatedly argued that their goal was to have the Jews convert and stay rather than to leave. The monarchs’ assertion is supported by the language of the edict of expulsion itself and by their ongoing efforts to convince entire communities to stay. Even after the expulsion, the crown issued formal decrees promising converted expellees the right to return to their homes and possessions. 48

Whether in Portugal, North Africa, Italy, or the Ottoman Empire, the two decades after 1492 witnessed an extreme refugee crisis. What mattered for the expellees was physical survival. In the journey out of Iberia the expellees depended upon the good will of their Christian and Muslim neighbors. The expellees’ experience was characterized by piracy and enslavement. Bribes often did not ensure safe passage. The expellees also lacked the legal status to pursue relief from their molesters. 49 After they arrived at their destinations, they suffered disease, homelessness, and shortages of food and water. The

48 Haim Beinart, The Expulsion of the Jews from Spain (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2002), 329–31. The monarchs established a special administration dedicated to resettling those Jews who sought to return to their homeland. A converso had to go before the vicario (royal magistrate) of the city where he sought to settle and present a certificate of baptism to be validated by a notary who then created a new record of the convert’s religious identity. Ray, After Expulsion, 54.
chronicles are full of vivid descriptions of the expellees’ horrendous tribulations. Often they were not admitted to their desired resettlement locations and were forced to stay outside the walls of a city.\textsuperscript{50} These difficulties influenced the emerging Ottoman Sephardic social organization to which we now turn.

**Social Organization**

Local Organization

Established ties of friendship, family, language, and place of origin were the first signifiers of the emerging Ottoman Sephardic communities in their tortuous transition from loose associations of expellees with a common cultural background to formal communal units. When they left Iberia, some of the expellees had fled in familial or communal groups, comprised of their remaining family members, friends, and neighbors. Often these groups formed the basis for new communities established in the lands where the expellees settled. However, in spite of preexisting ties, the expellees restructuring their communities based on social context rather than simply continuing their previous medieval social patterns or adopting the structures of their host cultures.

The extended patriarchal and hierarchical family was the basic Ottoman Sephardic social unit. Close-knit families intermarried to dominate communal political, mercantile, intellectual, or religious spheres. The age of betrothal (under 12 for daughters and 13 to 16 for sons) was lower than was customary in Iberia. After the engagement, the young couple lived with the young man’s family until they were old enough to start their

life as an independent couple. In this context the Ottoman Sephardim brought up families rather than individual children.\textsuperscript{51}

The *kahal* was the basic building block of the Ottoman Sephardic community and the ideal early modern Jewish political unit. The *kahal* was an independent community based on families of shared ethnicity and headed by a representative council. Perhaps one of the reasons for the success of the *kahal* model was its compatibility with the Ottoman social organization in which the effective social units were micro communities based on neighborhood, quarter, or ward (*mahalle*).

At times the *kahalim* (pl. of *kahal*) formed an organic *kehilla* (congregation). Most often, however, the *kehila* was a collection of loosely tied *kahalim*. The number of *kahalim* in each *kehila* varied greatly. In large communities one could find more than thirty *kahalim* whereas the smallest ones were comprised of only two. For example, the sixteenth-century Adrianople *kehila* included the following *kahalim*: Catalan, Portugal, Germany, Spain, Apulia, Toledo, Aragon, Sicily, Italy, and Buda. In contemporary Salonika we find the following *kahalim*: Spain, Sicily, Maghreb, Lisbon, Italy, Otranto, Catalan, Aragon, Apulia, Provencal, Castilian, Evora of Portugal, Germany, Calabria, and Zaragoza. In Istanbul we find most of the above mentioned *kahalim* and a variety of Romaniote, Hungarian, Balkan, and Anatolian communities that were relocated to the city in 1453.\textsuperscript{52}

The *kahal* leadership (known as *maamad*) numbered six to eight representatives of different social classes or tax brackets (i.e., rich, poor, and middle class). The *maamad*

\textsuperscript{51} Hacker, “Spanish Jewry in the Ottoman Empire,” 52–53.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 29.
was elected for a predetermined period. Each male member of the community voted to elect a representative to the maamad according to his tax bracket. However, often the maamad was dominated by the top tax payers, and usually the elite of the exiting maamad appointed the key office holders (parnasim) of the incoming leadership. Thus even though it was an elected leadership, the maamad generally represented the elite’s interests.

The kahal managed communal services such as the maintenance of synagogues and public education, the supervision of butchers, welfare for the poor and sick, the legal system, a graveyard, and most importantly, the regulation of tax payments. The maamad appointed different communal office holders to manage the different services, for example, the marbitz torah (lit., Torah teacher, a local communal leader), melamed (teacher or educator in the heder), cantor, gabay (manager of the synagogue), berurei averot (deciders on matters of purity, marital relations, and punishments for moral transgressions), gizbar (treasurer), or estimators (responsible for assessing tax brackets).

The cultural boundaries dividing kahalim of different ethnicities faded as the century advanced. New social and political associations gradually comprised a novel type of Mediterranean community whose organizing principle was social status rather than ethnicity. The goal of these new communities changed from erecting new functional congregations to ensuring that the community was viable, financially stable, socially functional, and that the interests of the emerging elite families were safeguarded.

53 Ibid., 42.
54 Ibid., 46–47.
55 Ibid., 43–45.
With the weakening of ethno-cultural bonds and increased social polarization, financial instability became the axis around which the exiled communities revolved and the factor most responsible for pitting the political leadership against the general community. Middle class merchants and artisans carried most of both the internal (i.e., maintenance of communal institutions) and external financial burdens (i.e., taxes owed to the Ottoman authorities). The reliance on the middle class did not prevent the emerging oligarchy from justifying their continued dominance by their self-proclaimed ability to mediate between the Ottoman authorities and the general community. Thus, to function effectively, the Jewish leadership had to defuse tensions between lay and rabbinic elite, the elite and the general public, and the community and its host culture (especially in regulating tax payments).

The relationship between lay and rabbinic elite was complicated and delicate. On the one hand, the lay elite sought rabbinic sponsorship to legitimate their leadership status. On the other hand, the rabbis’ authority threatened the lay leadership. The rabbis, whose legitimacy emanated primarily from their charisma and popular support, sought a more formal manifestation of their loosely defined relationship with the lay elite. One means to achieve their goal was through the various communal agencies established to promote pious behavior (ve’adim or berurei averot). Before 1492, lay leaders dominated these functions but during the sixteenth century, the religious elite came to dominate and use them as a means to exert political influence. Requiring halakhic approval for general communal ordinances was a less official but effective means. However, these methods

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56 Ibid., 50.
often ceased to function with the demise of the charismatic rabbi or rabbinc circle because the source of political influence was primarily their charismatic qualities.

A large stratum of Ottoman Sephardim struggled with poverty well after the Sephardic elite recovered from the catastrophe of 1492. The lower classes were effectively excluded from the lay and rabbinc elite networks and consequently lacked significant political influence.\(^\text{57}\) Therefore, defusing tensions between the elite and the disenfranchised masses was one of the main challenges of the diaspora leadership. Failure to do so could lead to the denunciation of elites to the non-Jewish authorities.\(^\text{58}\) On the other hand, communal support often proved insufficient to sustain the poor that lived in difficult conditions. The leadership trod on very thin political ice.

The rabbinc elite were instrumental in defusing social strife. Traditionally, rabbinc authorities presented an ambivalent evaluation of the poor as unlucky victims of the wealthy but of a debased moral behavior. Therefore, some rabbis supported an oligarchic government for communal affairs. Others, on the other hand, supported extensive and active participation of the poor in political life and communal governance. However, the latter efforts remained theoretical because the poor were never integrated into the political system in a meaningful way.

The marginalization and the exclusion of the poor from the elite networks resulted in their living on the outskirts of towns or in shantytowns, especially from the second half of the sixteenth century. In socially mixed neighborhoods, the poor inhabited less desirable quarters, usually the lower floors where sanitation conditions were poor and


disease was rampant. The social compartmentalization was manifested in the political organization as well. From the second half of the century, the poor were grouped in *kahalim* set aside for those of lesser social strata rather than according to their ethnic group.  

Cross-Regional Networks  
Together with the emergence of local political associations, the expellees formed broader cross-regional networks. These networks were based on associations that sustained medieval Jewry’s fluidity of social, economic, and intellectual contacts across the Mediterranean and beyond. Although they declined sharply in the later middle ages, the routes, port towns, commercial centers, and communities in these networks never ceased to exist and served in the relocation and settlement of the Iberian expellees. The Sephardic cross-regional network was of two interconnected kinds, namely, the rabbinic and the trading networks.

**The Rabbinic Network** The rabbinic network was a set of dynamic encounters of different intellectual traditions on the move rather than a connection of clearly identifiable, distinct stationary intellectual centers. The unprecedented, early modern migration, loss of many libraries and scholars, and encounters of different intellectual traditions all blurred the lines separating medieval cultural trends. During the Middle Ages sedentary heads of particular schools dominated intellectual life and cultural production. Medieval Iberia was the seat of philosophy and kabbala, northern France of Talmudic exegesis, and Germany of pietism. However, the early modern rabbinic
network relied on itinerant scholars that encountered new customs, defended old beliefs, and produced new intellectual trends.59

The expellees’ increased mobility and cultural encounters confronted them with new revelations and forced them to defend or modify old truisms. The result was cultural production written at an accelerated pace and manifested in new forms of literary creativity in law, kabbala, medicine, history, and homiletics. For example, the expellees produced many books about customary practices to commemorate and defend old traditions. In addition, the aftermath of the expulsion saw the composition of universal legal codes, namely, the Shulhan Arukh of Joseph Caro and Moses Isserles’s glosses to the Shulhan Arukh.60

Rabbinic networks relied on mutual trust that developed among small groups. Much like their mercantile counterparts, one of the ways that the rabbis maintained such connections was by marrying within their ranks.61 Beyond the familial contacts, the scholarly circle out of which the rabbi emerged provided him with a social network. Former students often supported their rabbi, and students of particular rabbis would support each other. A related scholarly network (though not necessarily identical) was that of scholars belonging to particular intellectual circles.62

The weak financial and political position of Sephardic scholars made them dependent on both elite and popular support. Competition among migrant scholars was

59 Printed material developed into a similar rabbinic network as ideas that formerly were limited to certain regions or rabbinic circles were now transmitted through texts to previously unreachable cultural spheres.
61 Ben Naeh, Jews in the Realm of the Sultans: Ottoman Jewish Society in the Seventeenth Century (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 386.
fierce as the market of legal experts and teachers was flooded. The large number of applicants for each available position sent many struggling scholars on trips across the Mediterranean as frequently as their merchant brethren.63 A rabbi’s ethnicity reduced the number of possible positions even further. Although early modern rabbis generally saw themselves as religious authorities to all Jews, a rabbi not associated with the ethnic group that comprised a particular kahal was not always considered for a position.64 The rabbis’ distress was exacerbated by a general disinterest in advanced studies among most expellees. The trade-oriented communities of merchants and artisans showed limited interest in studying. Therefore, except for a small number of centers, it was difficult for itinerant rabbis to find paying students.65

During most of the sixteenth century, various yeshivot were closely associated with individual communities that acted as their sponsors. By the end of the century, the congregations in these communities experienced financial crises and were unable to fund the yeshivot. Consequently, rabbinic sages became increasingly dependent upon the patronage of individuals among the lay elite. This arrangement enabled the lay elite to gain status and honor through public recognition of their financial support of religious

63 Ben Naeh, Jews in the Realm of the Sultans, 296–97.
institutions, to intervene in the internal management of the yeshivot, and to affect the rabbis’ views on a plethora of social matters.66

The Trading Network The Sephardic trading network was based on Mediterranean trading routes that connected Jewish merchants in Italy and the eastern Mediterranean and converso centers in England, France, the Low Countries, Iberia, and North Africa.67 The network’s main centers were Lisbon, Seville, Madrid, Salonika, Istanbul, Venice, Livorno, Antwerp, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Bordeaux, and London. Most of these centers were located in Western Europe and were a product of the conversos’ migration to these regions later in the sixteenth century and in the seventeenth century.68 The early Ottoman Jewish global trade, however, was conducted mostly with Italian Adriatic centers, namely, Venice, Ancona, Ragusa, and Livorno as European powers did not allow trade with merchants that were not of their citizenship. Thus, the establishment of a broader international Ottoman Jewish trading network was gradual and did not occur immediately after the expulsion.

The expellees in North Africa were the first to manifest the Sephardic network. It was there that from the early stages of the expulsion the Sephardim traded with Iberian conversos. The former offered access to African and Ottoman markets, and the latter provided much needed credit.69 In North Africa the recuperated expellees were integrated

68 In addition, the Sephardic network operated among, and collaborated with, different Christian trading networks. For example, the Genoese, Catalan, and Flemish merchants operated networks spread throughout the Mediterranean, the New World, and Asia. Jonathan I. Israel, European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism, 1550–1750 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), chaps. 1–2; Braude, “Rise and Fall of Salonica Woollens”; and Bashan, “The Rise and Decline of Sephardi Communities,” 349–88.
69 On the current view of early modern Sephardic networks, see Israel, European Jewry; Israel, “Diasporas Jewish and Non-Jewish and the World Maritime Empires,” in Diaspora Entrepreneurial Networks: Four
into the regional trading system. The merchants that settled in the interior trading hub of Fez were in contact with Mediterranean and Atlantic coastal ports, as well as sub-Saharan centers. The expellees managed to stay connected to the markets in Portugal and the Portuguese territories along Africa’s Atlantic coast through their connections with conversos and utilizing their linguistic and cultural skills.70

In the Ottoman Empire Jews were involved at all levels of the Ottoman economy from street sellers to maritime mercantile magnates.71 Internally, Ottoman Jewry traded primarily with Egypt and the mercantile hubs around the Black Sea. Egypt was the gateway for African goods (gold, ivory, precious stones, and slaves) and Arabian merchandise (indigo, spices, coffee, and raw silk). As a producer, Egypt supplied cotton, hides, rice, wheat, and sugar cane. Into Egypt flowed metal, metal works, wood, textiles, and clothes.

The emergence of a global Ottoman Jewish trade network, although protracted, was an unexpected development. Medieval Jewry was an unlikely candidate for the dominance of early modern global trade. After the persecutions of 1391, the volume of Iberian Jewish trade decreased significantly. Italian Jewry suffered a similar fate during

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70 Ray, After Expulsion, 100.
71 Ibid., 57.
the fifteenth century. Supported by European political powers (Venice, Genoa, Florence, France, and Cataluña) Christian merchants dominated medieval long-range trade.\textsuperscript{72}

Several historical developments drove the success of the Ottoman Jewish network. The Ottoman expansion after 1453 and the discovery of new trading routes drastically disrupted the established medieval Christian trading network. The established European trading elite were not equipped with the knowledge (linguistic, bureaucratic, or political) or the trustworthy connections required for successful commerce with agents of varying cultures. Between 1492 and 1540 Iberian Jews and conversos entered the void in global trade and pushed Christian merchants out of the Ottoman trade centers of Salonika, Belgrade, Sarajevo, Sophia, Adrianople, and Ankara. The Ottomans actively contributed to the success of the Sephardic network as they systematically cut traditional privileges for the Italian merchants, forced western merchants to pay higher taxes and levies, and pushed western maritime movement out of the Black Sea.\textsuperscript{73}

Three additional factors influenced the rise and decline of the Ottoman Sephardic network: (1) Ottoman Jews were channeled toward trade because they were not allowed to engage in independent business enterprises or in agricultural industries. Consequently, trade and professional services (medicine, education, brokerage, or translation) were Ottoman Jewry’s venues for economic success.

(2) The Ottoman Empire was not a sea-faring realm or in the forefront of technology. In the Ottoman ethos, maritime trade was considered a lesser calling than craft or war. Consequently, the Ottoman navy and merchant marine traditionally relied on


\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 58.
foreigners. In addition, the Ottomans rarely settled conquered areas or interfered in local economic enterprises. For example, after 1453 the Ottomans gave trading rights to Italian merchants that were slowly ousted by the incoming Sephardim in the sixteenth century. The sultans Mehmed II (1451–81) and Bayazid (1481–1512) actively promoted international commerce. They founded trading posts, exempted Balkan settlements from certain taxes to secure a free flow of goods, and developed Istanbul as a commercial center connecting the Far East, India, the Arabian Peninsula, and Europe. The result was economic expansion and general prosperity, at least in the first half of the sixteenth century. Together these developments enabled the expellees’ success as they were knowledgeable in cutting-edge technology, had mastered a variety of languages, had access to credit and insurance, and were familiar with different legal and financial systems.

(3) Historical contingencies at first enabled the success of the Ottoman Sephardic trading networks yet significantly diminished their status as the century progressed. For example, the end of the Ottoman conquests in the second half of the sixteenth century generated inflation and economic stagnation. But the most significant factor in this context was the gradual return of Christian merchants to dominate global trade. From the second quarter of the sixteenth century, the European powers reached agreements with the Ottomans allowing European merchants to trade directly with Ottoman agents. In 1521 and 1535 Venice and the Ottomans signed agreements to facilitate direct trade between them. Later in the century France (1535) and England (1583) signed similar

74 Ibid., 352–55.
75 Bashan, “The Rise and Decline of Sephardi Communities,” 353.
agreements. Consequently, the intermediary functions of the Jewish networks were no longer needed, which resulted in their decline.  

In addition to international and local commerce, Ottoman Jewry served the important functions of brokers and interpreters. A broker was a middle man between foreign diplomats and merchants and the local bureaucracy and its merchants. Interpreters supplied much more than simple translation; they served as guides and advisers who gathered and analyzed information that was useful to their employers. Some interpreters occupied positions of prestige with foreign embassies or consulates while others worked for private foreign merchants. Individual brokerage and brokerage partnerships often passed from father to son and brokerage “rights” were sold. Therefore, brokerage and translation practices established and even increased the trend toward social polarization.

The expellees served in a variety of trades and crafts: as goldsmiths, tanners, textile dyers, tailors, metalworkers, blacksmiths, fishermen, butchers, cheese and winemakers, seamen, printers, entertainers, healers, and physicians. However, the textile industry was the most important economic base for the Sephardic diaspora in the Mediterranean. Jews dominated the textile industry well before 1492; and with the expulsion and the rising European demand for textiles, the expellees made the existing infrastructure a stepping stone to economic success.

Several factors contributed to the success of the Jewish textile industry including know-how and demand; the expellees brought new techniques in wool manufacturing and produced a more attractive product. The Ottoman authorities encouraged the success by

76 Hacker, “Spanish Jewry in the Ottoman Empire,” 56.
77 Bashan, “The Rise and Decline of Sephardi Communities,” 357.
78 Ibid., 350; Hacker, “Spanish Jewry in the Ottoman Empire,” 65.
giving Ottoman Jews primary rights for selling and buying textile products. The Ottomans then sought to profit from this thriving sector and imposed significant taxes on the textile industry.\textsuperscript{80}

The textile industry touched all social levels and the geographical centers of Ottoman Jewry. Raw silk was brought from Persia through Syria to the Anatolian cities of Bursa and Istanbul, and from there the processed product was sent to Europe. Cotton came from Syria, Egypt, and Cyprus. Wool came from Greece, sorted and processed in Adrianople, and was then sent to markets in the Balkans, Land of Israel, Istanbul, and Syria. Woolen and silk clothes from Venice arrived in the Balkans through Ragusa, and Salonika textiles were sold in Skopje (Macedonia), Pleven, Sofia, and Nikopol (Bulgaria). Jewish merchants in Egypt bought textiles from Safed, Rhodes, and Salonika and sold dyes bought from India to the same centers. In Syria, Aleppo was an important center of silk imports from India and Persia and of its export to Anatolia and Europe in addition to the sophisticated silk industries located in Damascus, Safed, Zidon, and Tripoli.\textsuperscript{81}

**The Expulsion: A Protracted Return of Iberian Jewry to the Mediterranean World**

The common historical perception of the expulsion is that of a sudden closure, an abrupt end for a glorious Iberian Jewish past. In recent years scholars have begun challenging this notion. Jonathan Ray argues that the expulsion was a protracted development that started in 1391 and proceeded well into the sixteenth century rather

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.,” 358–60.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 361.
than a brief, sudden event. The above survey of the expellees’ long years of circuitous travels along the Mediterranean demonstrates the merit of Ray’s argument.

In addition, Ray disagrees that the expulsion was essentially a departure from a natural environment. Rather, Ray argues, the expulsion returned Iberian Jewry to the Mediterranean world of which it was an integral part until the thirteenth century. Medieval Iberian Jewry, so his argument goes, was an integral part of a Mediterranean network that began to crumble in the middle of the thirteenth century. Consequently, the network’s communities turned into distinct and disconnected regional Jewish societies. For Iberian Jews this development manifested in a separation of the Jewish communities from the Muslim Arabic spheres that connected them to their brethren in North Africa and the Levant. By the close of the thirteenth century, this trend began to reverse slowly as Jews were systematically excluded from most of Christendom. Among the most important events that drove this development were the persecution of 1391; the century of murder, conversion, and exile that followed; and finally the expulsion of 1492.

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84 The main reasons for this development are that Christian merchants began taking the place of Jewish networks and that Jewish society assumed a provincial character. For more on this matter, see Ray, *After Expulsion*, 2.

85 By 1492 only a minority of intellectuals, diplomats, and merchants mastered Arabic. See Ray, *After Expulsion*, 3.

86 Ibid., 2–3.
Iberian Jews maintained important contacts to the Mediterranean world even before 1492, primarily through trade with Mallorca, Italy, and North Africa. In the fifteenth century, as the Crown of Aragon begun focusing its attention on the eastern Mediterranean and Italy, so did Jewish traders and migrants from eastern Iberia. At the same time Castilian Jews, following Castile’s growing interest in North Africa, increased their presence in the Maghreb. These contacts necessitated developing Iberian Jewry’s relationships with Mediterranean Jewish communities as well as the local gentile elite.

Jewish migration and resettlement along the Mediterranean routes began before 1492. However, the expulsion was not a direct continuation of existing trends. The magnitude of the numbers and the mixed social profile of the expellees distinguished this migration from earlier movements. Before the expulsion it was the lay and religious elite that were connected to the Mediterranean networks rather than the majority of medieval Iberian Jewry. After 1391, and especially after 1492, non-elites were forced to migrate in large numbers; they followed the commercial paths that connected Iberia to Mallorca, Italy, North Africa, and the Levant, where they came into contact with indigenous Jews and gentiles.

After 1391 the number of Iberian immigrants was relatively small, a fact that enabled their successful assimilation in the different host cultures. However, after 1492 it was not realistic to expect the numerous expellees to adopt the indigenous identity, liturgy, culture, and social organization embedded in the indigenous communities. The cultural differences had to be negotiated between the incoming and the indigenous

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communities. In several eastern Mediterranean and North African locales, Iberian expellees outnumbered indigenous Jews and established their culture as one that was competitive with, or even superior to, the indigenous culture.\(^89\) The magnitude of the forced conversions and the mass migration at the turn of the sixteenth century, therefore, compelled Mediterranean Jewry to actively rethink and reshape its identity as old categories disappeared.

The mobile expellees were creatures of their time and place. Early modern Europe and the Mediterranean also saw other ethnic groups on the move. The Ashkenazim, for example, moved eastward from northern Europe to settle in the Kingdom of Poland. Christian religious minorities were on the move as well.\(^90\) In the particular case of Spain, the Jewish exodus came in the midst of the Muslim migration to North Africa prompted by the Reconquista. As scholars note, the age of migration was not completely voluntary but included the mass movement of African slaves to Europe and its Atlantic colonies.\(^91\) Thus, the rethinking of Sephardic identity took place in the context of recompartmentalizing the Mediterranean, European, and Jewish worlds.

The trauma of the expellees was an ongoing process beginning with the violence of 1391 and continuing until the middle of the sixteenth century. In this long period of liminality and uncertainty, Iberian Jewry suffered persecutions, conversions, constant migration (forced or voluntary), and the loss of family members, material possessions, and a sense of identity. The expellees’ identity crisis was fueled by the encounter with

indigenous foreign (Jewish, Muslim, or Christian) cultural trends and social organizations in addition to the loss of the familiar. It is in the context of a protracted restructuring of Iberian Jewish identity in an Ottoman and Mediterranean world that we must understand their cultural production and their interpretation of yibbum.

Iberian Kabbala: Trends, Centers, Themes, and Genres

The dissertation examines the Ottoman Sephardic social imagination as it is manifested in the yibbum discourse. The evidence comprising this discourse is found in several genres, some clearly kabbalistic and others halakhic or written by halakhic authorities, yet incorporating elements of Iberian kabbala. This discourse must be understood in the context of an unprecedented proliferation of kabbalistic activity among the expellees and in the context of how this previously esoteric lore turned into an exoteric tradition. Thus, the context couching the yibbum discourse was clearly and heavily influenced by Iberian kabbala. For these reasons I consider the Ottoman Sephardic yibbum discourse to be predominantly kabbalistic. The following, therefore, presents a brief review of the major developments and themes in Iberian kabbala before 1492. In this dissertation I define kabbala as an ideological literary tradition that seeks to explain the relationship between God and his people. It is an interpretive tradition that considers Judaism as a system of symbols reflecting the mystery of the Torah, the commandments, and God. Kabbala supplies the means of understanding this system and acting upon it.

Scholars located two major trends in Iberian kabbala, namely, the theosophical-theurgical and the ecstatic. The first, and the dominant approach at the time of the
expulsion, is concerned with the structure and functioning of the divine sefirotic system (i.e., theosophy) and with the ways in which the believer can maximize the system’s efficiency through the performance of the commandments (i.e., theurgy). This approach views harmony between the Jewish people and the divine as a requirement for a proper functioning of both. Ecstatic kabbala saw its purpose in enabling a mystical union of the kabbalist and the divine through the ascension of the former to the latter by means of isolation, letter combination, drug consumption, hyperventilation, dancing, and other trance-inducing means. Such a union was meant to serve the individual kabbalist by harnessing divine power or using supernal knowledge.

The discourses comprising the theosophical-theurgical trend focus on the sefirotic system and the mystical meaning of the commandments. In Iberian kabbala the ten sefirot are God’s attributes, powers, or emanations. The sefirotic system is a dynamic articulation of the relationship of the manifested divine with the world it created and the hidden divine world. Similar to the Neoplatonic system of emanations, the sefirot emanate from the hidden God known as the Ein-Sof (lit., infinite or endless). However, unlike the Neoplatonic model of emanations, the sefirot are not considered separate from the hidden God and are not completely hierarchical but display internal relationships and dynamic unions that vary according to the behavior of the believers. The nature of the sefirot is a disputed matter; some argue they are separate from the divine and are instruments that channel divine energy, whereas others argue that they are of a divine essence. This matter was often kept opaque to discourage pantheism or polytheism.

The theosophical-theurgical trend is directly connected to the rabbinic perception of the commandants and, consequently, is conservative in nature. Whereas rabbinic
interest was in Jewish law and the proper way to perform the commandments, theosophical-theurgical kabbala was focused on the mystical rationale underlying the law and the performance of the commandments. This approach is exoteric because it is open; indeed, it binds all Jews already tasked with performing the commandments. Fulfilling the commandments contributes to the proper functioning of the sefirotic system and is therefore essential for the survival of the world. Thus, the performance of the commandments is not only a personal, Jewish, or worldly requirement but rather a divine necessity as well.

Although kabbalists belonged to different schools of thought, they shared the same notion of textual authority. Kabbalists used what Idel calls the “mosaic” writing, that is, free usage of texts belonging to different genres, schools of thought, geographical areas, or historical periods. The kabbalists employed a phenomenological-synchronic approach to their study: isolating, selecting, and constructing narratives around unifying themes and symbols emanating from different historical contexts. Thus, phenomenology, literary criticism, or in our case, social imagination, are especially useful tools for unpacking the logic governing kabbalistic discourses.

Kabbala was transmitted in several literary genres. Exegetical writing was common among kabbalists and non-kabbalists alike. However, the focus of the exegesis varied: for example, earlier kabbalists interpreted major kabbala works such as Sefer yetzirah, Bahir, and, of course, the Zohar. In a later period, and especially from the thirteenth century, the emphasis turned to exegesis of the Torah rather than exegesis of kabbalistic texts. Another important kabbalistic genre is the systematic theological

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discussion concerning the function and nature of the sefirotic system. Other kabbalists documented revelations transmitted to them by a possessing angel or a sacred spirit known as a maggid.

Although rooted in much older mystical traditions, kabbala became discernible as such in the Middle Ages from the twelfth century onward. In the thirteenth century kabbalistic centers existed in Provence, Catalonia, and Castile. In the fifteenth century—even before 1492 and with an increased intensity after the expulsion—kabbala spread to Italy, the Land of Israel, North Africa, Ashkenaz, and the Ottoman Empire from Iberia. In all of these centers, Sephardic kabbalists encountered, adopted, and adapted to local traditions. Thus different variations of Iberian kabbala turned into the dominant, early modern, mystical interpretation of Judaism.

The main, competing kabbala centers at the time of the expulsion were located in Italy and the Ottoman Empire. In Italy the Iberian kabbalists encountered ecstatic kabbala and a unique theosophical-theurgical tradition heavily influenced by Western philosophy. The Italian philosophical interpretations emphasized the unity of the divine and its emanations, its perception by means of human intellect, and generally downplayed the theurgical aspects characteristic of Iberian kabbala. For example, some Italian kabbalists explained the ten sefirot as causes derived from the Ein-Sof (which they perceived as the equivalent of Plato’s One); they imagined the relationship between the emanations as static rather than dynamic (and, therefore, not dependent upon the performance of the commandments).

The Italian philosophical concept of the sefirot and, consequently, of the divine or the supernatural, therefore, is much more orderly, predictable, and dependable. As some
scholars noted, this was a kabbalistic vision of a community living in the midst of a stable and secure host culture, a far cry from the expellees in the Ottoman Empire. The Spanish kabbalists that arrived in Italy emphasized the doctrine of the sefirot and actively resisted (though eventually were influenced by) Italian kabbala. In the Ottoman Empire the expellees found a Byzantine kabbala that was influenced by the Italian ecstatic kabbala but not by philosophy because it developed in a region where philosophy was not as important as it was in Italy. Perhaps for this reason, Byzantine kabbala was not rejected as adamantly by Sephardic kabbalists who had consciously adopted some of its major aspects and works.

In the aftermath of the expulsion, Iberian kabbala had to adapt to survive because it experienced significant social and intellectual challenges. After 1492 Iberian kabbala was exoteric and conservative; it was primarily focused on the mystical purpose of the commandments that governed traditional Jewish life. Thus in its ideology and function, theology and practices, kabbala was aimed at the general public rather than the elite esoteric kabbalists. Although kabbalists employed older traditions and established sources, postexilic kabbala was not a simple continuation of past Iberian kabbalistic trends but rather a novel interpretation. This fact is apparent in the exoteric nature of postexilic kabbala and in the novel trends that resulted from the cultural friction between expelled Iberian sages and indigenous traditions.

Another testimony to the novelty of the Ottoman Sephardic kabbala is the topic of the dissertation, namely, the egalitarian social imagination underlying the yibbum

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discourse. This imagined social organization had alternatives in pre-expulsion Iberia and differed from its contemporary Italian and Ashkenazic discourses, as well as those adopted by Ottoman Jewry in the later sixteenth century.
Chapter 2

Belief in Hybrid Offspring (Products of Demonic Copulation)

The belief in hybrid offspring, the mythical progenies created through demonic copulation, is the first phenomenon that put me on the path toward an exploration of the Ottoman Sephardic communal identity in the aftermath of the expulsion. The unique characteristics of the Ottoman Sephardic incarnation of this long-lasting belief piqued my curiosity. These characteristics concern the creation process, purpose, and effects of the hybrids. The medieval hybrid was believed to have been an otherworldly initiative, created by spiritual agents (spirits or demons), who addressed their predicament of immateriality by using human wasteful emissions to embody themselves. In the aftermath of the expulsion, the Ottoman Sephardim came to believe that the hybrids originated in the worldly, human sphere. The creating agent of the hybrids, their conscious animating spirit, was believed to have emanated from a human origin, now identified as their father. According to the later belief, the human soul destined to turn into a demonic hybrid was first encapsulated in wasted semen. However, the soul’s temporary vessel eventually released it into the open air where it sought to reembody itself by taking a body formed from demonic matter.

As the danger that the hybrids posed increased dramatically, the repercussions of their existence changed as well. The medieval hybrids were imagined as tormentors of the Jewish people. Their post-exilic counterparts, however, came to hurt their human

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94 These creatures are not referred to as hybrid offspring in the primary sources. I use this term to refer to a category of creatures created through demonic copulation, whose origins are both human and supernatural. Joshua Trachtenberg uses this terminology when referring to the product of demonic copulations or to demons who reside in a house occupied by a living family. See Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 36, 51.
father and to empower the cosmic evil in its struggle with God. Thus, what once was a nocturnal menace that threatened the community came to endanger the father, the existence of the Jewish people, and the world.

Contextualizing these changes proved a difficult task. The relative scarcity of primary evidence and scholarly interest in the matter made it very difficult to base my research exclusively on evidence directly concerned with the phenomenon itself. An added difficulty was the fact that the phenomenon is not contained in a clearly identified religious or scholarly field but rather occupies several interrelated discourses. Due to space constraints I chose to focus my early efforts on one such discourse, namely, various funerary practices that took many shapes and forms after their first appearance in Talmudic texts. In their Ottoman Sephardic incarnation, they were meant to protect the deceased from the intent of his hybrid offspring to prevent his soul from entering the afterworld. In time these funerary rituals came to comprise the modern *maamadot u-moshavot*, a custom that was meticulously researched by Meir Benayahu.

I soon realized that even the *maamadot u-moshavot* discourse does not supply sufficient useful evidence or methodological tools for contextualizing the Ottoman Sephardic hybrid offspring belief. Benayahu’s thorough survey of the funerary rituals stretches from the Talmud to modern times. However, in spite of the work’s impressive scope, several periods lack primary evidence from Sephardic sources. Most importantly, the period stretching between the end of the thirteenth century and the expulsion from Spain is almost exclusively represented by the works of Ashkenazic and Italian rabbis.95

It is only at the turn of the sixteenth century with the expulsion generation that we once again encounter the Sephardic opinion. The second significant gap stretches from the mid-sixteenth century to the seventeenth century. Benayahu makes a very interesting observation, noting that although the works produced during the expulsion generation were available to seventeenth-century sages, the latter did not use them to support a kabbalistic interpretation of the funerary rituals.96

The available evidence, therefore, makes it very difficult to contextualize the maamadot u-moshavot rituals and hybrid offspring beliefs of the expulsion generation. I address this matter in this dissertation by extending the historical context in which both phenomena reside. I do so by examining the larger historical development that includes both phenomena, namely, the expellees’ turn to kabbala in the aftermath of the expulsion. I examine this turn through an exploration of the contemporary interpretation of yibbum, a considerably more prolific discourse that is closely related historically and thematically to both phenomena. Thus, the dissertation constitutes a stepping stone for further research of the hybrid offspring beliefs and the maamadot u-moshavot rituals because it expands the phenomena’s historical context.

The methodological issues inherent in Benayahu’s work concern his perception of the kabbalistic interpretation of the rituals in the aftermath of the expulsion as a strictly religious phenomenon and his perception of the relationship between the religious and the social spheres. Benayahu identifies a unique quality in the Ottoman Sephardic incarnation of the rituals. Namely, he found that the main purpose of the rituals was to protect the

deceased from his hybrid offspring. He then argues that the rising influence of kabbala in the aftermath of the expulsion was responsible for this unique characteristic.

Indeed, there is no doubt that thematic similarities exist between kabbalistic discourses and post-exilic funerary rituals. However, we cannot assume that these similarities mean that kabbala influenced funerary practices rather than that each phenomenon was a similar response to shared predicaments. Such an assumption would set kabbala (and the religious sphere in general) as exalted and unaffected by the sociocultural realm, yet affecting society and culture nonetheless. Such a relationship between the religious and the social, while possible, cannot be assumed but, rather, must be defended by evidence and theory. To not do so needlessly blocks potential sociocultural paths of investigation.

My dissertation takes one path toward a sociocultural interpretation by offering methodological tools for examining the proliferation of kabbalistic activity, in general, and the Ottoman Sephardic yibbum discourse, in particular, as sociocultural phenomenon. It does so by exposing the interconnections between religious production and social context as they manifest in the yibbum discourse. Therefore, I delay the thorough theoretical discussion of the relationship between kabbala and sociocultural developments in the aftermath of the expulsion until the historiographical survey chapter below.

My aim in the current chapter is twofold and limited. I present the particular historiographical and methodological questions that Benayahu’s thesis leaves unanswered and offer ways in which my research addresses them. This chapter, therefore, is both a
The belief in hybrid offspring is much older than the expulsion from Spain. The notion that “the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives, whomsoever they chose” (Gen. 6:2) made the belief in spirits copulating with earthly partners quite popular in Talmudic, medieval, and early modern Judaism. The Talmud mentions succubae that were thought to attack newborn children and their mothers and to seduce men in their sleep. Lilith was most frequently identified as the demon that frequents sleeping men and causes them to have the nocturnal emissions necessary to form the hybrid offspring. Another Talmudic tradition identified the hybrids with the children Adam bore with different succubae. This tradition is based on the following biblical presentation of Adam’s genealogy:

This is the book of the generations of Adam. In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him. Male and female created he them; and blessed them, and called their name Adam, in the day when they were created. And Adam lived a hundred and thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness, and after his image; and called his name Seth. And the days of Adam after he had begotten Seth were eight hundred years: and he begat sons and daughters. And all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years: and he died. (Gen. 5:1–5)

The following excerpt from *Midrash Tanhumah* explains Adam’s procreative idleness during the one hundred and thirty years before Seth was born:

For one hundred and thirty years Adam was separated from Eve. Since Abel was slewed, Adam wondered why he should beget children if they got slewed. So

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what did he do? Female spirits came to him and gained warmth with him [i.e., had intercourse], giving birth to mazikim [Hebrew for harm-doers or evil spirits].

In another Talmudic text, the Midrash Rabbah, we learn that Eve’s behavior during the separation was not unlike Adam’s:

In the entire period of one hundred and thirty years during which Adam refrained from having sexual relations with Eve, the male spirits became impassioned with her and she bore, and the female spirits became impassioned with him, and they gave birth.

According to the Talmudic tradition, therefore, Adam and Eve are the ancestors of the hybrid as well as the human race. The Zohar asserts that this dynamic continued among Adam’s offspring (i.e., Jewish men) who routinely copulate with succubae in their sleep by nocturnal emissions. The Zohar, therefore, turned a hermeneutical mythology explaining the biblical text or contemporary beliefs in the existence of succubae into a daily drama involving the average Jewish man and conducted in realms natural and supernatural alike.

In his commentary on the Torah (Parshanut al ha-Torah), Menahem Recanati (1250–1310) represents the late medieval perception of the hybrid offspring while discussing the repercussions of wasteful emission:

When a sperm is released in the spouse, a pure soul, sent by the holy [God], clings to it. If released not according to the order of things [i.e., outside the womb] an unclean spirit clings to the drop. As some of the kabbala sages said, the hairs around the male member [i.e., their shape] show the presence of the

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98 John Townsend, Midrash tanhumah (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 1989), 19. This midrash collection was probably edited in the seventh century although it contains traditions and discussions appearing in earlier midrash collections.

99 Jacob Neusner, Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis. A New American Translation, vol. 1, XX:XI, 225. Genesis rabbah was compiled around the tenth century, but parts were probably written beginning in the fifth century.

100 Patai, Hebrew Goddess, 233–36.
unclean forces lurking for the semen . . . and when semen is spilled, those spirits wrap themselves with it [i.e., embody themselves with the human matter].  

The human discharge in Recanati’s theory is soulless, passive matter used by an active supernatural spirit that “clings” to it. In this context the human contributor supplies the material, passive element in the hybrid offspring while the supernatural being contributes the creative, active, and conscious spirit that seeks to embody itself.

At the turn of the sixteenth century, we find a new logic governing the hybrid offspring belief, one that places an increased level of agency in the hands of the hybrid’s human half. Consider, for example, Avraham Saba’s reflections on the repercussions of nocturnal emission:

[W]hen a man sees keri at night [i.e., nocturnal emission], mazikin and pogin beney adam are created from him . . . and those mazikin that had been formed from zov haadam [i.e., semen] all come together when the man passes away to touch their father and make him impure.

It seems that Saba’s model for the creation of the hybrids is very similar to the medieval model because he asserts that the hybrids are “formed from zov haadam,” that is, from semen, suggesting that the animating spirit is once again supernatural and that the human contribution is passive and material. And indeed, this interpretation is supported by contemporary kabbalistic sources that likened wasted semen to a soulless body, a corpse. Consider, for example, Menahem Bavli, a Sephardic rabbi, who was active in Salonika and the land of Israel during the first half of the sixteenth century. For Bavli, an unburied corpse was an attractive “[dwelling] place for mazikim” because it was made out of “[a]  

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102 Abraham Saba, *Tseror ha-mor* (Venice: s.n., 1523), [4a] and [99b].
drop of *keri* [semen].” Bavli likens the empty corpse to a drop of semen: matter without form, a body without a soul. This view is in tune with Recanati’s assertion that semen is impure because it is as “the dead man whose soul has left him.” It would seem, therefore, that the medieval model presenting a passive, material human contribution to the creation of the hybrid is maintained in Saba’s perception of the hybrids’ creation process.

Yet Saba’s report is more nuanced. The connection between the emitter and the hybrid offspring is direct and personal; the hybrids are identified as the man’s sons who come together to make “their father” impure at the time of his death. The conscious and aware aspect of the hybrid associates itself with the father and identifies itself as the man’s offspring. Such an identity seems unimaginable in the context of the medieval model where semen is perceived as a completely material substance devoid of any awareness whatsoever. The medieval model presents semen as matter that may receive an animating, conscious holy spirit (if released in the womb) or an evil one (if released outside the womb), yet in itself is devoid of any kind of awareness or spirit. Saba’s model is therefore fundamentally different than the medieval model as it associates the

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103 Menahem ben Moses Bavli, *Sefer taamei mitsvot* (Lublin, 1571), “Negative Commandments,” § 109. Bavli was named The Babylonian (*bavli*) despite originating from Trikala, Greece. He moved to the land of Israel in 1524, residing in Safed and, later, in Hebron. For more on Bavli, see Benayahu, *Sefer zikaron*, 118.


105 In addition, and considering our knowledge of contemporary opinions concerning the place of semen in the Ottoman Sephardic *yibbum* discourse, it is not unlikely that the spiritual element encapsulated in the semen was believed to evacuate its temporary body and be released to the open air after the wasted seed is corrupted and decayed. Consider, for example, the assertion of Joseph Caro: “and [of] the matter of spitting, the spewed spittle implies [stands for] that spewed thing that rolls outside of the body from the spine with which the soul clothes and wraps itself [i.e., semen]. For this reason the sages argued the spittle must be insipid [as it is] before the widow eats so it is not from [created due to] eating but from her body’s humors, as that thing spewed from the body.” That is, the spittle in fact contains the husband’s soul trapped in the widow’s womb and is not a simple digestive fluid. Joseph Caro, *Sheelot u-teshuvot bet yosef* (Jerusalem, 2002), #1. For more on this matter, see Chapter 6.
hybrids’ animating spirit with humanity in general and with their father in particular rather than with the supernatural.

Judah Hallawa is another expulsion-generation writer who displayed a similar opinion concerning the creation process of the hybrids. Hallawa writes:

[I]f a man had keri [i.e., nocturnal emission] . . . from this drop one satan is created. And all of these satanim are called nigey beney adam who walk at night to prosecute and do harm . . . and when a man leaves this world, those satanim, his sons, hold their father’s soul [i.e., prevent its entrance to the afterworld].

Much like Saba, Hallawa identifies the hybrids’ human element, the wasted semen, as the source of the active, conscious agent creating the hybrid offspring. Additionally, both Hallawa and Saba believe that the hybrids’ purpose is to create general nocturnal mayhem in addition to hurting their father. Thus, Hallawa’s version of the hybrid offspring creation process shares Saba’s identification of the hybrids as the emitter’s offspring, the perception of semen as the source of the creative agent in producing the hybrids, their function as general agents of nocturnal menace, and the particular threat they pose to their human father. However, Hallawa increases the level of personalization of the connection between the emitter and the offspring arguing that each drop produces one particular hybrid, a unique demonic heir.

Menahem Bavli addresses the matter of the hybrid offspring while exploring the commandment of yibbum. Bavli reiterates Recanati’s interpretation of the logic of wasteful emission: “this effluence [i.e., semen] can only be issued into his spouse, and then a holy soul is upon it. And when issued improperly, then around his hair [i.e., pubic hair] the forces of impurity wrap themselves [i.e., with the semen] and from there [i.e., in this way] evil spirits are created.” Until this point Bavli literally reiterates Recanati and

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seems to support the thesis identifying the human contribution as essentially material and passive. However, Bavli digresses from Recanati’s quotation in a similar fashion to his contemporaries Saba and Hallawa when asserting that the offspring are directly related to the deceased and that they torment his soul: “because they are his sons.” Similarly, the Salonika sage Chaim Ovadiah di Bushal asserts in his Sefer be’er mayim hayim (1546) that the hybrids are born out of nocturnal emission, as the medieval model would suggest, yet clearly states that “out of that seed are born ruhin, bishin, and mazikin.”

It is clear then that the expellees present a different notion of the hybrid offspring belief although they do retain some elements of the medieval model. The most significant novelty in the post-exilic model is the close and personal connection between the emitter and the hybrids. This personal connection suggests that the medieval perception of semen as strictly material was changing in our period. However, the sources are not explicit or uniform on this matter. The Lurianic hybrid offspring model is the dramatic exception to this rule.

The great kabbalistic sage Isaac Luria (1534–72) articulated the most revolutionary interpretation of the Ottoman Sephardic hybrid offspring, the last phase in the development I present in this section. Luria’s model clearly asserts what was only
hinted in his predecessors’ reflections. He completely overturns the relationship between the natural and the supernatural and places a greater responsibility on the individual Jewish man. In Shaar ha-kavanot, a commentary on Jewish liturgy, Luria asserts: “He [who wastes semen] causes those soul drops, destined to turn into his sons, to join the other side [sitra ahrah, the cosmic evil] and to clothe themselves with bodies made out of the side of the serpent [the other side].”^110

As Saba, Hallawa, and Bavli before him, Luria identifies the hybrid offspring as the sons of the wasteful emitter and his drops of semen as the source of the active creator of the hybrid offspring. However, unlike his predecessors, Luria explicitly argues that the human spirit contained within the semen embodies itself with “bodies made out of the side of the serpent.” The passivity and materiality of the supernatural and the agency of the human spirit are now complete. With the increased responsibility of the human creator, the stakes rise as well. Pre-Lurianic hybrids were imagined as a nightly menace that threatened the community in general and their father in particular. However, according to Luria, giving birth to a hybrid offspring empowered the “other side” and posed an additional existential threat to the Jewish people and the world.

The differences between medieval and Ottoman Sephardic perceptions of the hybrid offspring inverted the imagined power relationship between the human and demonic elements merged in the hybrid in particular and between humanity and the supernatural in general. These changes, I argue in the chapters below, are related to the changing notions of communal identity caused by a unique combination of historical developments, namely, the expulsion from Spain in 1492 and the expellees’ social

^110 Isaac Luria, Shaar ha-kavanot (Jerusalem, 1901), 56r.
context in the Ottoman Empire. However, before telling the story of the expellees’ social
context and communal identity, I first turn to the immediate (and perhaps exclusive)
scholarly treatment of the Ottoman Sephardic beliefs in the hybrids, namely, Meir
Benayahu’s examination of the *maamadot u-moshavot* custom, one of whose purposes
was to protect the deceased from the hybrid offspring.

**Historiography: Meir Benayahu’s *Maamadot u-Moshavot***

Although the belief in the hybrid offspring was not Meir Benayahu’s research
topic, he is the historian who most thoroughly examined the primary evidence that
exhibited this phenomenon. He identified and meticulously studied several
interconnected discourses involving the phenomenon. Benayahu’s project, however, did
not seek to explain or even identify the phenomenon as such. Rather, his purpose was to
explore different discourses pertaining to *maamadot u-moshavot*, a custom common in
modern funerals conducted by the Jerusalem burial society (*hevrah kaddisha*) that was
meant to protect the deceased from malicious, supernatural powers including the hybrid
offspring.

During the modern *maamadot u-moshavot* ritual, some of the mourners circle the
deceased seven times and with each completed circle, they throw stones or pieces of
copper in the air and recite psalms. However, a different aspect of the custom prompted
Benayahu to unearth an impressive quantity of evidence concerning its history, namely,
that the children of the deceased are not allowed to join the procession accompanying
their father to the grave. The reasons for this custom, in its late medieval and early
modern incarnations, included beliefs concerning hybrid offspring. Some feared that the
hybrids would follow the children, thus finding their way to the deceased, and eventually making him impure. Others feared that the hybrids, present at the funeral to attack their father, would also hurt the human offspring that are there to bury their father.

Benayahu came into close and unfortunate contact with the custom on the day of his father’s funeral. He was urged to respect the local custom and not follow his father’s bier to the grave, a suggestion he did not comply with. He was confronted with his alleged transgression during the shiva when a rabbi “stood up and with a raised voice asserted that ‘this [i.e., preventing the children from accompanying their father’s corpse] is an old custom . . . practiced in all of Israel’s communities.’” This traumatic experience left Benayahu determined to research the origins “of this ‘custom’ and to benefit faithful sons whose hearts ache as they are prevented from participating in their father’s burial and to see him off during his last moments on earth.”

Benayahu’s purpose, therefore, was to find the custom’s origin and its true meaning and purpose, and to demonstrate the ways in which its modern interpretation “expropriated it from its first form.” Equipped with the premise that the origin is available to be found and considering his personal experience, Benayahu’s conclusions fail to surprise. The original meaning of the custom, Benayahu argues, was to “honor the

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111 Rabbi Yitzhak Nissim (d. 1981) was the Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel from 1955 to 1972.
112 Shiva (lit. seven) stands for the seven days of mourning following the death of a close relative. The period begins immediately after the burial and ends on the morning of the seventh day.
113 Benayahu, Sefer zikaron, 7.
114 This was a wonderful word choice by Benayahu as le-zakot may mean to credit, i.e., give something to other sons or to acquit as in clearing his name from the alleged transgression.
115 Ibid., 7.
116 Ibid., 8, 9, 11. Meir Benayahu, “From the Maamadot u-moshavot for the Dead to the hakafot and the Ban on the Sons to Follow Their Father’s Bier,” Sinai 92 (1983): 58–65: “[T]he important elements of the custom of giving money to the poor and the commandment of burial of the dead . . . were driven by a different matter that is far from the ways of the Torah and Judaism.” (p. 64).
dead and to separate the living from the dead . . . [to] show that [the mourners] do not wish to immediately get rid of the dead with contempt, but rather that the separation is difficult for them. . . . [The mourners’ goal was] to console the soul.”

Regarding the particular matter of preventing the sons from following their father, Benayahu asserts:

[W]e found that the ‘custom’ is not a custom at all and it was based on wrong interpretations. . . . [I]t is not from the Torah, or from the sages’ rulings, or from kabbala, and only depends on the man who wishes [to follow] it.

Benayahu’s argument is clear, yet it does not explain what prompted different sages and communities to construct and follow the particular “wrong interpretations.” This is not to criticize Benayahu’s work for not walking in a path not taken. Rather, I claim that his premise, namely, that there is a “correct” purpose or practice for a religious custom, prevents an examination of the different historical processes reflected in the “errant” interpretations. The material about the hybrid offspring that follows and especially the historiographical chapter below offer a number of relevant historiographical discussions and theoretical tools for this purpose.

In this chapter I make the case for the benefits of further contextualizing the Ottoman Sephardic hybrid offspring beliefs and the maamadot u-moshavot custom. I follow Benayahu’s footsteps and briefly examine the funerary rituals that are tied together in the custom of maamadot u-moshavot. Yet, I use these histories to offer a sociocultural means of further contextualizing each phenomenon rather than a reiteration or simple critique of Benayahu’s argument. I do so by showing that in the aftermath of the expulsion, both phenomena changed in similar ways. I then explore the methodology Benayahu used in the most extensive scholarly attempt to explain this change as it

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117 Benayahu, Sefer zikaron, 9.
118 Ibid., 286.
manifests in the post-exilic maamadot u-moshavot custom. I locate the limits of Benayahu’s thesis and present a methodology and historical background that enable scholarship to go beyond those limits. Most importantly, my research suggests that the hybrid offspring beliefs and the maamadot u-moshavot rituals were different manifestations of a new social imagination and communal identity in the aftermath of the expulsion. In this context I suggest that a means for shedding additional light on Sephardic religious phenomena in the aftermath of the expulsion lies in locating the interconnections between social context and religious production.

Maamadot u-moshavot: This is one of the funerary rituals that came to comprise the modern custom of the same name. Maamadot u-moshavot literally means risings (rising up or standing) and sittings (sitting down). This custom was an integral part of the medieval Jewish burial rite. In its medieval form the ritual consisted of five elements: (1) Mourners stand in three rows according to their relationship to the dead man. (2) They stand up and sit down seven times. (3) A eulogy is delivered. (4) A glass of wine is blessed in a public space (usually a street). (5) The crowd escorts the mourners back to the home of the deceased.\textsuperscript{119} What was the purpose of this ritual? Benayahu shows that during the Second Temple period, the word maamadot referred to a particular place in the cemetery where the mourners could publicly mourn the deceased. During the Second Temple period, when families had their own burial caves, this was a specific area that belonged to the family. When burial in the ground became more common, the term referred to a public space in the cemetery used by all mourners rather than a particular

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 36–37.
family.\textsuperscript{120} Benayahu’s conclusion is that originally the custom was a means of consoling the dead man’s soul and his family members.

During the periods of the \textit{geonim} (c. seventh to the eleventh centuries) and of the \textit{rishonim} (eleventh to the fifteenth centuries), the ritual received an added meaning, namely, to ward off evil spirits.\textsuperscript{121} These could have been spirits that followed the mourners on their way to the cemetery or on their way back from the cemetery.\textsuperscript{122} These spirits (identified as evil spirits, the angel of death, or demons) were believed to originate from a hostile other-worldly agent. The custom’s practice, as well as its logic, received different interpretations in these periods. For example, some would sit down and stand up seven times on their way to or from the burial site while reciting psalms, mourning, or comforting the family. Others left instructions before they died to humiliate their dead body as a means of repentance by dragging the coffin and stopping seven times on the way to the grave. Others left instructions to have their dead body held up on its feet during the funeral procession as means of self-humiliation and also to protect it from evil spirits who, so it was believed, would mistake the corpse for a living person and leave it alone.\textsuperscript{123} Regardless of the different medieval practices, the main purpose of the custom remained to protect the deceased from evil spirits. These spirits came to be identified as the emitter’s hybrid offspring only by the expulsion generation. Thus, the historical development of the beliefs concerning the identity of the spirits is clear and follows the trajectory presented in the analysis of the hybrid offspring above.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 12–14, 16, 18.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 20, 25, 27–29.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 40.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 39.
**Hakafot:** With the malicious spirits identified as the emitter’s offspring came a new protective custom that replaced the *maamadot* among the Ottoman Sephardic communities, namely, the *hakafot* or encirclements. This ritual included seven encirclements of the deceased performed at different stages of the funeral. Much like the *maamadot* ritual, Benayahu finds that the *hakafot* custom varied in its assigned significance and practice from the time of its appearance in the aftermath of the expulsion and throughout its history.\(^ {124}\) Benayahu identifies the Ottoman Sephardic kabbalists as the source of the new custom.\(^ {125}\) He does not follow his observation with a thesis explaining why it was the case that the Sephardic expellees in the Ottoman Empire were those who developed the custom and gave it its particular interpretation. Instead, Benayahu reflects on the connections between the *hakafot* and *maamadot*, namely, the shared purpose of the customs in protecting the deceased from evil spirits.

Benayahu chose this path because he was searching for the history of what he perceived as an errant custom, that is, the kabbalistic logic driving the ban forbidding the sons from following their father’s bier. In this context he finds that the *hakafot* as a means to combat hybrid offspring is not an independent ritual but rather a mistaken kabbalistic interpretation of the older *maamadot* mourning ritual. Thus the intellectual scaffolding supporting Benayahu’s argument excludes the research of the post-exilic *hakafot* custom as an independent phenomenon to be explained on its own terms. Rather, *hakafot* is strictly relational and matters only in comparison to the *maamadot* u-moshavot ritual. I suggest separating the two phenomena for a clearer notion of the developments.

\(^ {124}\) Ibid., 127–43.
\(^ {125}\) Ibid., 63.
that shaped them. The chapters below and especially Chapter 2 offer useful methodological tools and a historical perspective for this purpose as they contextualize a contemporaneous and thematically similar phenomenon. In this way the dissertation enables the examination of the transition from the maamadot u-moshavot to the hakafot or, in fact, the introduction of the hakafot as a creature of its time and place rather than a disfigured tail of an earlier phenomenon.

I present Benayahu’s argument concerning the history of the hakafot in its entirety as it aptly displays additional methodological issues that I examine at length in the historiography chapter below:

[T]he kabbala sages did not mention the custom of hakafot before the generation of the expulsion from Spain and they [then] gave each [custom] a different purpose. . . . [They] found a custom and sought to dress it with a kabbalistic gown . . . if not so [i.e., if hakafot was an established kabbalistic custom,] it should have had one purpose and root that, with time, grew different branches.\footnote{Ibid., 106.}

Even if we accept Benayahu’s assertion that the sages gave different purposes to an existing custom, it does not explain why they selected these particular purposes. What drove different sages to project different theological representations onto the same screen? Again, it would be pointless to criticize Benayahu for not answering unasked questions. However, these questions are worthwhile asking, and Benayahu’s methodology deems them irrelevant.

Also apparent in the quotation above is Benayahu’s theory concerning the relationship between the religious and the social spheres. This theory is exposed in Benayahu’s speculation concerning the sudden appearance of the kabbalistic hakafot ritual. Of interest for Benayahu is the fact that the different sages that “dressed” the
custom with kabbalistic “gowns” did not represent an established religious custom. To use Benayahu’s words, the kabbalistic interpretation of the *hakafot* ritual was “not from the Torah, or from the Sages’ rulings, or from kabbala, and only depends on the man who wishes [to follow] it.” A truly religious movement, Benayahu asserts, has “[o]ne purpose and root. . . . Only after this root, this primary theological basis is established it may grow . . . [d]ifferent branches . . . or different interpretations of the accepted belief.” It is obvious then that for Benayahu, not every religious expression constitutes a legitimate religious phenomenon. What exactly constitutes such phenomenon according to Benayahu is an interesting question, yet of lesser importance in the current context. Of a greater importance is the fact that this conservative approach excludes an examination of the *hakafot* as an independent religious phenomenon and of the role played by popular religion in its evolution.

Another methodological issue concerns Benayahu’s perception of the interaction between the social and the religious spheres. This dynamic is clarified in the following assertion: “the seal imprinted on the custom by the kabbala sages did not become common until the eighteenth century . . . but in the last two hundred and fifty years kabbala overpowered [the alternative explanations].” According to Benayahu, the factor determining the presence of the religious phenomenon outside of its theological realm is its influence or power. In this context it is one religious tradition that is acting upon the sociocultural or upon other religious traditions. It is only after kabbala

127 Ibid., 286.
128 Ibid., 106.
129 Ibid.
“overpowered” other interpretations of the *maamadot*, argues Benayahu, that their kabbalistic meaning came to be identified as the custom’s logic.

Yet why should we assume kabbala or religion in general was an external force that affected Jewish history rather than a manifestation of the exact same historical developments? Should we assume that the social context did not shape the interpretations of the *maamadot* and *hakafot* customs? Should we assume that the believers were passive consumers of elite religious production or perhaps they were able to shape their religious practices and ideology? I examine these questions and others in the context of the contemporary interpretation of *yibbum*, in particular, and the general proliferation of kabbalistic activity among the expellees in the aftermath of the expulsion. The historical knowledge and methodological tools I offer enable further research examining the developments in the hybrid offspring beliefs and the *maamadot u-moshavot* rituals as manifestations of a contemporary sociocultural phenomenon rather than a distortion of “correct” traditions.

*Shir shel peguim*: Benayahu identifies another recurring ritual in the *maamadot* custom, namely, a hymn titled *shir shel peguim* (i.e., a song for the afflicted).¹³⁰ Benayahu presents different versions of the hymn that usually constituted a combination of Psalms 3, 30, 91, and 140. Since the Talmudic period, the hymn was believed to protect against divine and earthly wrath as well as aid the healing of those already afflicted.¹³¹ Among the supernatural threats were spirits known as *mazikim* (evil doers) or *malaachi chaballa* (angels of destruction). Medieval sources identified these spirits as

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¹³⁰ *Peguim* are the afflicted by God and *peguin* are those afflicted by man. For more on this, see Benayahu, *Sefer zikaron*, 67.

¹³¹ Ibid., 66.
those kept at bay during the week and set loose during the Sabbath, those believed to have been born to Adam from fornicating with female demons or simply unidentified generic evil spirits (ruah raa). During the Talmudic period it was believed that these spirits increased in number, and their attacks became more frequent as a result of the destruction of the temple, the temple having kept them at bay. Even in the Zohar, the hotbed of medieval and early modern kabbalistic obsession with wasteful emission, the emitter’s tormentors are identified as impersonal spirits rather than the offspring of a particular man. However, in the Ottoman Sephardic employment of the hymn, it serves to protect the father from his hybrid sons.

The Ottoman Sephardic shir shel peguim, which identifies the spirits as the emitter’s sons, demonstrates the unique turn in the post-exilic hybrid offspring beliefs. The next ritual in this short survey marks at the same time the height of the post-exilic turn and the beginning of its decline. On the one hand the Lurianic tikkun shovavim presents extreme versions of the post-exilic trends noted above, namely, human agency, identification of the hybrids as the emitter’s offspring, and the grave repercussions of their existence. On the other hand, the Lurianic practice displays a social imagination that is fundamentally different from its predecessors in that it does not consider the community as a means of protection against the malicious supernatural beings. Rather, the Lurianic tikkun replaces the post-exilic community that protected the deceased from evil spirits or hybrids with the individual who is now tasked with saving his soul, the Jewish people, and the world.

132 Ibid., 73, 75.
133 Ibid., 66–67.
134 Ibid., 71–72.
135 Ibid., 77.
Tikun shovavim: Tikkun (reconstitution or restitution) is a means available to the believer for collapsing the forces of evil and bringing an end to a corrupt historical order. This concept is at the same time conservative, thriving of a reconstitution of an old order, and revolutionary, as it necessitates a destruction of contemporary structures. This particular tikkun shovavim required fasting roughly around the time that the first eight of the weekly portions in Exodus were read.¹³⁶ Much like the maamadot u-moshavot custom, the purpose and practice of tikkun shovavim evolved as many shapes and interpretations throughout its history.¹³⁷ The imagined relationship between God and his people, displayed in the Lurianic tikkun, is of special significance for contextualizing the hybrid offspring beliefs. Whereas the medieval perception of the hybrids presents a passive humanity and the post-exilic, pre-Lurianic rituals present a protective humanity, the Lurianic tikkun shovavim elevates human agency to unprecedented heights as it is corrective in essence. The Lurianic tikkun was believed to allow the individual to fix the hybrid offspring problem after their creation and before the man’s death by separating their human souls from the demonic bodies.

To put the Lurianic tikkun in context, I briefly present the expellees’ pre-Lurianic protective measures. The report of Avraham Saba concerning the hybrid offspring aptly represents the logic governing these rituals:

¹³⁶ Shovavim is the Hebrew acronym for the first eight weekly portions in Exodus: Shemot, Va-era, Bo, Be-Shalah, Yitro, Mishpatim, Terumah, and Tetsavveh.
¹³⁷ In addition to Benayahu’s treatment of the custom, see Moshe Halamish, Ha-kabbalah ba-tefillah ba-halakhah uva-minhag (Ramat Gan, 2000), 567–94. Some thought that the title of the tikkun emanated from the following quotation from Jer. 3:22: “Shuvo banim shovavim [Return you backsliding children].” These banim were identified in different times with actual sons that were at risk of high mortality during the two months of the winter when those portions of the Torah were being read, with sinners, or with the hybrid offspring. Fast days varied from time to time, place to place, and even among individuals. Some fasted only during the day. Others fasted only during the first and last weeks of the period. Another practice restricted the fasting to Mondays and Thursdays during a leap year. For more details, see, Encyclopaedia Judaica, 2nd edition, s.v. “tikkun shovavim”
For this reason [i.e., the attacks of the hybrid offspring], the sages commanded to make *hakafot* for the man . . . so that all [i.e., the hybrids] will flee and will not touch him. That is the reason why the *hakafot* must be made at the grave [gravesite]. And as soon as they finish the *hakafot*, they [should] put him in the grave, and they should hurry him to the pit so that no evil will touch him.\(^{138}\)

According to Saba the *hakafot* and the internment in the grave are both protective in nature and meant to prevent the hybrids from hurting their father’s soul.

Hallawa’s *hakafot* is a protective measure as well: “and they [i.e., the hybrid offspring] will not let go [of their father] if it was not for the seven *hakafot* . . . and the ten [ten men circling the corpse] remove the soul from their [i.e., the hybrids’] hands until it [i.e., the corpse] is thrown in the grave, and [they] cover it with earth as under the earth the demons have no authority.”\(^{139}\) Hallawa presents a struggle over the soul between the mourners and the offspring intent on making their father impure. The protective nature of the ritual is clear as the body is finally safe in the grave where the “demons have no authority.”

The Lurianic *tikkun shovavim* displays a different logic as it is meant to separate the hybrids’ human soul from their demonic bodies.\(^{140}\) Luria offers the following solution for the menace of the hybrids: “He [the emitter] should destroy the impure bodies taken by those souls, enabling them to break free and return to the lowest female *sefira* where they will be fixed and resent to this world properly just like the other souls.”\(^{141}\)

The Lurianic turn to *tikkun* as a solution to the problem posed by the existence of the hybrid offspring while the father is still alive reveals several critical points in the Lurianic

\(^{138}\) Saba, *Tseror ha-mor*, [99b].  
\(^{139}\) Hallawa, *Tsafnat paneah*, 29a. Mordechai Ha-Cohen argues similarly “and for this reason they circle the dead . . . to drive them away [from the corpse].” *Siftei cohen*, 310b.  
\(^{140}\) Halamish, *Ha-kabbalah*, 571–72.  
\(^{141}\) Luria, *Shaar ha-kavvanot*, 56r.
perception of the hybrids. Namely, it displays an increased level of human agency and responsibility. The Jewish man is able to save his soul, rescue the souls of his spiritual sons from their demonic bodies, and finally reintegrate them in the proper economy of bodies and soul sustaining the Jewish people and the world.

The Lurianic tikkun displays new notions of communal identity in addition to the increased human agency and individual responsibility. The empowered individual was expected to perform a corrective practice on his own without a communal network of support. This is a striking novelty when compared with earlier protective rituals displaying a communal and solidary defense against the supernatural. To demonstrate this point, below I briefly present a discussion that I develop further in Chapter 5, which concerns the relationship between the human body, soul, and communal identity as it is expressed in the Ottoman Sephardic yibbum discourse.

The hybrid offspring and yibbum discourses insist that the soul must always be embodied and thus protected from the external air that is abundant with malicious supernatural agents. The human body seems to be the obvious protective measure isolating the soul from the outside world. However, the religious imagination exposed in both the hybrid offspring and yibbum discourses expends the list of protective bodies even further. In this dissertation, especially in Part II, I argue that the mechanics of yibbum necessitated a continuous protection of the disembodied soul, a process in which the widow played a key role. The soul of the childless man was believed to be roaming the world unable to cross to the afterworld. In this narrative the widow was tasked with inhaling her husband’s soul into her womb where it was out of reach of malicious spirits. When the yibbum process went well, the soul exited the widow in the body of the levirate
offspring. If *halitsa* (levirate divorce) was preferred, a ritual during which the widow must spit at the levir, the soul was believed to exit in the widow’s spittle. In fact, contemporary sages referred to this bodily fluid in terms identical to contemporary descriptions of semen.\(^{142}\)

As the chapters below show, I found that the purpose of the *yibbum* custom was more nuanced than the maintaining of the soul in a state of embodiment. Rather, the logic governing the custom was to keep the soul in a particular body, family, and lineage. I argue that the social imagination underlying this custom reflects a concern with maintaining a particular economy of bodies and souls, a complicated pattern of embodiment that was integral to the identity of the Jewish people. Maintaining such embodiment patterns was not perceived as a personal or familial matter but rather as a key for the arrival of the messiah and the salvation of the Jewish people.

In this context the womb, the human body, the levirate offspring, the widow’s spittle, the semen, the lineage, and the Jewish people all serve as provisory receptacles of the Jewish soul, a key for communal identity, and a path toward the salvation of the Jewish people. This notion receives its most visual solidary manifestation in the *hakafot* ritual when the disembodied soul (represented by the corpse) is physically surrounded by a protecting community of mourners. This symbolic community forms a provisory body, the soul’s temporary vehicle protecting it until it is “hurried to the grave” where it is sheltered from malicious spirits.

This trend, however, changed dramatically with the Lurianic interpretation of the *tikkun shovavim* tasking the individual man with nothing less than destroying the

\(^{142}\) See the discussion of Joseph Caro’s interpretation on p. 211 below.
supernatural (rather than keeping it far afield) on his own (rather than with the
community’s help). In this dissertation I offer a model that may explain this turn. I argue
that the changing social context of Ottoman Jewry in the middle of the sixteenth century
was accompanied by an appropriate social imagination. As different historical
developments polarized a relatively egalitarian social structure, the social imagination
followed suit. To justify the elite’s elevated status, the emerging hierarchical and
centralized communal identity emphasized its ability to mediate between the community
and the Ottoman authorities or the divine.

The Case for a Sociocultural Examination of the Hybrid Offspring Beliefs

As mentioned above, Benayahu recognized the fact that the maamadot u-
moshavot rituals fundamentally changed in the aftermath of the expulsion. He argues that
the emergence of kabbala as a dominant religious interpretation was responsible for these
changes. Benayahu asserts that the rituals were “arranged and initiated by the kabbalah
sages”\(^{143}\) and that “it is clear that until the kabbalah penetrated the synagogue liturgy, and
its influence on the order of prayers increased, the hakafot did not lose their literal
meaning [i.e., assume a kabbalistic interpretation].”\(^{144}\) The point in time when these
changes took place was a “generation or two before the expulsion from Spain . . . [when]
kabbalah and the book of the Zohar began leaving their abodes and make an impression
on the lives of the general public.”\(^{145}\) Thus, according to Benayahu, the growing
influence of kabbala was critical for the diffusion of new kabbalistic practices and

\(^{143}\) Benayahu, Sefer zikaron, 105.
\(^{144}\) Ibid., 106. See also pages 7 and 81 for similar assertions.
\(^{145}\) Ibid., 83, 106.
discourses. Further evidence for this, Benayahu asserts, is that the carriers of the “maamadot custom, in its original [i.e., non-kabbalistic] form, [were the] Ashkenazic communities. In the Sephardic communities a new custom spread, ‘hakafot.’” Here it is suggested that the community untouched by kabbala in the aftermath of the expulsion (i.e., Ashkenazim) retained the custom’s original meaning whereas those immersed in kabbala (i.e., Sephardim) readapted an old custom to suit a new kabbalistic theology.

A number of methodological issues are inherent in this argument. As already noted above, it assumes religion is untouched by sociocultural developments. In addition, it defines religion in conservative and restrictive terms, including beliefs and practices condoned by religious authorities or established traditions, while excluding novel or popular religious practices. Such an approach leaves no room for popular religion or religious practices negotiated between the elite and popular culture. Following this logic, Benayahu finds that certain customs are “mistaken,” whereas others represent the custom’s “original” or “true” form. The methodology of social imagination releases the hybrid offspring and maamadot u-moshavot from a restrictive scholarly discourse that considers them to be exclusively religious phenomena, thus considerably limiting or cancelling their examination as sociocultural phenomena. These principal methodological issues, however, are explored above and examined at length in Chapter 2 below. Therefore, I do not elaborate further on the benefits of addressing them by examining the phenomenon through a social lens.

What forces acted upon the hybrid offspring and maamadot u-moshavot rituals if the phenomena were not strictly religious? One means for shedding light on the matter is

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146 Ibid., 83.
to locate the interconnections between social context and religious production. Above I presented several instances that may reflect such interconnections. For example, I presented the transition from the communal, protective hakafot ritual to the Lurianic, individual tikkun shovavim. As I showed, the community of encircling mourners that served as the provisory protective receptacle of the disembodied soul was replaced in the Lurianic tikkun with the individual man. Above I offer one possible explanation for this development as I point toward the interconnections between the changing social context of sixteenth-century Ottoman Jewry and the social imagination manifested in the hakafot and tikkun shovavim.

In general, the characteristics of the social imagination exposed in the hybrid offspring beliefs resemble some of the most important elements of the social imagination displayed in the contemporary yibbum discourse. First, both inverted the imagined power relationship between humanity and the supernatural. Second, both put a very high premium on procreation, continuous lineages, and the integrity of the demographic structure. Yet the evidence for the hybrid offspring beliefs, although compelling, is insufficient for supporting a thesis arguing that they were affected by the social context. However, such a speculation seems more plausible in the broader context of the social imagination exposed in the yibbum discourse. In the following, I support and demonstrate this assertion by briefly examining one particular challenge to Benayahu’s thesis that was noted by the scholar himself.

Benayahu found that after 1492 some sages did not adopt the new kabbalistic interpretation of the maamadot u-moshavot rituals in its entirety. This challenge demonstrates the necessity in leaving the narrow religious realm of the particular
phenomena examined above and in entering a more fluid yet advantageous meeting place of the social and the religious spheres by means borrowed from the fields of literary criticism and cultural studies. When we do so, we notice thematic patterns that contextualize what may otherwise seem as inconsistent or contradictory opaque theological discourses.

Some sages did not give the funerary rituals a kabbalistic interpretation. Some sources do not identify the assailants as the wasteful emitter’s offspring and therefore do not offer any of the protective rituals as a remedy. Others clearly identify the assailants with evil spirits that lack any human ancestry. Consider, for example, Joseph ben Rabbi Elijah Tirshom, a writer active in the first half of the sixteenth century in the Ottoman Empire. Tirshom wrote the following in his *Shoshan yesod haolam*, an early sixteenth century compilation of magical or practical kabbala: “The encirclements of the dead are seven and it is their power to cut down the seven sects of impurity expecting the dead man’s soul, . . . and each one wants to take the soul with it, . . . and the *hakafot* cut the [impure] sects.”

For Moses ben Jacob Cordovero (1522–70), “the demons Adam gave birth to in the one hundred and ten [sic] years while he was separated from his wife . . . chase [after] human beings at night to deceive them and tempt them to *keri* [nocturnal emission]. And they appear as women [yet] have no hair.”

Cordovero’s student Elijah di Vidas seems to follow his rabbi. In *Reshit hokhma*, di Vidas identifies the threat as “Lilith and the affliction that are *nigeey beney adam* [afflictions of men].”

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147 Ibid., 114.
148 In addition, according to Cordovero, the *mazikin* prevent the soul from reaching the afterworld. Ibid., 82.
expulsion generation sage David ibn Zimra (known as Radbaz), the malicious spirits were not hybrids but rather “evil spirits.”

The fact that Cordovero, di Vidas, Caro, ibn Zimra, and other sages did not imagine the attacking spirits as hybrid offspring is a significant counterargument to Benayahu’s thesis as he considers the expulsion and consequent rise of kabbala as the main reasons for the interpretation of the *maamadot* as a protective measure against the hybrid offspring. In addition, the absence of the kabbalistic interpretation in the works of some sages and their inclusion of elements associated with the medieval hybrid offspring model is a direct counterargument to my depiction of the hybrid offspring belief in the aftermath of the expulsion.

Indeed, Benayahu identified this challenge and attributed the phenomenon to “the Ramak, his students, and the Salonika kabbala sages.” He finds that “there is nothing in the treatises of the Ramak and his students on the matter of the clinging of the *negaaim* to the deceased and the matter of their casting away. Nor can I find such matters in the writings of the Ari [i.e., Luria] and his cubs [Ari literally means lion].” Benayahu then wonders: “If the custom of *hakafot* was born in Spain . . . why didn’t the sages mention it . . . [and] Yosef Caro did not talk about it?” He offers the following assertion in the way

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150 Benayahu, *Sefer zikaron*, 111. It could be argued that although they identify the malicious spirits as supernatural, the Salonika sages do acknowledge a closer relationship between these spirits and the wasteful emitter. See p. 29.

151 Ibid., 83; Benayahu, “*Maamadot u-moshavot,*” 5.

152 To the sources mentioned above, we may add Joseph Caro’s conversation with his *maggid* concerning Caro’s nocturnal emission. The *maggid* informs Caro that copulating with his wife afterward did not make her or the potential offspring impure as “[the *sitra ahrah*] already took what they needed from your emission . . . and when you slept with your wife you already clung to the holy side and was separated from them [i.e., the impure spirits].” This scenario seems to follow the medieval model of hybrid creation. Joseph Caro, *Sefer maggid mesharim*, (Amsterdam: Y. Alvaris Soto, M. Even Yakar Br’andon u-B. Deyunkh, 1708), 51a.


154 Benayahu, “*Maamadot u-moshavot,*” 5; Benayahu, *Sefer zikaron*, 62.
of an answer: “It seems one can explain it by [the fact that] it [the custom] did not spread in all of the Sephardic communities.” Benayahu seems to suggest that there was something essentially different about the Salonika sages or perhaps Salonika Jewry that may explain the phenomenon. However, Benayahu’s observation does not explain what is the significance or reason that the custom entered some communities and not others.

Although it does not explain the Salonika anomaly, the dissertation points toward a way out of what seems to be an explanatory dead end. It does so in a way that retains Salonika Jewry, sages, and hybrid offspring beliefs within the Ottoman Sephardic fold. The contribution of the Salonika sages to the social imagination displayed in the yibbum discourse shows that they shared a characteristic egalitarian communal identity with their Ottoman Sephardic peers. Thus, the Salonika sages’ different beliefs concerning certain characteristics of the hybrid offspring emanate from a source different from their communal identity. This argument advances a contextualization of the postexilic hybrid offspring beliefs by eliminating one possible answer, namely, that a different social imagination or context generated the Salonika hybrid offspring beliefs. However, the argument leaves an open question, namely, what caused this difference if it was not their social imagination? This question, however, is beyond the scope of the current research. It is my hope to return to it in the future equipped with the historical context and methodological tools the dissertation offers.

155 Ibid., 106, 119.
Chapter 3

Historiography, Methodology, and Chronological Boundaries

This chapter is comprised of three sections that situate the dissertation in interconnected scholarly contexts. The first section examines the historiography of the kabbalistic turn, the immediate and natural surroundings of the Ottoman Sephardic yibbum discourse, which is the phenomenon that stands at the center of the dissertation. The section presents two gaps in the historiography of the kabbalistic turn. One void, in general, is that scholarship did not examine the phenomenon through a social lens. Another is that scholars did not consider the general population of expellees as agents of change who affected the turn in a significant way.

The second section locates the dissertation in a methodological context by examining the views of scholars on the relationship between social context and cultural production. In this section I use two methodological tools to fill the historiographical gaps mentioned above. The first tool, the methodology of social imagination, examines the nexus between the cultural and the social by exposing the imagined (rather than imaginary) social constructs in kabbalistic discourses. By social imagination, I mean the imagined rather than imaginary social constructs displayed in cultural production. Social imagination is different than (though tied to) social history. Social history examines the hard facts of social status (such as power and material possession) and social activities (joining a political party, a sports team, or an army), but it does not address the contemporary understanding of the social order. Social imagination, however, searches
the sources for the imagined or abstract social structures and relates them to the actual logic of social organization in society.\footnote{My approach is similar to Idel’s usage of phenomenology: “My approach uses phenomenology in order to isolate significant phenomena and only thereafter to elaborate upon the possible historical relationships between them.” Moshe Idel, \textit{Kabbalah: New Perspectives} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), xviii-xix.}

The rich scholarly tradition that examines the study of popular culture equips us with the second methodological tool. This tradition provides a way to evaluate how the general community affected the kabbalistic discourses that were written by the elite members of the community. Together, these methodological tools enable an examination of how the real and the perceived social context affected religious expression during a crucial period in Jewish history.

The third section explains the historiographical significance of the temporal boundaries of the dissertation. The section presents scholarship that examined this period in a somewhat biased fashion and thus diverted attention from the dramatic contemporary sociocultural developments. The section demonstrates the need to examine the Ottoman Sephardic social imagination during the first half of the sixteenth century to enhance the understanding of this formative period in Ottoman Jewish history and Jewish early modernity in general.

\textbf{Historiography of the Kabbalistic Turn}

The aftermath of the expulsion witnessed a proliferation of interest in kabbala among the expellees. The proliferation of this period was in contrast to the dearth of kabbalistic works in the period that stretched from decline of the Zoharic circle beginning in the late 1200s to the expulsion from Spain in 1492. During this period no significant
kabbalistic work was authored in Iberia. How can we explain the renewed interest in kabbala in the aftermath of the expulsion? In their monumental contributions, Gershom Scholem and Moshe Idel offer the most dominant theories regarding the relationship between the expulsion from Spain and the kabbalistic turn. Therefore, before I examine the historiography of the turn to kabbala and present the contribution of the dissertation to this scholarly discourse I first examine the theses of Scholem and Idel.

In spite of their enormous scholarly achievement, both Scholem and Idel left open a number of paths for further research. This dissertation follows two such paths. First, neither scholar pays much attention to the role of the lower classes as agents of change who affect the kabbalistic turn. In Scholem’s view, the lower classes were at best consumers of the theological production of the elite, and even as consumers, they were inferior to their elite coreligionists because they failed to see the supposed national and intellectual value of kabbala. Instead, according to this view, the masses were attracted by the magical and superstitious aspects of kabbala. The lower classes are largely absent from Idel’s thesis as well because for Idel, the essence of the period and the reason for the kabbalistic turn was the increased mobility of the elite kabbalists and the cultural friction with indigenous intellectual traditions during the aftermath of the expulsion. In fact, when the masses do appear in Idel’s thesis, it is in a similar fashion to Scholem’s view; the rabbis of the expulsion generation, Idel argues, sought to produce and disseminate their kabbalistic knowledge as a means of frightening the unruly expellees into submission.

157 In addition, several reports from 15th-century Iberian Jews document their difficulty in finding kabbalists capable of teaching them the tradition. See, e.g., Ephraim Gottlieb, *Mehkarim be-sifrat ha-kabalah* (Tel-Aviv: Bet ha-sefer le-mada’e ha-yahadut ‘a. sh. Hayim Rozenberg, Universitat Tel-Aviv, 1976), 350–51.
Both Scholem and Idel present the masses as passive, manipulated, and superstitious consumers of elite cultural production.

The second historiographical gap is the relative neglect of the social aspects of the kabbalistic turn. This neglect was a derivative of Scholem and Idel’s perception of the phenomenon as essentially religious and intellectual, as well as their perception of the lower classes. For Scholem, the answer for the trauma of 1492 arrived only in the third quarter of the sixteenth century when a proper theological system—Lurianic kabbala—was finally formulated in a clear and consistent fashion. For Idel, the core of the kabbalistic turn is the synthesis between different kabbalistic theses. Therefore, an examination of the turn to kabbala as a social phenomenon is either marginal (Idel) or actively, strongly, and completely discouraged (Scholem). The dissertation fills these historiographical gaps by examining the kabbalistic turn through the lens of social context. Doing so, I argue, shows that unique social circumstances in the aftermath of the expulsion drove the Ottoman Sephardim to reformulate an idea of communal identity through new kabbalistic discourses and thereby affected the kabbalistic turn.

**Gershom Scholem’s Approach**

In what came to be known as the three-stage theory, Scholem famously argued that a direct and causal relationship existed between the traumatic expulsion from Spain, the proliferation of Lurianic kabbala in the sixteenth century, and the later success of the Sabbatian movement. According to Scholem, the initial reaction to the trauma of 1492 was a turn to messianism.

During one generation, during the forty years after the expulsion from Spain we find a very deep messianic effervescence and excitement, almost like that in the
generations preceding the explosion of Sabbatianism, and this is understandable as an unmediated reaction to the expulsion from Spain. The actual and obvious hope for messianic-political-national redemption is understandable. . . . It is easy to understand that the entire religious literature of the first generation after the expulsion is replete with this issue; it is, in its entirety, an actual hope for an immediate redemption.\textsuperscript{158}

Consequently, the expulsion infused the entire Jewish theology with an eschatological messianic essence. The second stage in Scholem’s theory is kabbalistic messianism or messianic kabbala: “[M]essianism became part of the very core of Kabbalah. . . . This combination of mysticism and messianic apocalyptic turned Kabbalah into a historic force of great dynamism.”\textsuperscript{159} The expulsion then turned kabbala into a popular interpretation of the Torah among the expellees and into a historical force that caused the rise of Lurianic kabbala in the 1570s. In turn, the popularity of Lurianic kabbala, so the argument goes, caused the rise of the messianic Sabbatian movement in the seventeenth century. The following quotation aptly conveys Scholem’s thesis:

> [T]he development of Jewish mysticism . . . has been singularly uniform. . . . There is only one main line. . . . [T]his doctrine [i.e., Lurianic kabbalah] could not but lead to an explosive manifestation of all those forces to which it owed its rising [i.e., in the Sabbatian episode]. . . . [Ottoman Jewry] needed little to take the final step to messianism. The appearance of Sabbatai Sevi and Nathan of Gaza . . . [liberated] the latent energies and potentialities which had gradually accumulated during the generations imminently preceding them. The eruption of the volcano, when it came, was terrific.\textsuperscript{160}

The story of the enduring status of Scholem’s thesis as a paradigm is well known and requires little introduction.\textsuperscript{161} Moreover, the dissertation examines the Ottoman

\textsuperscript{158} Gershom Scholem, \textit{Explications and Implications: Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance} (Tel Aviv: 1975), 205.
\textsuperscript{161} Scholem’s theory was so dominant that at times we are asked to see what is not necessarily there, or at least not in the available evidence. Consider, for example, the words of R. J. Zwi Werblowsky “The absence of a consistent internal messianic structure in a kabbalistic doctrine does not mean the absence of a messianic temper and of underlying messianic motivations.” R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, “Yosef Karo, Solomon Molkho, Yosef Nasi,” in \textit{Moreshet Sephard}, 2:187.
Sephardic communal identity in the aftermath of the expulsion rather than the conflict between the followers and critics of Scholem. Therefore, I do not focus on Scholem’s thesis per se. Rather, I examine several research venues Scholem left untouched and that this dissertation examines. In addition, as I explore the expellees’ communal identity during the first half of the sixteenth century, I limit my examination to the first stage of Scholem’s thesis, that is, the kabbalistic turn in the aftermath of 1492.

Scholem’s negative attitude to sociocultural explanations for the kabbalistic turn is clear. In fact, most of our insights into Scholem’s position regarding such explanations are taken from counterarguments that completely deny this methodology. Scholem’s disapproval resulted in particular distortions of the kabbalistic turn, rather than in a simple absence of sociocultural analysis. Namely, for Scholem, the religious sphere was immune to social influences; rather it was the religious that fashioned the social. In addition, Scholem perceived of the intellectual and religious spheres as those that affected religious production, in particular, and the historical trajectory of the Jewish people, in general. In this context the kabbalistic turn was a religious and intellectual, rather than social, development.

Scholem’s thesis regarding the differences in the reception of kabbala among different social classes is another obstacle that must be removed for a better view of the turn to kabbala. While Scholem presents the elite’s reaction as intellectual, religious, and responsible, he presents the lower classes as passive, timid, and escapist. Scholem’s theory, therefore, deemed redundant the examination of social context as a force that affected the kabbalistic turn or of kabbalistic production as appropriate source material for sociocultural history.
Scholem did agree that linkage existed between the social and the religious although he did not accept sociocultural history as a means for contextualizing religious production. For example, Scholem conceded that some thirteenth-century historical reality is reflected in the Zoharic texts. Scholem argued that the Zohar “reflects the actual religious situation, and expounds it through Kabbalistic interpretation”\(^{162}\) and that “[a] medieval environment can be recognized in many details of the Zohar.”\(^{163}\) Superficial aspects of the social, therefore, may appear in religious texts. However, social context could not affect theological production. In this context, studying the social to account for changes in the religious or an examination of the religious to learn about the social context is absolutely absurd. This notion is clear in Scholem’s seminal research on the Sabbatian movement. Here Scholem rejects the possibility that the success of Sabbatianism is a case of Marxist dialectical materialism; he disregards “materialistic ‘explanations’ that do not explain anything.”\(^{164}\) This notion is apparent, as well, in Scholem’s claim that “an internal social war” was not behind the success of Sabbatianism.\(^{165}\) In fact, according to Scholem, “Even if it [i.e., Lurianic kabbala] did contain some social message this was not its true secret which is in the religious realm. It is modern naivety to think that every vision about the changing place of humanity is social because it has a social aspect.”\(^{166}\)

Scholem’s assertion that the kabbalistic turn was not influenced by a social crisis is rooted in his understanding of the turn as a religious-intellectual answer to what he

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\(^{162}\) Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 58.

\(^{163}\) Ibid., 225.


\(^{165}\) Ibid.

\(^{166}\) Ibid., 2:378.
perceived as a national crisis. The troubles, Scholem argues, did not belong to different social classes but were shared by the entirety of the Jewish people or nation. This is clear from the following quotation:

[Messianism] . . . was not a manifestation of an internal Jewish situation . . . [or of] class warfare . . . [but] of the unusual situation of the Jewish nation as a pariah people; the upper classes in the Jewish society shared in this reality of insecurity and life hanging on a balance as did the lower classes, and at times even more. Therefore the connection between poverty and messianism is not definite and is not the answer to the problem [i.e., the reason for Sabbatianism’s success]. The change [i.e., decline] in the status of the entire nation affected even more the interests of the elite, and this was the reason for its success among these classes. 167

This is a problematic assertion. Of course the anachronistic aspect of Scholem’s word choice is self-evident. 168 However, more significant for the current research is the fact that choosing “national” or group-wide membership as the investigation category significantly limits the range of possible results. It does so by artificially combining different sociocultural elements into a single group—one “nation” created by the scholar rather than historical contingencies and human agency. Scholem then arbitrarily identifies the Jewish nation’s voice with that of the kabbalistic elite. Once the basic national definition of the group under inspection is established, it is impossible or pointless to discuss the opinions of the group’s different social strata. This is, therefore, a circular logic that prevents a true sociocultural analysis of a layered, complex phenomenon. Was his interpretation of 1492 as a national crisis, first and foremost, affected by Scholem’s Zionist political ideology? Perhaps, however, for the purpose of the current research, it

167 Ibid.
168 In this context it is interesting to note that one of Idel’s main counterarguments (briefly explored in n 87) questions Scholem’s usage of Ashkenazic sources to examine a Sephardic disaster. It may very well be that Scholem’s national perception of the expulsion and Jewish history in general blurred not only social differences but ethnic ones as well. Therefore, a “national” Jewish disaster would have affected equally the Sephardic and Ashkenazic flanks of the Jewish “nation.”
suffices to note that Scholem’s methodology invites an examination of the kabbalistic turn that considers how different social strata contributed to its formation.\textsuperscript{169}

Scholem’s perception of the responses to kabbala of different social strata augments the necessity of a sociocultural analysis of the kabbalistic turn. As implied above, although Scholem does not accept social context as a reason for the kabbalistic turn, he does agree that its results (i.e., Lurianic kabbala and Sabbatianism) had different appeal for various social strata. According to Scholem, the intellectual elite understood the national ramifications of the crisis and the appropriate and remedial effect of kabbala for the people. However, the lower classes were attracted by the magical and eschatological aspects of kabbala because they were disillusioned by the prospect of earthly salvation. This notion is apparent in the following quotation:

"W[e must admit that the utopian aspects of messianism [i.e., its eschatological redemptive visions] . . . affected the wider popular circles. Poverty and decline generate utopian hopes, but the decline of the entire nation attracted these circles [i.e., the elite] to the messianic ideas. . . . [T]he power of the national messianic myth is itself a social generator. Clear evidence for that is the success of the Lurianic Kabbalah that was accepted as “mystical theology” among the circles responsible for the generation’s public and religious responsibilities."\textsuperscript{170}

\textsuperscript{169} Scholem acknowledged Zionism as a primary reason for choosing to study kabbala as a young man and that he continued his study of kabbala in the service of Zionism. For a discussion of this matter, see Shaul Magid, “Mysticism, History, and a ‘New’ Kabbalah: Gershom Scholem and the Contemporary Scene,” \textit{The Jewish Quarterly Review} 101, no. 4 (2011): 511–25. Magid brings the following quotation by Scholem: “I wanted to enter the world of Kabbalah out of my belief in Zionism as a living thing—as the restoration of a people that had degenerated quite a bit” in “With Gershom Scholem: An Interview,” in \textit{Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays} (New York, 1976), 18. See also Arthur Hertzberg on this matter: “Zionism and not his scholarly studies on Kabbalah, or even the redefinition of the whole of Jewish history in the light of those studies, is the center of Scholem’s intellectual and moral endeavor.” Hertzberg, “Gershom Scholem as Zionist and Believer,” \textit{Modern Judaism} 15.1 (1995): 15. See also David Biale, \textit{Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 163–64.

\textsuperscript{170} Scholem, \textit{Shabtai tsevi}, 2:378. See also the following line from the quotation above in n 72: “and this [i.e., deep messianic effervescence and excitement] is understandable as an unmediated reaction to the expulsion from Spain.” Scholem, \textit{Explications and Implications}, 205. It seems we must excuse this misbehavior of the traumatized masses, this “unmediated” raw messianism (i.e., lacking a theological or intellectual adaptation). This transgression is “understandable” considering the hard circumstances and trauma during the immediate aftermath of the expulsion. The mechanism Scholem describes here, attracting the masses to messianism through fear or despair, is very similar to Idel’s perception of the relationship between fear and messianism among the masses analyzed in Chapter 10. This similarity emphasizes the
Though comprising one national unit, the different social classes are attracted to kabbala for different reasons. The lower classes, because of their poor material conditions, are attracted by the “utopian aspects of messianism.” The more savvy, responsible, and educated elite were driven by the decline “of the entire nation” and were attracted by “the power of the national messianic myth.”

In this context Scholem seems to counter his own assertion that the “materialistic ‘explanations’ . . . do not explain anything” because they seem to explain something after all, namely, how the expellees reacted to the kabbalistic turn rather than why this phenomenon came to be. The reason for this potential contradiction is Scholem’s perception of the social context as essentially separate from, and affected by, the religious. Theology, it seems, is produced in a separate autonomous religious sphere. Any social content found in kabbala emanates from a religious discourse. It is only after the theological product is completed that it breaches the religious realm; it is then that the rest of the Jewish people consumes and is affected by the religious rather than participates in shaping it. According to Scholem, the reasons for choosing a certain religious interpretation or certain aspects of a religious ideology shed light on the social context of the practitioner. However, the production of a particular theological trend cannot be retraced to the social context that couched it.

In conclusion, Scholem’s theory presents several methodological challenges that I address in this dissertation. First, it locates religious production in a separate sphere, making it impossible to use as source material for researching the contemporary social necessity in examining the kabbalistic turn from a sociocultural perspective that considers the expellees as agents of change, who shaped their social and spiritual world to address the harsh realities of the expulsion in this world rather than fleeing it for the eschatological.
context. Second, it seems that for Scholem, it was the religious that fashioned the social. In Scholem’s historical narrative, messianism and kabbala act as a force of nature upon the passive general body of expellees. Consequently, Scholem’s theory assigns almost exclusive influence on the trajectory of early modern Jewish identity to the rabbinic elite while denying the masses any significant measure of agency in addressing the harsh realities of their lives. Third, Scholem explains the success of kabbala by presenting it as a response to a pseudo-national, religious, and intellectual, rather than social, crisis. The dissertation engages these challenges: it examines the kabbalistic turn from a social rather than a national, religious, or intellectual perspective; it perceives religious production (i.e., the kabbalistic turn) as an outcome of contextualizing social crises rather than as an elite-generated, external force that acted upon the community; and it views the expellees as agents of change rather than as passive consumers of religious discourses.

Moshe Idel: Criticism of the Three-Stage Theory and a Corrective Thesis

Scholem’s thesis was thoroughly scrutinized after his passing in 1982. Moshe Idel is undoubtedly the most prolific and challenging of Scholem’s critics. Idel’s criticism and corrective thesis in turn were heavily criticized by Scholem’s successors. It is not my intention to thoroughly review the heated debates between Idel and Scholem’s supporters. Rather, I present the further research opportunities that Idel’s criticism and corrective thesis left untouched and that I pursue in the dissertation. In general, Idel

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challenges Scholem’s assumption of a direct and causal relationship between the expulsion, messianism, Lurianic kabbala, and the Sabbatian movement.\(^\text{172}\) Idel then offers a corrective thesis that posits the increased mobility in the aftermath of the expulsion as the main driver of the kabbalistic turn. Increased mobility, according to Idel, released previously isolated kabbalists from their natural intellectual habitats, resulting in cultural friction and new forms of religiosity. Much like Scholem before him, Idel does not examine the kabbalistic turn from a social perspective (with the exception of the elite kabbalists) and denies the general body of expellees a significant measure of agency in shaping contemporary religious production.

Idel unties Scholem’s Gordian knot that binds post-exilic kabbala to messianism. In this section I explore two of Idel’s arguments that demonstrate the need to examine the kabbalistic turn from a social perspective.\(^\text{173}\) First, Idel questions the assertion that messianism manifested exclusively or predominantly in kabbalistic treatises. Post-exilic


\(^{173}\) Two major counterarguments, which I do not discuss here, yet are worth mentioning, are the dominant involvement of Ashkenazic sages in the kabbalistic production and Scholem’s messianization of what Idel perceives of as political movements. First, Idel disagrees with Scholem’s choice to base his argument regarding a connection to a Sephardic trauma on Ashkenazic sources. How is it that the Ashkenazic sages who did not experience the expulsion or even mention the event in their works became the carriers of the Sephardic trauma? Why were the former more influenced by the expulsion than the actual expellees? These concerns are even more acute when one considers that Luria, who according to Scholem was responsible for a messianic interpretation of kabbala that encapsulated the trauma of the Sephardic expellees, was the son of an Ashkenazic Jew. For more on this matter, see Moshe Idel, “Religion, Thought, and Attitudes: The Impact of the Expulsion on the Jews,” in Spain and the Jews: The Sephardi Experience, 1492 and After, ed. Elie Kedourie (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992), 127–29; “Jewish Reactions to the Expulsion from Spain” in *The Expulsion from Spain and the Holocaust: The Jewish Community’s Response*. (Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, 1990), 21. Second, Idel wonders why Scholem did not seriously consider historical characters such as David Ha-Reuveni and Shelomo Molcho, two pretenders or self-proclaimed messiahs, who had clearly stated that their goal was to generate true political change rather than an apocalyptic messianic agenda. Both Ha-Reuveni and Molcho promised to facilitate a new age of Jewish political dominance, a return of the Davidic line of kings to rule an earthly Jewish kingdom. Idel wonders why Ha-Reuveni and Molcho were tagged as messianic instead of political leaders. The implied answer is, of course, to support the three-stage theory by making the case for messianism as the response of a traumatized body of expellees to their diasporic predicament.
kabbala, Idel concedes, was characterized by certain messianic beliefs. However, these qualities were not strong enough and not an exclusive or sufficiently predominant feature of kabbalistic production to justify their almost interchangeable usage in Scholem’s thesis. To support this assertion, Idel points out that sixteenth-century halakhah, poetry, and philosophy demonstrate an even greater interest in messianism than kabbala did. In fact, some texts that are clearly messianic are loosely or not at all connected to kabbala. In addition, Idel questions the level of the expellees’ interest in messianism; although Idel agrees that there is a documented growth in messianic discussions after the expulsion, he claims that in general the topic remained marginal.

As I elaborate below, I, too, argue that examining the kabbalistic turn through a messianic lens results in a partial image of the phenomenon and, therefore, a partial explanation that is distorted if it is considered to be the exclusive answer. However, whereas Idel’s corrective thesis examines the kabbalistic turn through the lens of increased mobility and cultural encounters of elite kabbalists, I examine the phenomenon through a social lens. My approach, therefore, does not deny or correct Scholem or Idel’s theses but rather sheds light on an additional aspect of the kabbalistic turn that generally was unexplored in their work.

Idel’s second criticism of the purported connection between kabbala and messianism rejected Scholem’s assertion that Lurianic kabbala was a delayed yet direct response to the expulsion. Scholem wrote:

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175 Ibid., 126. “Only by ignoring the thrust of the voluminous literature and concentrating on the more liminal phenomena, could a characterization of the Jewish literature of the period as infused with messianic aspirations dominate the modern intellectual scene” in “Jewish Reactions to the Expulsion from Spain,” 22.
176 Idel, “Religion, Thought, and Attitudes,” 126.
[The] historic process set by the expulsion from Spain required several generations—almost an entire century—to work itself out completely. Only by degrees did its tremendous implications permeate ever more profound regions of being. This process helped to merge the apocalyptic and Messianic elements of Judaism with the traditional aspects of Kabbalism.\(^{177}\)

Yet how can we explain the paradox of a cataclysmic event so shocking that it deeply affected a generation born in the middle of the sixteenth century yet not those that were actually expelled or suffered as second-generation expellees? Idel explains the delayed religious manifestation of the messianic response to 1492 by pointing toward the arrival of Portuguese conversos to the Ottoman Empire after 1536. According to Idel, the conversos were the true carriers of the messianic agenda.\(^{178}\) Idel claims that the double life of the conversos as crypto-Jews, “forced upon them through fear,” led to “a state of mind that encouraged messianism.”\(^{179}\) This theory works well to counter Scholem’s thesis and to explain the delay in the adoption of messianism by Ottoman Jewry. However, it does not explain the proliferation of post-exilic kabbalistic production in the first half of the sixteenth century, a task I undertake in this dissertation.

Idel questions the foundations of Scholem’s thesis, namely, the messianic essence of the kabbalistic turn and the causal connection between 1492 and the rise of Lurianic kabbala. However, in addition to highlighting the weaknesses in Scholem’s theory, Idel offers an alternative thesis. Idel suggests that new kabbalistic trends resulted from the

\(^{177}\) Scholem, *Major Trends*, 246. For Scholem, “sixteenth century Kabbalah was the movement that contained the religious answer to the expulsion from Spain.” Scholem, *Explications and Implications*, 204. However, by the “sixteenth century” Scholem in fact referred to the later part of the century; Schoem argued that: “it is a mistake to think that a nation’s response to catastrophe is given immediately right there and then. The answer to the expulsion from Spain was given in the Safedian [i.e., Lurianic] religious movement.” Scholem, *Explications and Implications*, 204. Tishbi argues that: “eighty years later [i.e., after 1492]... was established in Safed the Lurianic kabbalah, in its essence an intellectual response to the catastrophe of the end of the fifteenth century.” Tishbi, “Hafekha be-heker ha-kabbalah,” 214.

\(^{178}\) “Messianic expectations were far stronger among conversos... than among the Jews who left the Peninsula and had the opportunity to rebuild their religious life.” Idel, “Religion, Thought, and Attitudes,” 136.

\(^{179}\) Ibid., 135.
increased physical mobility of the expellees during a prolonged diasporic process. Previously isolated kabbalists, so the argument goes, were brought together to form new intellectual communities and, consequently, novel religious trends.

Idel’s thesis differs fundamentally from Scholem’s in its perception of the expellees’ mindset. Scholem’s assumption is that that the expellees’ trauma and despair were so severe that they triggered a turn away from the earthly despair to the otherworldly and messianic. Idel argues that although the tragedies affected many, the mindset of the expellees was not as dark as described by Scholem: “The drama of hope may incite the religious imagination no less than that of suffering; self-confidence is as good a prescription for envisioning an even better future as despair may be.”

Indeed Idel shows that regardless of the apparent physical upheavals and separation from their Iberian homeland, the literary production of the expellees is characterized by a continuation of “literary templates and interests,” making it “a sustained effort by the Sephardic Jews to rebuild their religious and social life in new centers” rather than a craving for a break or a yearning for new messianic age.

180 Idel, “Jewish Reactions to the Expulsion from Spain,” 21; and on p. 20: “I would, therefore, not invoke the ghost of the traumatic Expulsion to cultural leaders whose main objective was to plan a saner future. Traumas only rarely energize individuals and collectives; more often they paralyze creativity rather than spur it. More mundane processes, such as those discussed above, informed by more quotidian factors, apparently played a much more important role than a traumatic event in the explanation of the developments of Sephardi Jewry after the Expulsion.” Compare with Scholem’s note in his essay “Reflections on the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time”: “There are no greater hours of inspiration in the history of religion, no times of greater creativity in the public realm of mysticism, than times of historical crisis. All of the great outbreaks of mysticism in the monotheistic religions (of which we know a considerable amount, after four generations of research) are associated with crisis. I will not elaborate this point here. The same holds true for the history of Jewish mysticism, in all of its various forms.” See Scholem, On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time and Other Essays (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 10.


However, Idel’s argument is more sophisticated than a blanket statement covering the entire body of the expellees. Nor is it a simplistic assertion that the rebuilding process resulted in a complete return to traditional pre-exilic religious, social, and cultural norms. Rather, Idel argues that the increased mobility in the aftermath of 1492 unleashed a messy process of cultural friction between the expellees’ intellectual elite and local intellectual traditions. In turn, this friction generated new halakhic, philosophical, and kabbalistic trends. This was a process of “confrontation between different versions of Jewish life and thought, resulting in both frictions and syntheses.”

Idel identifies several centers of “friction” or intellectual exchange between the incoming expellees and indigenous traditions. The most important are the centers in the Italian peninsula, in the former Byzantine areas, in the Land of Israel, and in North Africa. Idel’s main thesis is that “it was only because of the disappearance of the Iberian center, with its centralist authorities, that the Sephardi kabbalists could free themselves from the inhibitions of two centuries.” The disappearance of the limiting hegemony was but a first step in the trajectory of post-exilic kabbala, which was followed with “encounters, confrontations, frictions, but also synthesis.” Idel continues: “there is no doubt, in my opinion, that it was the opposite of that homogenous atmosphere characteristic of Spain since the fourteenth century that catalyzed the rapid development of Kabbalah in Safed.”

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183 Ibid., 137.
184 Ibid., 130–33.
185 Ibid., 133.
186 Ibid., 132.
187 Ibid., 133.
According to Idel, the process of cultural friction had different manifestations. First, the incoming Sephardic sages had to explain their tradition, rebut, adopt, and adapt to local customs. Second, Sephardic kabbalists felt that they had to save a body of knowledge that was predominantly oral and was lost together with the Iberian communities and kabbala sages that sustained and transmitted it from one generation to the next. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, kabbala was localized, taught in courts or yeshivot of particular kabbala sages, and was shared by a small intellectual elite. The death, conversion, or dissolution of these centers and their charismatic leaders during the expulsion and its aftermath drove many sages to preserve the tradition that was on the verge of extinction. One manifestation of this trend is the proliferation of kabbalistic compilations of existing material that survived the expulsion.¹⁸⁸ 

Therefore, according to Idel, it was creativity, hope, cultural encounters, and fruitful debates rather than stagnation, trauma, despair, isolation, and fear that propelled the kabbalistic turn.¹⁸⁹ Idel’s thesis was promptly criticized.¹⁹⁰ As I mentioned above, my goal is to locate the dissertation within its scholarly surroundings rather than take sides in a scholarly conflict. My goal, therefore, is to explore two gaps in Idel’s thesis that my work begins to fill. First, Idel’s exploration is limited to the circles of elite kabbalists, thus downplaying the contribution of the general body of expellees to the kabbalistic turn. Second, Idel’s perception of the general body of expellees is very similar to Scholem’s in

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 130.
¹⁸⁹ “It is in the domain of historical hypotheses, interesting but very speculative indeed, that the attempt to link the traumatic events and the peculiar formulations of elaborate brands of mystical literature is to be located. I myself am inclined to much more concrete kinds of argumentation. In lieu of assuming, as these scholars do, that a whole type of literary activity, in a great number of areas, written by different individuals who apparently had experienced the Expulsion differently yet, it is claimed, reacted . . . in a similar manner, I would prefer to explain the literary effervescence following the Expulsion by means of other kinds of explanations.” Idel, “Jewish Reactions to the Expulsion from Spain,” 19.
¹⁹⁰ See n171.
that he presents them as timid and passive consumers of the theological production of the sages.

Indeed, I completely agree with Idel’s assertion that “confrontations between the autochthon customs and types of religious thought on one hand, and Sephardi customs and religious thought on the other” characterized the post exilic period.\textsuperscript{191} I find that this theory brilliantly explains complex intellectual developments in the work of elite kabbalists. However, the kabbalists lived in, and actively pursued the leadership of, communities that were in the throes of deep social and identity crises. The sages’ main source of authority was their kabbalistic knowledge, a source they consciously used to solidify their leadership status. Thus we cannot contain an examination of the kabbalistic turn within the closed networks of elite kabbalists. For a better perspective of the kabbalistic turn, we must venture outside of the sages’ circles and into the messy social realm that surrounded them.

If we examine the general body of expellees, we find that Idel’s theory cannot account for their experience in the Ottoman Empire. The expellees may have encountered elite intellectual traditions but not a living society with robust social structures and cultural traditions. In the third part of the dissertation, I articulate the reasons why the expellees found that their new settlements often lacked a local Jewish community. Where

\textsuperscript{191} “In some new centers of Spanish Jewry there were confrontations, well-documented in the extant sources, between the autochthon customs and types of religious thought on one hand, and Sephardi customs and religious thought on the other. This was the case in regard to difference in customs between Jews in the Ottoman Empire and the new arrivals from Spain, or with regard to the encounters between the Spanish Kabbalah, with its particularistic tendencies, and the Italian Kabbalah, which was much more inclined to philosophy.” Idel, “Jewish Reactions to the Expulsion from Spain,” 20; also there: “The friction between the different types of mystical trends contributed, in my opinion in a substantial manner, to more productive literary activity in those new centers of Kabbalah. These confrontations were, inter alia, fertile catalysts for the creative period of the Safedian Kabbalah, especially as it was presented in the writings of Rabbi Moses Cordovero.”
they did find such a community, it was often weak and in the midst of an identity crisis. Even in Istanbul, the strongest center of Ottoman Jewry before the expulsion from Spain, by 1492 the local community was an amalgam of internally displaced communities brought there after the Ottoman occupation of the Byzantine capital.

Therefore, we cannot correct Idel’s relative neglect of the general body of expellees by simply extending his thesis to the entire community. Rather, we must acknowledge that for the majority it was not friction with indigenous traditions but, in fact, the lack of such friction that defined their diasporic experience. The loss of established Iberian sociocultural traditions, a minimal intervention of the Ottoman authorities, and a weakened Ottoman Jewry, enabled the expellees to address their diasporic social context and rebuild their community and communal identity relatively free from external influence. In this context, the kabbalistic turn resulted from the expellees’ effort to reconstitute a sense of identity on their own terms rather than as a result of external influence, a response to a shocking “trauma” (as Scholem argued), or to a competing indigenous local tradition (as Idel argued).

However, the problem is more complicated than simply excluding the lower classes from the examination of the kabbalistic turn and the solution not as simple as incorporating them into an explanatory thesis. This is because Scholem and Idel consider the general body of the expellees as essentially passive and timid, passengers rather than drivers of Jewish history. To demonstrate the inherent bias in Idel’s thesis, I briefly examine his idea of the role fear played in the diasporic drama. As a stepping stone to this discussion, I first examine Idel’s analysis of the logic governing the production and dissemination of kabbalistic knowledge by Ottoman Sephardic sages:
As part of the process of rebuilding Jewish life in new centers the need to supply religious guidance induced authors to write many more treatises than had been composed earlier in Spain. The more stable forms of communities that maintained traditional forms of life had disappeared, and instead it was important to contribute to the formation of newer centers.\(^\text{192}\)

In this argument Idel makes two assertions that reinforce my general analysis of his work and one that leads to a clarification of Idel’s perception of the expellees’ psyche. First, Idel asserts that the kabbalistic proliferation was a part of a campaign to rebuild Jewish life rather than to flee the shambles of the expellees’ Iberian past for the comforts of the apocalyptic and messianic. In addition, Idel argues that the new communities were of a different essence because “new centers” that were erected after “the more stable forms of communities that maintained traditional forms of life had disappeared.”\(^\text{193}\)

However, more relevant to the current discussion is the fact that the rebuilding process required the sages to write a multitude of treatises to supply religious guidance to the new communities. How did these texts work? What ingredient did the sages incorporate in their cultural production to appeal to the masses? Idel’s answer is that striking fear in the expellees’ hearts and frightening them into submission was the main reason for the sages’ production and dissemination of kabbala in the aftermath of the expulsion.\(^\text{194}\) In addition, as mentioned previously, according to Idel, the mindset that pushed the conversos toward messianism was “forced upon them through fear.”\(^\text{195}\) Idel’s analysis of the sages’ dissemination of kabbala and the dynamic that drove the conversos toward messianism exemplify his perception of the masses’ psyche. Fear, according to Idel, seems to be a precondition for the attraction of the masses to messianism. Idel’s

\(^{192}\) Idel, “Jewish Reactions to the Expulsion from Spain,” 19.
\(^{193}\) Ibid., 20.
\(^{194}\) For more on the contemporary crisis in rabbinic authority, see Chapter 10.
\(^{195}\) Idel, “Religion, Thought, and Attitudes,” 135.
model of the relationship between fear and messianic tendencies among the general body of the expellees excludes the expellees from the ranks of the active, hopeful, and resourceful few. Instead, Idel places the timid and passive masses in a category not unlike Scholem’s grouping.\textsuperscript{196}

Scholem and Idel, therefore, disagree on the reasons for the kabbalistic turn but not on the social status of its active producers (the elite) and passive consumers (the general body of the expellees). Accepting the passive and timid nature ascribed to them by Scholem and Idel deems meaningless an inclusion of the masses in a thesis contextualizing the kabbalistic turn. I suggest, however, that this profiling of the masses is not based on strong evidence but rather on the methodological tools of the historians. It is therefore possible and useful to consider the general body of expellees as a factor that affected the construction of the Ottoman Sephardic communal identity in a rational manner, that is, to consider them as people who addressed their diasporic predicament. I argue that the community as a whole—rather than its elites alone—found hope in, and could identify with, the new kabbalistic trends. In this context, the expellees’ revival of mystical creativity after 1492 marked an attempt to directly address the diasporic realia by the entire community rather than by its intellectual elite alone.

A Sociocultural History of Kabbala and the Methodology of Social Imagination

Although Scholem and Idel did not examine the history of the kabbalistic turn through a social lens, kabbala scholars did not completely neglect this approach. In fact,\textsuperscript{196} This point is made clearer when contrasted with Idel’s suggestion that the post-1492 kabbalistic production was driven by “a drama of hope [and] . . . self-confidence,” an effort by the Sephardic Jews “to rebuild their religious and social life” rather than abandon all hope of earthly salvation; see the section titled “Moshe Idel: Criticism of the Three-Stage Theory and a Corrective Thesis” below. It seems then that Idel associates this more hopeful outlook with the elite kabbalists rather than the general body of the expellees.
as early as 1936, Yitzhak Baer (1888–1980), Scholem’s contemporary and fellow German Israeli historian, dedicated a significant part of his seminal *The History of the Jews in Christian Spain* to the social context that couched the thirteenth-century Zohar circle. Baer argued that the Zohar reflects contemporary social tensions. Baer identified the message of the Zoharic circle with a popular criticism of the elite.¹⁹⁷ For Baer, the Zoharic narratives were not “figments of the imagination, invented to provide a frame for the discussions and teachings of the ancient sages,” but rather a reflection of “[the] contemporary scene . . . part of a real Jewish experience in Spain.”¹⁹⁸ Baer’s early attempt at a sociocultural analysis of kabbala did not come to fruition because Scholem’s theory turned into a paradigm. The unusual success of Scholem’s thesis made suggesting an alternative explanation a daunting task. Sociocultural history, in particular, suffered because Scholem was adamantly against considering social context as an explanatory tool. Consequently, generations of scholars gazed at complex and multilayered phenomena almost exclusively through the narrow messianic lens.

During the 1990s, however, scholars noted the lack of a sociocultural examination of Jewish early modernity in general and kabbala in particular. In 1992 Elliott Horowitz commented on the lack of examination of the medieval and early modern Jewish social history of religious life:

Specialists in Jewish history . . . have generally been slow to absorb the methods of social history, and have tended to view religion as either too trivial or too sublime to be part of the historical process. Those who have written Jewish religious history have generally done so within the fairly rigid confines of the history of law or of thought or of custom, whereas social history has often been

¹⁹⁷ For more information, see Baer’s “The Historical Background for the Rayah Meheimna” [in Hebrew], *Zion* 5 (1940): 1–44.
¹⁹⁸ Yitzhak Baer, *Toldot ha-yehudim bi-sefarad ha-notsrit* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1959), 267–68. Baer seems to suggest that the kabbalistic discourses directly reflect social realities.
limited to the collection of social facts. The ways in which religion worked itself out on the social plane or in which social experiences and perceptions were given religious expression have not yet received their due from historians of early modern Jewry.\footnote{199}

In 1992, Joseph Hacker, the prominent scholar of Ottoman Jewish history, dared to intervene in the clash between Idel and Scholem’s followers. In the midst of the scholarly turmoil, Hacker asked his readers (and perhaps his fellow scholars) to remember the social context when thinking about the Scholem-Idel clash of paradigms:

\begin{quote}
[I]n the heat of the argument [i.e., between Idel and Scholem’s supporters] it seems as if the society of the Iberian Jews was pushed into the discourse’s periphery. It may give the wrong impression, one the researchers did not intend to give, that the crises of the fifteenth century and the shock from the expulsion did not reshape this society and did not force it to cope with its tradition, past, and religious and cultural values . . . the new reality led to new and old attitudes . . . only after clarifying and diagnosing the processes and changes that happened in this society and its values it will be possible to estimate how did these processes affect the general Jewish society.\footnote{200}
\end{quote}

Toward the end of the millennium, Peter Schäfer lamented the lack of sociocultural examination of kabbala:

\begin{quote}
I believe that this is the question [i.e., the historical context of kabbalah] which has to be taken up much more seriously in future research. It is important, but not enough, to follow the winding paths of literary influences and dependencies, to demonstrate that there are indeed many Islamic and Arabic influences on the Kabbalah on the literary level.\footnote{201} The historical question . . . is of the context in which the Kabbalistic systems were developed . . . The problem is not what kind of background we are talking about but that since Baer there hasn’t been much written at all about the historical background and the social milieu out of which the Zohar emerged . . . in any case, what is at stake is a description . . . of the historical circumstances, the background, the environment, in which the Bahir, the Zohar, and other important Kabbalistic books and movements originated and grew.\footnote{202}
\end{quote}


\footnote{201} This is a reference to Moshe Idel’s corrective theory of cultural encounters examined above.

Scholars of early modern Judaism, Ottoman Jewry, and kabbala soon answered the calls of Horowitz, Hacker, and Schäfer. Many of those who answered the call examined the rise of the Sabbatian movement. This was only natural as this later period presents a larger variety of useful evidence for sociocultural analysis. However, scholars who examined the sixteenth century offer several interesting studies as well. Especially useful for a consideration of the kabbalistic turn as a social phenomenon is Shaul Magid’s examination of the concept of erev rav (mixed multitudes) as it appears in Haim Vital’s Ets ha-da’at tov. Here Magid offers a useful methodology for discerning the interconnection between social context and cultural production. Magid argues that Vital’s description of the erev rav has:

[twisted] rabbinc and post-rabbinc readings so that the erev rav’s making of the golden calf is partially justifiable, at least from their and Moses’s perspective. . . . And, more importantly, he [Vital] views the relationship between the erev rav and Moses, a relationship already documented in rabbinc literature, as paramount in understanding the plight of the erev rav, whom he aptly calls am shel Moshe (Moses’s people).

Magid argues that Vital’s positive treatment of the mixed multitude “is intended as a biblical mirror of the conversos who were immigrating, or had recently immigrated, to Safed during the first third of the sixteenth century in hopes of being reabsorbed into the Jewish community.” To substantiate his claim, Magid employs a methodology inspired by Stephen Greenblatt’s school of New Historicism, arguing that “the construction of the

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205 Ibid., 627.
erev rav in Vital’s Ets ha-da’at tov is a fictional and thus aesthetic comment on the social reality of the converso immigration to Safed.”

Magid’s adoption of the New Historicist assumption that social realities work themselves into literary production charts an innovative and useful methodological path that I adopt and adapt in this dissertation. I discern the social imagination underlying the elite cultural production, what Stephen Greenblatt saw as “the complex circulation between the social dimension of an aesthetic strategy and the aesthetic dimension of a social strategy.” I therefore approach the kabbalistic discourse of yibbum as literature, searching for patterns of meaning in recurrent images and themes regardless of their meaning for the particular theological yibbum discourse. My intention is to search for what Sarah Maza saw as the “the cultural elements from which we construct our understanding of the social world.” In this way concerns left unarticulated by the lower classes come to life and are used to understand the relationship between the expulsion and kabbala.

The methodology of social imagination emanates from the French tradition of l’imaginaire social. This methodology expanded during the 1970s and 1980s when French historians from the Annales school came to study the imagined as it manifested in spirit-possession stories, dreams, journeys to the afterworld, and more. Two of the masterpieces that set the foundations for the tradition are Georges Duby’s The Three

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206 Ibid., 629.
209 In Sarah Maza’s words, “[I am applying] to the realm of the social the cultural approach that historians have, for many years now, been bringing to the study of politics, gender, race, and nation.” Maza, Myth of the French Bourgeoisie, 7.
Orders: Feudal Society Imagined (1978) and Jacques Le Goff’s The Birth of Purgatory (1981). Duby argues that the social division into three orders: “followed the channel cut by the social structure itself.” In The Birth of Purgatory, Jacques Le Goff argued that the arrival of a “third estate” of merchants into the previous binary “feudal world” is responsible for the appearance of a third theological place. In the twelfth century, Europe had “finally tasted growth after centuries of mere reproduction or even recession. More ‘goods’ were being produced, and values formerly situated in the life to come were now in one degree or another incarnated here below: justice, peace, wealth, beauty. . . . Mankind had taken up residence on earth.”

One problem with Le Goff and Duby’s approach is that it implies that images, discourses, and texts reflect a real social context. As Maza put it, such an interpretation of social imagination “presumes an objective, material reality of social existence that is passively reflected in . . . language.” Another methodological pitfall lies in assuming that the social imagination underlying the kabbalistic texts represents the social ideology of a homogenous Jewish people rather than its elite. As I elaborate below, I avoid these pitfalls by considering the kabbalistic texts as a space of cultural negotiation between elite and popular culture rather than a top-down transmission of values. Therefore, in the

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212 Jacques Le Goff, The Birth of Purgatory (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 231. This notion is apparent in Duby’s analysis of similar imagined social constructs. Duby identifies different groups who, in the course of the church reform and urban developments of the 12th century, followed the same pattern, namely, they observed a social reality, translated it to the theoretical or imaginary realm, and made sure to keep the observer’s own group on top: Gregorian reformers reverted to a binary distinction between the clergy and the laity as they tried to get rid of married priests and princely control of benefices, while Saint Bernard of Clairvaux added merchants to the end of a procession headed by monks of noble birth.
213 Maza, Myth of the French Bourgeoisie, 6. In his defense, Duby did note that there are some caveats in his theory and that things change in a less straightforward manner. “The history I am recounting, the history of a social fantasy is made up of . . . imperceptible displacements, partial superimpositions, and imperfect condensations. It is also made up of lapses of memory, whether conscious or not.”
context of this research, social imagination uncovers a cultural dialogue rather than reflects a static homogenous social structure.

Especially helpful in addressing the pitfalls of social imagination is Michele de Certeau’s suggestion that we transition from a description of social behavior (i.e., voting, traveling, etc.) to a discussion of social practices (i.e., every day practices of ordinary people). Certeau’s point was to take the observed people seriously and consider them as agents rather than passive automatons. In the spirit of De Certeau, Maza argues that “language is not passive but performative; peoples’ identities are constructed by the cultural elements they absorb and then articulate as individual and collective stories.”214 Indeed, when we apply this theory to the Sephardic expellees, we see that they actively participated in weaving a new sense of communal identity out of old discursive threads. They restructured, reappropriated, and changed their social imagination to address a new social context.

Social imagination addresses the aforementioned methodological weakness of Scholem and Idel’s theses because it demands a rethinking of the relationship between the religious and the social spheres. For Scholem and Idel, the religious was superior to, and unaffected by, the social. In fact, for both scholars it was the religious that acted on the social.215 Social imagination, however, perceives the religious and the social as equally affected by historical contingencies and assumes both spheres act on and are in a dialogue with one another. In other words, social imagination uncovers a communal identity that addressed contemporary predicaments and was negotiated between the

214 Ibid., 7.
215 Indeed, Idel identifies a dialectical process but one that was limited to members of the intellectual elite.
religious and the social, the sages and the people, rather than one that was forced by the elite on the people. The next section locates social imagination in the greater methodological discourse of the relationship between the social and the religious, the material and the cultural, the real and the imagined.

Methodology: Social Context, Cultural Production, and Popular Culture

The historiographical survey of the kabbalistic turn demonstrates the need to explore the phenomenon through a social lens and consider the general body of expellees as agents that affected the construction of a post exilic communal identity. Such examination, however, is a methodological challenge due to the genres and authorship of the available sources. As for the genres, kabbalistic discourses are rich in literary content but poor in objective observations regarding the diasporic social context. As explained above, I address this matter and examine the kabbalistic turn from a social perspective by approaching the evidence as literary texts and searching for the social imagination underlying them.

As for the matter of authorship, the fundamental question is whether we can use texts written by elite kabbalists to uncover the social imagination of the masses. I argue the answer is positive. This is so not because the elite message simply trickled down to the lower social strata. Rather, I suggest that the kabbalistic discourses document an ongoing process of cultural negotiation between the sages who had authored the texts and their distraught communities. The negotiated kabbalistic discourses served the sages as a source of legitimacy as they offered a more egalitarian social imagination that evinced the importance of the expellees’ few assets, namely, their offspring. To examine the dialog
between the sages and their community and to uncover the role the latter played in constructing an Ottoman Sephardic communal identity, I rely on methodology borrowed from the field of popular culture. The survey that follows, therefore, locates the dissertation within two methodological contexts that address the methodological challenges mentioned above and attend to the historiographical gaps exposed in the survey of Scholem and Idel’s theses. The first section examines scholars’ reflections on the relationship between social context and cultural production. The second section turns to the rich scholarly tradition examining the study of popular culture.

The Interconnection between Social Context and Cultural Production

Scholars who debate how to approach the matter of interconnections between social context and cultural production offer valuable insights for the study of Ottoman Sephardic social imagination. In what follows I focus on, though do not limit myself to, scholarship examining Reformation Europe. The scholarly discourse over Reformation social imagination is extremely helpful for the scholar of Ottoman Sephardic social imagination despite the different geographical area, religion, and culture.

First, Robert Scribner argued that during the Reformation “the material conditions of existence shaped expressions of social and religious life” thus making Reformation Europe a wonderful benchmark for a comparative examination of similar processes among the Ottoman Sephardim. Second, both the kabbalistic turn and the Reformation are contemporaneous phenomena and were couched in a decompartmentalization of older

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216 Robert Scribner, “Elements of Popular Belief,” in *Handbook of European History 1400–1600*, ed. T. A. Brady, H. Oberman and J. D. Tracy (Leiden: 1995), 234. In a future paper, I plan to show that the response of the rising elite at the turn of the 17th century in Europe and (albeit somewhat earlier) among the Ottoman Sephardim lends itself to a fruitful comparative analysis.
social, cultural, economic, and religious orders. As Scribner notes, the breaking down of old orders was particularly discernible in the religious sphere:

[Reform through state action] lead to a dramatic change in the availability of older religious forms and practices. Sacred places and objects were destroyed . . . sacred persons, especially the saints, denigrated and demythologized, significant religious communities uprooted or dissolved. All of this upheaval presented ordinary people with problems of how to respond, whether with acquiescence, resistance, adaptation, or strategies of survival. 217

The commoners of Reformation Europe and the Sephardic expellees in the Ottoman Empire seem to have faced a common challenge, namely, to paint an image of a new social structure on a new religious canvas. 218

Particularly relevant for our purpose is what some Reformation scholars refer to as a “bourgeois” religiosity (i.e., religion tailored for the life of the townsfolk). In the spirit of Marxism, some scholars identify the Reformation as an “early bourgeois revolution.” 219 According to Marx, ideas reflect material interests. Therefore, if we wish to understand a set of ideas, we are to explore the material interests that caused them. As one scholar demonstrated this notion, “looked at from this aspect the transcendent God of the Puritans might be seen to express the irrationality and anonymity of the market.” 220

This, however, is not my claim. Although I agree that material and social conditions directly affect social imagination, the first does not simply reflect the second. Rather, I

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217 Ibid., 253.
218 It seems both groups addressed this challenge similarly, presenting a similar social imagination. I intend to discuss the implications of this similarity in a separate article.
220 Michael Hill, A Sociology of Religion (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 105. This methodological weakness is very similar to that of the Annales school discussed above.
consider the kabbalistic discourses as a space where the various sociocultural groups that belonged to the community negotiated a communal identity.

Other scholars argued that only rarely do authors’ religious ideas reflect their social status and material interest. For example, Max Weber argued that: “[i]t is not our thesis that the specific nature of a religion is a simple ‘function’ of the social stratum which appears as its characteristic bearer, or that it represents the stratum’s ‘ideology,’ or that it is a ‘reflection’ of a stratum’s material or ideal interest.” Religious ethic, Weber argues, “receives its stamps primarily from religious sources.”²²¹ For Weber, religious ethic was not determined by material conditions but rather by religious beliefs.

Although he claimed that the social did not affect the religious, Weber did identify an intersection between the two spheres: “Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men’s conduct. Yet very frequently the ‘world images’ that have been created by ‘ideas’ have . . . determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest.”²²² The religious, therefore, defines the contours of the social discourse; it equips the socially minded individual with tools to express his or her position regarding the social as well as guiding his or her actions. In the concept of “elective affinity,” Weber clearly articulates his theory regarding the relationship between the ideal and the material. Weber argues that when a group finds a certain religious idea

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²²² In Gerth and Mills, From Max Weber, 280. See also Hill, Sociology of Religion, 107. Maza presents an inverted version of this argument when she claims that material factors and social experience, though they do not determine social imagination “limit the range of ways in which the world can be described.” Maza, Myth of the French Bourgeoisie, 9.
compelling, even if it was created in a separate and religious context, the group will adopt or elect the aspects of the idea that they feel best represent or address their social context.\textsuperscript{223}

Weber’s approach is very similar to Scholem’s in the way in which it imagines the religious sphere and its interaction with the social. Both Scholem and Weber imagine the religious as immune to social influences. It seems that the religious is produced within a closed sphere but is then introduced into, and affects, the social as different social groups elect the religious elements toward which they feel an affinity. The dissertation questions this assumption, arguing that contemporary social context did not simply affect the believers’ choice of certain religious doctrines but rather affected the doctrines as well.

Another theoretical approach to the relationship between social context and cultural production is Vittorio Lanternari’s thesis, formulated in his \textit{The Religions of the Oppressed}.\textsuperscript{224} Lanternari documents the appearance of messianic religious cults in America, Africa, Asia, Australasia, and Oceania. Lanternari’s argument is that these movements first sprang up as a pre-political response to imperialist incursions into indigenous societies. The messiah figure came to serve as a beacon of hope as the indigenous earthly leaders were unable to meet the challenge posed by the Europeans. Often these cults took direct military action against the Europeans. However, they were not able to drive out the colonizer, and they often relapsed into a second, contemplative “accepting” phase. Nevertheless, the cults enabled the colonized people to maintain their national consciousness and dignity; this later bore fruit when purely political movements

\textsuperscript{223} For more on elective affinity, see Hill, \textit{Sociology of Religion}, 104–9.

succeeded where messianism had failed. Lanternari’s thesis seems to suffer from weaknesses similar to those of Scholem’s thesis, especially in its treatment of the lower classes, namely, that it is the elite who attempt to address a quasi-national predicament in the world while the masses adopt a messianic route outside of the political realm of failure. The dissertation, however, challenges this notion and offers an alternative path to examine the lower classes—as agents responsible for a social imagination that addressed the world rather than avoided it.

Peter Blickle presents an interesting approach to Reformation religiosity that offers a useful methodology for examining the kabbalistic turn. Blickle asserts that the growing power of the German parish commune—and the communal striving for authority—generated a religious manifestation, a concept he named “communal reformation.” According to Blickle, communal reformation was a historical development in which peasants and city dwellers gradually gained a measure of limited self-government. This was a result of their lords’ decision to allocate representatives to collect rents and fees from the peasants, freemen, and serfs. In the absence of their lords, the peasants were able to come together as a community, agree on their laws, and control their lower courts. They devised strategies to improve their inheritance rights; present grievances; regulate village questions; and coordinate collective use of water, forests, and so forth. Their values relied heavily on biblical teachings: common good, neighborly love, and the value of an adequate livelihood.\footnote{Peter Blickle, \textit{Communal Reformation: The Quest for Salvation in Sixteenth-Century Germany} (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1992).} From these developments, Blickle argues, rose the communal reformation of the 1520s. The common people demanded the
right to elect and dismiss their own pastors as well as the responsibility to take care of
their local parishes. This communal reformation came from below because it rose up in a
grass roots movement.

I find Blickle’s approach extremely useful to contextualize my approach to the
kabbalistic turn. Especially useful is Blickle’s theory regarding the connection between
the townsfolk’s freedom from external influences and the development of the communal
reformation. Blickle suggests that the development of a more egalitarian communal
identity from below was possible because the townsfolk were released from an older,
hierarchical, and centralized social structure. In a similar fashion, I argue that the
Ottoman Sephardim were able to develop a more egalitarian social imagination in the
aftermath of the expulsion as a result of unique social circumstances. The expellees were
released from established social institutions, elite narratives, structures, organizations,
and enforcement mechanisms; they were left on their own to construct a new communal
organization and identity.

Applying Blickle’s thesis to the kabbalistic turn, however, requires some
modification. Blickle’s model puts less emphasis on the interaction between the different
social classes within the parish commune. Therefore, we must adapt Blickle’s thesis to
acknowledge the fact that the kabbala sages who authored the kabbalistic texts belonged
to the expellees’ intellectual elite. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that the sages’ notions
of communal identity represent the entire community. Rather, I perceive of the kabbalistic
discourses as a dialog between the sages and their community. In this context, production
and dissemination of kabbala is an educational and political effort meant to legitimate the
sages’ leadership by gathering popular support.
The exoteric trend among sages of the expulsion generation reveals another difference from Blickle’s model. The sages’ production and dissemination of kabbalistic knowledge was a manifestation of their declining power combined with the general sense of an identity crisis among the expellees. Blickle’s communal reformation, however, is a manifestation of the growing power of a group asserting its liberation from restrictive structures and discourses. The expellees “reformation” was an act of identity formation through negotiation whereas the parish commune’s reformation was an assertion of a liberated identity. Because the sages’ reformation is an effort of cultural negotiation, in what follows I examine some useful tools for understanding the dynamic of cultural negotiation between the sages and their community. I do so by exploring scholarly examinations of the relationship between elite and popular culture in early modern Europe.

Popular Culture as a Key for Understanding Cultural Negotiation

Since the seminal work of Peter Burke appeared, much has been written about the two-tier model approach to early modern culture.\textsuperscript{226} The model poses a tiny, literate, clerical, and aristocratic elite, with a characteristic culture, religion, and textual tradition that was distinguished from the great mass of peasants equipped with folk culture and unaware of, or uninterested in, the elite cultural tradition. The two-tier model forms the

most basic foundation for the examinations of early modern popular culture. However, the model is problematic and was indeed criticized from inside the ranks of its practitioners (i.e., by scholars of popular culture) and outside (i.e., those placing popular culture out of the historian’s toolbox). Scholars raised concerns regarding the proper category for differentiating elite from popular strata; doubt the model’s premise that both groups were internally homogenous; debate how the groups act upon each other (if at all); and criticize the notion that popular culture is a defined object of finite qualities.

Even scholars who support the two-tier model seem to disagree on the essential quality that distinguishes elite and popular culture. Is education the dividing line separating the literate educated from the uneducated illiterates? Is it power that distinguishes those able to promote or force their traditions and interpretation from those subjected to campaigns of cultural modification? In fact, it was not only the category of differentiation that scholars questioned but the model’s premise that elite and popular cultures were internally homogenous. For example, is the experience of non-elite women, children, the elderly, townsfolk, or peasants the same as the other members of their social stratum? To address this matter, some scholars developed the concept of segmented culture, a horizontal division of cultural poles into groups that vary by profession, language, and social and economic status, yet share the same level of influence or core values and, therefore, still constitute a distinct cultural pole.227 To complicate the matter even further, some scholars argued that elites were “bicultural” by nature; wealth or social position, so the argument goes, do not exclude one from what is otherwise

perceived as low or popular culture (not to mention those who rose to social prominence out of the ranks of the lower classes).\textsuperscript{228}

Another significant methodological pitfall lies in thinking of popular culture as a motionless object, an immutable passive artifact that waits unchanged to be discovered by the historian. This is a fallacy for several reasons. As mentioned above, popular culture is divided into numerous subgroups. In addition, these subgroups constitute a dynamic culture comprised of a changing set of values. Therefore, what is exposed by scholars of popular culture is not an artifact but rather a process of mediation between elite and popular culture. Therefore, we can only see changes in popular culture but not the thing itself.\textsuperscript{229} For this reason I consider popular culture as an essentially multivalent complex process of change, adoption, appropriation, competition, assimilation, and rejection of values. Rather than a motionless object, social imagination is a static frame of an ongoing process of mediation between elite and popular cultures.

As I do not consider social imagination to represent a static social vision of a homogenous social unit, I find no challenge to my thesis in complicating the assumption of the two-tier model regarding the homogeneity and immutability of culture. On the contrary, I argue that social imagination combines elements of elite and popular culture, a meeting place where two cultural traditions negotiated communal identity. In this context, social imagination uncovers the relationship between elite and popular culture rather than the ultimate image of either one.

\textsuperscript{229}Scribner, “Is a History of Popular Culture Possible?” 38–39.
However, the nature of this relationship is another contested issue. For some, the dominant culture affected, dominated, and even attacked popular culture. In this context, the masses are passive consumers of the elite message, and culture travels from top down only. Scholars show that this model, although rooted in the evidence, is problematic, nonetheless, because there was a gap between imposed and inculcated values. In addition, scholars demonstrate the variety of ways in which an elite message can be interpreted, adapted, resisted, and changed by members of its target audience.

Others note that we must acknowledge the influence of popular culture on the elite and beware of presenting a distorted image of elite culture itself. In fact, scholars found that resistance to elite transmission of values resulted in a “subcultural” identity, a sectional set of values and practices that exists in a more or less covert or tolerated form within a wider dominant culture.

The expellees’ unique social context in the aftermath of the expulsion defuses the challenges emanating from the question of the relationship between elite and popular culture. Coercion requires power that the religious elite did not have. The interaction between the sages and their congregations, therefore, was between the rabbinic elite in an identity and authority crisis and the masses in the throes of an identity crisis. This dynamic, as already mentioned above, was conducted in a society that had lost much of its material possession and many of its propertied elite. Therefore, neither religious nor...

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233 Scribner, “Is a History of Popular Culture Possible?” 46.
financial sources of legitimacy disturbed the balance of power among the expellees. In addition, it was the general neglect by the Ottoman authorities that enabled this status quo as they did not support one group out of the expellees nor force upon them hierarchical or centralized social organization.

Therefore, the social imagination underlying the kabbalistic discourses supplied the expellees with a communal identity that addressed their social context and was minimally affected by external influences. Of course, it may be argued that the elite sages were influenced by the same developments that shaped the general community’s sense of identity. However, the sages produced their kabbalistic discourses in response to a crisis of rabbinic authority rather than exclusively in the context of social or religious crises. In addition, their choice to disseminate kabbalistic knowledge after generations of esoteric practices suggests they approached their theology as a means of convincing the masses rather than as an expression of a general state of mind that affected the entire Ottoman Sephardic community.

The issues mentioned above concerning early modern popular culture clarify that a definition of popular culture is a problematic task for any historian. However, the difficulty increases dramatically for the historian of early modern Jewish culture in general and Ottoman Sephardic culture in particular. In spite of clear differences in education, social and political positions, and wealth among them, late medieval and early modern Jews lacked anything similar to the Christian peasantry, aristocracy, or ecclesiastical hierarchy. The social, intellectual, and economic gap between elite and popular Jewish cultures therefore was not as dramatic as that of pre-modern
Christianity.\textsuperscript{234} The case of the expellees, as I show in the dissertation’s second part, poses an even greater challenge as their social stratification was even more limited. As mentioned above, their lay and religious elite were extremely small and weak. In addition, the indigenous Ottoman Jewish community was itself in the midst of an identity crisis, and Ottoman intervention in the matters of the incoming Sephardim was limited. As a result the expellees did not develop a hierarchical and centralized social structure before the middle of the sixteenth century.

The expulsion created a unique social context that was very similar to the historical junctures Scribner asserts that we should analyze to uncover shifting trends in popular culture. Scribner suggests we should approach “moments when inherent tensions become evident, moments that attract the historian’s attention, signaling that the ongoing process of cultural formation reached a point of particular intensity, even crisis . . . some symbolic event . . . may provoke a clash between dominant and subordinate interests.”\textsuperscript{235} These are moments when “[a] clash between dominant, hegemonic, and subordinate cultures is too strong and requires a change; in these moments tensions that may have been dormant emerge.”\textsuperscript{236}

The aftermath of 1492 was indeed a time of cataclysmic crisis when social tensions emerged and, in that sense, it fits Scribner’s model quite well. However, the experience of the expellees differed from Scribner’s model because his model lacked an


\textsuperscript{235} Scribner, “Is a History of Popular Culture Possible?” 49.

\textsuperscript{236} Ibid.
actual conflict between the elite and popular culture. The expellees were removed from their hierarchical social context and, due to the severe loss of family members and material possessions, also lost what little of it remained. Combined with the minimal external influence of their host culture, the expellees thus experienced a dramatic lack of cultural friction in the aftermath of the expulsion.

Two types of discourses filled the void. First, the expellees developed an egalitarian sense of communal identity. Second, as discussed in Chapter 7 below, one of the few Iberian discourses that survived the sociocultural destruction of 1492 held the intellectual lay elite responsible for the expulsion. The egalitarian social imagination and the anti-elite discourses are the Ottoman Sephardic equivalent of the victory of the dormant opposition presented in Scribner’s model. However, the context is quite different. Whereas in Blickle’s model the communal religiosity challenges and overcomes the older hierarchical structures, the expellees’ challenge is to construct a new community and communal identity. Thus, we may follow Scribner’s suggestion and examine the aftermath of the expulsion to uncover contemporary popular culture. However, as we do so, we must be aware of the fact that the context is one of negotiation, persuasion, and construction rather than cultural conflict.

In this section I examined two methodological contexts that address the methodological challenges mentioned above and the historiographical gaps exposed in the survey of Scholem and Idel’s theses. I showed that the relationship between social context and cultural production among the expellees must be understood as a negotiation of cultural values. I then showed that we must understand the balance of power between
the religious elite and the general body of expellees if we wish to illuminate the cultural negotiation exposed in the social imagination underlying the kabbalistic discourses.

The Chronological Boundaries in Historiographical Perspective

The dissertation examines the Ottoman Sephardic social imagination during the first half of the sixteenth century. This section locates the dissertation in four scholarly traditions that addressed the same period in a rather biased fashion. The first tradition simply avoids examining a period that provides only meager and problematic evidence. The second one considers the period as a hotbed of seminal phenomena, which later blooms into Jewish modernity. The third tradition examines the period from a perspective of a victorious narrative. Here the aftermath of the expulsion is imagined as a hurdle for the expellees to overcome on their way to an unprecedented material and spiritual success. According to this argument, the expellees rose from the ashes of Iberian Jewry to become global movers and shakers. The fourth one imagines the Sephardic culture and society as essentially derivative and reflective of trends located in its host culture. This survey demonstrates the requirement to examine the first half of the sixteenth century as a unique period in Ottoman Jewish history rather than as a derivative of later historical developments, modern Jewish identity politics, or early modern host cultures.

The Avoidance Bias: Scarce and Problematic Evidence

Scholarly discourses concerning Ottoman Jewry, the expulsion from Spain, or kabbala often avoid the first half of the sixteenth century and begin their narratives in the middle of the century. The lack of available hard evidence is one of the main reasons for
this relative neglect of the early sixteenth century and one that enabled a biased treatment of the period. Considering the scholarly treatment of Ottoman Sephardic poverty, Yaron Ben-Naeh notes that:

[I]n contrast to Europe, where a wealth of sources have provided material for numerous studies, there are very few data relating to poverty in the Ottoman cities. No wonder that there has been almost no treatment of this topic in general, nor about the Jewish poor in the Ottoman Empire in particular. . . . In addition, the state and type of sources [i.e., Halakhah, literature, kabbalah, sermons, responsa] make it more difficult for us to reconstruct the way in which the poor saw themselves, and how poverty seemed to those around them.237

Although Ben-Naeh does not clearly identify the first half of the century as the period lacking in primary sources, it is safe to assume he is referring to this period because he bases his research on sources from the middle of the sixteenth century onward. However, the problem is more complicated than a simple lack of evidence. Rather, Ben-Naeh asserts that in addition to the scarcity of evidence, it is the literary nature of the evidence that makes it less effective for the historian examining sociocultural trends.238

Reflecting on the uneven scholarly treatment of the social development of Ottoman Jewry in the early sixteenth century, Hacker presents a similar analysis:

Major issues in the history of Ottoman Empire Jewry have not as yet been adequately clarified . . . [these are] vital to the comprehension of the growth of Jewish society in the Empire . . . with regard to the shaping of their social character.239

238 Aryeh Shmuelevitz presents a similar opinion regarding the sources available for the historian of the early Ottoman Sephardic period: “[A] researcher will find scarce material regarding this matter [the reception of the expellees in the Ottoman Empire] in Jewish sources. However, he will encounter greater difficulties searching for Ottoman or Mamluk material. . . . [F]rom the Ottoman Empire’s archival material little is left covering the period before the second half of the sixteenth century.” Shmuelevitz, “The Acceptance of the Expelled in the Ottoman Empire” [in Hebrew], in *The Culture of Spanish Jewry*, ed. Aviva Doron (Tel Aviv: Levinsky College of Education Publication, 1994), 213–18.
Hacker then proceeds to mention a number of reasons for the gaps in the scholarly examination of social processes during this formative period:

A number of factors have contributed to the fact that topics of this kind [i.e., Ottoman Jewish social developments and organization] have remained inadequately clarified, or have not even been considered for study. . . . Common stereotypes, on the one hand, and insufficient interrelationships between the study of the history and institutions of the Ottoman Empire and the study of Jewish history, on the other, are undoubtedly at fault. A culprit no less to blame is, however, the paucity of material . . . its diffusion, its incidental character and the errors which accompanied its transmission from one generation to the next. 240

In this quotation Hacker offers several technical, political, and cultural explanations for the lack of scholarly treatment of the early Ottoman Sephardic social structure. However, more relevant to the current discussion is the fact that Hacker shares Ben-Naeh’s opinion that scarce, fragmented sources of questionable authenticity discourage the historian interested in early Ottoman Sephardic sociocultural processes.

Therefore, it seems there is a scholarly consensus that we have little hard evidence that naturally lends itself to researching the Ottoman Sephardic social history in general and that of the lower classes in particular. Although this is an accurate description of the problem, I do not think it is an insurmountable difficulty. As elaborated above, the dissertation offers a methodological response to the lack of evidence; it enables access to the contemporary social context by uncovering the social imagination underlying the kabbalistic discourses. This matter was discussed at length above and requires no further iteration.

240 Ibid.
The Periodization Bias: Jewish Early Modernity

The scholarly discourse of Jewish early modernity somewhat distorted the significance of this period. Scholars often associate the beginnings of Jewish modernity with the emergence of the Haskalah (the Jewish Enlightenment movement) during the second half of the eighteenth century. The Haskalah was an elite ideological movement that perceived itself, to use David Ruderman’s words, as a “political, pedagogic, and programmatic movement.”241 In this narrative, the essence of the Haskalah, as well as that of Jewish modernity, is in the self-aware message of intellectual or ideational revolution.242 Therefore, examining this period from the perspective of a Haskalah scholar (or one that perceives of Haskalah as interchangeable with modernity) overlooks dramatic developments that scholars (most prominently, Ruderman) only recently came to see as the core of Jewish early modernity. These developments are: increased mobility, the crisis in rabbinic authority, increased communal cohesiveness, the printing revolution and consequent knowledge explosion, and the blurring of religious identities.243 Overlooking these factors and others while searching for the sixteenth-century roots of the Haskalah results in a partial and, therefore, distorted image of Jewish early modernity in general and early Ottoman Sephardic history in particular.

242 “The primary ingredient of a modern Jewish culture, distinguishing it from an early modern one, is the changing political landscape of western and eastern Europe as it affected the Jews, the impact of enlightened absolutism on Jewry policy, the political debates and limited successes of civil emancipation, and the subsequent use and misuse of Jewish minorities as tools of nineteenth-century nationalism.... When the Haskalah was institutionalized and politicized, it became a modern phenomenon and no longer an early modern one. Accordingly, the real pioneers of the Haskalah were those offering a political agenda of Jewish modernization—men such as Naphtali Wesseley and Isaac Euchel, but not Mendelssohn.” Ibid., 200–201.
243 Ibid., 14–16.
A related issue that demonstrates the dangers in considering the Haskalah as the benchmark for Jewish modernity is the exclusive focus on European Jewry. Jacob Katz, for example, famously argued in his path-breaking *Tradition and Crisis* that “Jewish society” of the “end of the middle ages” (for Katz this meant the period from the middle of the fifteenth century to the mid-eighteenth century) was a “traditional” one. For Katz the beginning of the Haskalah, a distinctive European Ashkenazic phenomenon, ends the Middle Ages and introduces modernity. The story that Katz tells, therefore, is perhaps of a traditional society yet of an Ashkenazic society rather than a Jewish one. This discourse overlooks contemporary developments in the Ottoman Empire and Eastern Europe. Recently scholars pointed out this bias. Ruderman, for example, perceives the Haskalah movement as “[a] movement committed to transforming Ashkenazic Jewish culture” rather than transforming early modern Jewry in general. Ruderman’s main argument is that the Haskalah emerged from a sense of:

cultural deprivation, of inequity, and out of a sense of intellectual inferiority and the deep-seated need to catch up with a world that had passed Jews. . . . [It was] an attempt by Ashkenazic Jews, first in Germany and later in eastern Europe, to acquire what other European Jews had enjoyed for centuries. The ideological program of the Haskalah was relevant to Jews who themselves lacked the cultural opportunities available to their coreligionists in other European communities. In such places as Italy, the Netherlands, or England, such ideological advocacy was generally unnecessary and thus relatively absent.

244 Ruderman draws our attention to the particularly effective criticism of this trend by Gershon Hundert: “He [Hundert] insists that Jewish modernity needs to be viewed in its proper perspective by considering the largest concentration of Jews living neither in Amsterdam nor Italy but in Poland and Lithuania. In this community, the historian can detect a more positive sense of Jewish identity, an urban population living in a state of multiple nationalities, along with a greater sense of Jewish insularity and apartness from the surrounding cultures. The absence of what Hundert calls a “beckoning bourgeoisie” creates a different cultural dynamic in the East in contrast to the West, one characterized by a stronger sense of Jewish cultural superiority. Ibid., 217.

245 Ibid., 201.

246 Ibid., 202.
Examining Jewish early modernity through an Ashkenazic lens, therefore, is distorting if one is interested in the essence of the period from a Jewish perspective and even less relevant for an examination of the early formative period in the history of the Ottoman Sephardim.

The Triumphant Bias: Did the Sephardim Recover Quickly in the Ottoman Empire?

The expellees that arrived in the Ottoman Empire during the first half of the century had lost many family members, most of their material possessions and, in addition, were deprived of their established Iberian social context. However, “in time,” one scholar argued, “many of these early immigrants, and their descendants, had recovered and became established.” Other scholars make similar assertions in what constitutes a dominant narrative according to which the expellees’ time of travail was relatively short and their recuperation spectacular. Consider Jonathan Israel who had argued that:

The expulsion from Spain in 1492 . . . caused a shock that was felt throughout the Jewish world. For a while all were tormented by the sufferings of the uprooting, detachment, and despair. However, it soon became clear that the expulsion had an unexpected creative outcome . . . from the chaos rose . . . an impressive Jewish activity in the cultural, social, and economic areas.

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247 See Part III and especially Chapter 9.
I touch on various assertions that constitute this narrative in different contexts throughout the dissertation, and therefore in this section I do not explore them in depth but rather mention only a few. For example, I explore Julia Lieberman’s argument that the “exiles arrived with broken families or as individuals and very rapidly reconstructed their lives” in the context of the changing structure of Ottoman Sephardic family practices during the sixteenth century, examined in Chapter 11.\footnote{Julia R. Lieberman, Sephardi Family Life in the Early Modern Diaspora (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 10.} In the same chapter, where I explore changes to the Ottoman Sephardic social context during the second half of the sixteenth century, I examine Hacker’s note concerning the significance of pedigree in the aftermath of the expulsion: “[L]ife quickly returned to normal and the famous [i.e., elite] Spanish and Portuguese families . . . took over the leadership in various communities.”\footnote{Joseph Hacker, “The Sephardim in the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth Century,” in Moreshet Sepharad, 2: 126.} Rozen echoes Hacker’s assertion, arguing that “this value [i.e., pedigree], which was abandoned in the first decades after the expulsion, was enthusiastically readopted when the second generation of expellees reached the age of marriage.”\footnote{Minna Rozen, A History of the Jewish Community in Istanbul: The Formative Years, 1453–1566 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 307.}

Most recently Ray restated the quick recuperation argument. Ray argued that in the aftermath of the expulsion, extreme social upheavals shaped a radically different Sephardic society:

sixteenth century was rapid and dramatic.” However, we also might derive the impression of a quick recuperation because he omits a discussion of the early decades of the century from his narrative: “[They] reached a peak of prosperity in the later part of the sixteenth century.” See his “The Sephardi Contribution to Economic Life and Colonization in Europe and the New World (16th–18th Centuries)” in Moreshet Sepharad: The Sephardi Legacy, vol. 2:371.
Among the first generation of exiles from Spain, informal encounters between refugees such as those described by the itinerant weaver [i.e., Abraham Shamsolo] led to the establishment of social and economic relationships that became the building blocks of new Jewish congregations. These first steps toward political organization in the Sephardic Diaspora were haphazard and extremely tenuous . . . the majority pursued associations that promised short-term personal benefit and required the minimum of personal commitment.  

The quotation above presents an emerging Ottoman Sephardic society essentially different than its medieval predecessor. However, Ray proceeds to accept the dominant scholarly assertion concerning the quick recuperation of established medieval social norms. This notion is apparent in Ray’s adoption of Hacker’s thesis concerning the speedy revival of medieval Sephardic elites. Hacker’s assertion relies on an analysis of a sermon by Abraham Shamsolo describing the predicaments of the expellees in the Balkans.  

Ray asserts that “[i]n time, our chronicler [i.e., Shamsolo] noted, the need for social hierarchy reasserted itself. The refugees overcame the initial state of social chaos that had prevailed in the first years of resettlement, and they once again began to consider matters of status and lineage in marital alliances and communal organization.”  

Ray’s analysis presents two issues. First, Shamsolo never notes that “the need for social hierarchy reasserted itself.” Nor does Shamsolo assert that the makeshift society of the expellees lasted only during the “first years of resettlement.” However, both assertions are congruent with Hacker’s analysis of the sermon. Ray’s argument clearly shows that the quick recuperation paradigm still serves as a dominant lens through which scholarship examines Iberian Jewry’s first decades in exile.

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254 The sermon is further examined in Chapter 11.
The experience of the expellees in North Africa provides scholars with additional evidence to support the quick recuperation thesis. For example, Ray argued that “[i]n most Mediterranean cities, those refugees who had retained a measure of their economic clout or connections to the seat of Muslim or Christian authority began to reassert themselves as communal leaders.”\textsuperscript{256} Ray points our attention specifically to the Maghreb where:

\begin{quote}
[d]ocuments attest to the existence of strong Jewish clans such as those of the Benzammero, Adibe, Rute, and Peres families. Members of these clans assumed posts as diplomats and translators for their new Muslim or Christian lords, and as a result were awarded positions of leadership over the local Jewish communities.\textsuperscript{257}
\end{quote}

This and similar observations by Ray and others is accurate as we hear of several expellees who were instrumental in Christian or Muslim political, military, and commercial efforts in the region. However, a close examination of the evidence shows that the recuperation of the Sephardic elite in North Africa took place about a generation after the expulsion.

For example, the Benzammero family came to prominence when they aided the defenders of the western Moroccan port town of Safi to end a siege in the year 1510. Official documents of 1513 from Safi mention Musa Dardeiro as an official interpreter for the governor. Jacob Rute held the position of an interpreter for the governor in Safi in 1523. The Adibe family played a central role in the Moroccan town of Azzemour, where in 1514 Yahya Adibe assumed the position of the official translator.\textsuperscript{258} It could be argued, therefore, that the recuperation period was short for some elite families. However, even

\begin{footnotes}
\item[256] Ibid., 89.
\item[257] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
for these families, this period was not a brief hiatus, and they seem to have suffered many years of continued uncertainty with the rest of the expellees.

The quick recuperation thesis is even more problematic when considering the entirety of the expellees rather than the elites alone. As stated above, the recuperation of the general body of expellees was much slower. Consider, for example, the report by Moses ben Mordecai Basola (1480–1560), an Italian rabbi from Pesaro. In 1521 Basola sailed to the Land of Israel where he spent a year and a half traveling throughout the land. Basola wrote a travel book titled *Sefer masaot* where he wrote the following: “[H]e who has no capital to invest in trade must be a craftsman. . . . One cannot expect to hire himself out as a teacher or as a house servant or shop assistant. Nor can one live at public expense, for the poor are many. Therefore, he who possesses neither craft nor funds should not leave Italy, lest he regret his actions and return.”

Basola’s report shows that in the Land of Israel of 1520, the few recuperated lay elite families led an extremely polarized community comprised of a majority of impoverished people. We also learn that local Jews worked as traders or artisans. Basola notes the absence of a market for non-essential services such as teachers, house servants, or shop assistants. These conditions suggest that the community did not have sufficient means to invest in social welfare. Consequently, the untrained and impoverished incoming Jew could not expect to “live at public expense.”

Scholars argue that the recuperation of the Iberian expellees was not only quick but also unexpectedly successful. The expellees’ Sephardic culture and liturgy soon replaced indigenous customs and became synonymous with Ottoman Judaism. According

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to Joseph Kaplan, for example, “members of the Sephardi diaspora succeeded, in a relatively short period, to recuperate from the hard blow and to renew in their new dwelling place the Spanish Jewish tradition.”\textsuperscript{260} In this narrative, the second half of the sixteenth century is a time of recuperation from destruction, loss, and despair. Mainstream scholarship often argues that only in this latter period can we discern characteristic Ottoman Jewish sociocultural, economic, and religious trends. However, by adopting this narrative, we fail to see that the first half of the century had a clear, governing logic, that it was a discernible and autonomous period in Ottoman Sephardic history, and that rather than a passive hurdle to be overcome, it had a profound effect on the trajectory of early modern Jewish history.

A particular case of the Sephardim’s fast-recovery narrative, namely, their involvement in the Ottoman, European, and world economies further demonstrates the bias of the narrative and the benefit in examining the period from a sociocultural perspective. The fast-recovery narrative posits that the expellees soon became key players in the Ottoman economy and a major catalyst for its unusual success. Avigdor Levy, for example, argues that:

[B]y the mid-sixteenth century, Jews had become so prominent in the Ottoman economy that to Pierre Bellon de Mans it appeared that they “have taken over the traffic and commerce of Turkey to such an extent that the Turk’s wealth and revenue is in their hands.” While the statement may be exaggerated, it probably is a reflection of the important role that the Jews had assumed in the development of the Ottoman economy and their ability to capture, in the process, a disproportionate share of it.\textsuperscript{261}

I do not question the economic success and dominance of some Ottoman Jews. However, I would like to shed a different light on this narrative by posing three questions: (1) Was

\textsuperscript{260} Porter and Harel-Ḥoshen, Odyssey of the Exiles, 45.
\textsuperscript{261} Levy, Jews of the Ottoman Empire, 27.
this commercial success shared by the entire or even a majority of the community or only by a select few? (2) Was this economic success a result of the efforts of the 1492 expellees or of the arrival of propertied Portuguese merchants, bankers, and traders after the establishment of the Portuguese national inquisition in 1536? (3) Did this later success cancel two generations of crises? Did it simply undo the impression left on the Sephardic social structure and imagination during the preceding difficult period?

Answering the first question is difficult because the hard evidence, as scholars have noted, is too scarce to evaluate Ottoman Jewry’s level of recuperation as well as the length of the recuperation process. However, some of the available evidence is quite incongruent with the scenario of a fast recovery. For example, above I presented Basola’s report concerning the Land of Israel and the evidence concerning elite families in North Africa. In addition, scholars show that at the end of the sixteenth century in the Sephardic community of Bursa, one of the well-off communities of that period, 21 percent of the community was in the lowest tax bracket, 31 percent in the middle bracket, and 48 percent in the top bracket. Information from the early seventeenth century shows that in one of Istanbul’s wealthiest Sephardic communities (Gerush) 43 percent of the community was in the lowest tax bracket. The evidence exposes polarized communities with a significant majority of poor people even in some of the strongest communities.

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262 As a side note and with regard to the implied connection between social organization in 16th- and 21st-century Jewish communities in my Introduction, it is interesting to note that in the socially polarized Israel of 2013, the government points toward the improving economy as a mark of a robust society. However, much like the case of 16th-century Ottoman Jewry, in contemporary Israel the growing national economy means that those that did well, do better, and those that did not, do worse.


Therefore, it seems that the recuperation narrative reflects the experience of a minority of lay elite rather than of the majority of the Ottoman Sephardic community.

Regarding the second question, I argue in Part III of the dissertation that the arrival of propertied Portuguese conversos in the Ottoman Empire created a thin layer of propertied elite rather than producing a recuperation of the expulsion generation and, consequently, their arrival generated social polarization. Therefore, the early sixteenth century cannot be presented as a period of a gradual process of recuperation—an age of victory against all odds—during which the expellees pulled themselves up by their bootstraps. Rather, this was a harsh period, marked by endurance and real engagement with difficult contingencies.

Regarding the third question, the cultural production during this period and the traditions it gave birth to were central in the development of early modern Jewry. Namely, I refer to the egalitarian social imagination that is expressed in the kabbalistic discourses of the expulsion generation. These discourses were one of the main reasons for the success of the seventeenth-century Sabbatian movement. Therefore, we cannot consider the first half of the sixteenth century as a simple hurdle that the expellees overcame, but rather we must acknowledge its enduring influence on Jewish history.

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265 For more on the social context during the second half of the 16th century, see Chapter 11.
266 See Chapter 10.
267 The interesting question is, of course, the reason for this bias; and the Zionist context of this post-Holocaust scholarly discourse is unmistakable. Was this a Zionist reading of the expulsion story? Perhaps. In n169 I refer the reader to several sources discussing a possible effect of Scholem’s Zionism on his scholarship. However, it is not my intention to pursue this fascinating historical phenomenon any further in this dissertation.
The Derivative Bias: Ottoman Jewry as a Derivative of Its Host Culture

This bias presents Jewish history as a derivative of its host culture. A particular example of this bias is worth mentioning. Jonathan Israel’s work had a profound effect on the scholarship of Jewish early modernity. In his *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism 1550–1750*, Israel was the first to offer a comprehensive review of Jewish early modernity and to clearly argue that this was a unique period in Jewish history. Israel argues that external factors shared with the Christian host culture (i.e., mercantilism and a revolution in European thought) shaped early modern Jewry: “[I]t was inevitable that . . . Jews collectively, should in some measure be dragged into an intellectual arena which was rapidly transforming and secularizing European civilization.”268 Once they were integrated into early modern Europe, argues Israel, the Jews dramatically affected Europe’s economy. The prime mover of this process and, therefore, the active force that shaped early modern Jewry was an intellectual movement in Europe. It is easy to see how in this context, the sociocultural history of Ottoman Jewry is of marginal significance.

The view that Jewish history is a derivative of its host culture influences Israel’s analysis of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century in addition to his interpretation of the second half of the century. Consider, for example, the following quotation: “As a result of oppressive actions and expulsions during the fifteenth century and the first half of the sixteenth century, the Jewish presence in western and central Europe disappeared almost

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268. “During the early modern era, Jews contributed mightily to both the economic and intellectual spheres. Jews living in relatively open cultural spaces such as Venice, Amsterdam, and Prague were in turn intellectually alive and creative because of their intense interactions with the outside world. With their growing isolation and intellectual Stagnation [sic] in the early eighteenth century, as Israel saw it, their dialogue with, and contribution to, the intellectual life of Europe declined, just as their financial and commercial significance to the mercantilist governments of Europe also diminished.” Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry*, 211.
entirely. . . . [F]rom 1570 appears a different trend in a direction of reintegration. . . . [A]s a result of new treatises, rights, and charters the Jews were instantaneously freed from old restrictions. . . . [A]s a result their influence on the west was very well felt.”269 The first half of the sixteenth century, therefore, is a time of oppression and decay, of banishment from the Western world in general and its economy in particular. Only a reintroduction to both spheres “freed” the passive Jews from their predicament. This is a problematic assertion because it assumes that Jewish history matters only when it resides in the Western intellectual and economic realm. In addition, it assumes very little agency on the part of, or the ability of, the Jews to change anything within the internal Jewish sphere.270 The only revolutionary force is the West and the Western economy; only this power is able to free the Jews. In this context, a thesis that claims that the general body of Ottoman Sephardim actively addressed their diasporic predicament is unlikely. Thus, once again, a historian’s methodology blocked an important path of investigation that could have led to a more nuanced understanding of the essence of the period.

In this section I showed how different scholarly discourses that directly address this period distort its image. Some scholars did not examine the period at all but instead began their examination at the midpoint of the sixteenth century. Others did not focus on the period itself but rather used it as a means of contextualizing later phenomena. Some

270 In this context it is important to note the considerable historiography on the increased internal autonomy and creativity brought about by the enclosure of Jews in early modern Europe. For example, see Stefanie B. Siegmund, *The Medici State and the Ghetto of Florence: The Construction of an Early Modern Jewish Community* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006); for Venice, see David Malkiel, *A Separate Republic: The Mechanics and Dynamics of Venetian Self-Government, 1607–1624* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1991); and see Kenneth Stow, *Theater of Acculturation: The Roman Ghetto in the Sixteenth Century* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2001) for a similar situation in Rome.
examined particular ethnicities, geographical areas, or social strata and applied their findings to the entire population of early modern Jewry. Others considered key developments in contemporary Jewish history to be derivative of trends located in the host culture. The goal of my criticism, however, is not to discredit any of the models mentioned above. These models are tools and when used properly produce excellent results. Rather, I argue that we will gain additional insights regarding this formative stage in Jewish history if we approach it as a unique period during which various social classes within the Jewish community acted as agents of change and addressed their predicaments on their own terms.
Part II: Ottoman Sephardic Logic of Levirate Marriage

Chapter 4

Biblical and Rabbinic Interpretations of Levirate Marriage

The dissertation contextualizes the hybrid offspring phenomenon through an exploration of Ottoman Sephardic interpretations of *yibbum*. Both phenomena share several characteristics. Admonitions regarding wasteful emission and the subsequent creation of hybrid offspring, for example, were often located within discussions about levirate marriage. Sharing both the chronological and geographic markers of the late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Sephardic Ottoman world, popular attitudes toward hybrid offspring and levirate marriage sought to restructure the relationship between God and his people (the supernatural and the natural) in a way that assigned greater agency to mankind.

After a century marked by expulsion, mass conversions, and persecution, the Ottoman Sephardim elevated Jewish lineages as the centrifugal force of their imagined communal identity. The tenets of earlier cultural formation, which I describe later, became impossible or obsolete among the multiethnic, often impoverished, displaced Ottoman Jewry. The mutually constitutive phenomena of levirate marriage and the avoidance of hybrid offspring discussed in Torah commentaries and responsa literature, I argue, were products of a historical moment, namely the demise of the Sephardic medieval communal identity and its early modern Ottoman incarnation. The uprooted

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271 The commandment assumes a bond exists between the widow and her brother-in-law, yet the couple may choose whether to actualize it or not. I refer to the commandment as levirate marriage, to the choice to go ahead and actualize the bond as *yibbum* (the Hebrew term for levirate marriage), and to levirate divorce as *halitsa* (a Hebrew term, lit., “un-shoeing,” referring to the un-shoeing of the levir’s sandal during the divorce ritual).
Sephardim sought stability and empowerment by way of safeguarding the integrity of their demographic structure through sophisticated yet often contradictory religious and practical commitments to familial and thus cultural reproduction.

Although there are several explanations for the Ottoman Sephardic choice to reconstitute their identity by emphasizing their lineages’ integrity, in the current part I examine only the explanations that relate directly to levirate marriage. Levirate marriage in the Ottoman Sephardi world epitomized the population’s concern with the material and immaterial, that is, the economic and spiritual well-being of their community. In their eyes, levirate marriage protected Sephardic families from further fragmentation by ensuring the post-mortem well-being of the deceased, maintaining patrilineal wealth, and elevating the status of the Ottoman Sephardic woman as a broker for the replication of her husband’s soul on earth. However, what I wish to emphasize in this part is that although all of these were important goals of the levirate marriage discourse, they ultimately served a higher purpose, namely to safeguard the expellees’ imagined communal identity by sustaining continuous viable lineages.

In this dissertation, I argue that there are several causes for the distinctive characteristics of the Ottoman Sephardic levirate marriage discourse. While there was obviously a desire to reconstruct Ottoman Sephardic communal identity around the blood lineage, as mentioned above, this process was undertaken in the context of a multiethnic amalgam of displaced communities lacking a dominant congregation, and under the relatively indifferent colonial gaze of Ottoman governance, at least when compared to the Sephardic experiences in the Iberian peninsula only decades before.
Three empirical questions direct this part’s five chapters: (1) Were Ottoman Sephardim inclined to perform or avoid the commandment of levirate marriage? Was *yibbum* perceived as useful in cultivating a viable community or was it avoided whenever possible? (2) How did the Ottoman Sephardim understand the commandment’s purpose and logic? In other words, was *yibbum* meant to commemorate the childless man or recreate his existence? (3) Lastly, what was the logic that governed the contemporary understanding of *halitsa* (levirate divorce), a ritual releasing the widow from the levirate tie. The answers to these questions present a unique Ottoman Sephardic interpretation of levirate marriage that emphasized the commandment’s importance for maintaining the continuous existence of the embodied lineage and Jewish demographic structure.

Before discussing the details of the Ottoman Sephardic logic of levirate marriage, I present the biblical and rabbinic interpretations of the commandment. This context enables an understanding of the novelty and liberty with which late medieval and Ottoman Sephardic thinkers shaped a unique interpretation of these practices while remaining in touch with existing sources and traditions.

First, I clarify my use of the term “Ottoman Sephardic” in the following chapters. The period is one of transition. The majority of the Ottoman Sephardim at the turn of the sixteenth century were not born into, but rather assumed, their identity. The traditions that they brought with them, including those that comprised their interpretation of *yibbum*, were not “Ottoman” in the sense that these Sephardim were not born in the Ottoman Empire. Similarly, some of the sources that I present below are not “Ottoman” per se, but rather were authored in the years preceding the expulsion. I classify these sources as Ottoman Sephardic because they were adopted by Ottoman Sephardim and were
influential in shaping the nascent Ottoman Sephardic yibbum discourse and communal identity and, thus, they are a means of better understanding Ottoman Sephardic Jewry.

**Levirate Marriage in the Bible**

Although the biblical discourse about levirate marriage is generally positive, references to the practice are scattered throughout the different books, with little continuous commentary or appraisal in any single excerpt. In general, levirate marriage is understood to ensure the survival of the blood lineage of a propertied male heir. Because a propertied heir and his viable lineage were the basic building blocks of a tribal communal structure, the biblical texts emphasize the importance of the survival of a propertied heir above all else.

When brothers dwell together and one of them dies and leaves no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married to a stranger, outside the family. Her husband’s brother shall unite with her: he shall take her as his wife and perform the levir’s duty. The first son that she bears shall be accounted to the dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out in Israel. (Deut. 25:5–6)

Here, Deuteronomy 25 presents the most basic characteristics of yibbum: an obligation of the childless man’s brother to marry the widow and father a child. However, Deuteronomy 25 leaves several questions unanswered. For example, what is meant by the brothers’ shared dwelling? Does it refer to shared property, an actual shared domicile, or simply living in proximity to each other? Further, the meaning of the firstborn’s continuation of the lineage’s “name” is also a topic of debate. Could the levir’s daughters or additional sons perform the same role? Do they belong to the dead husband’s “name” or to the levir’s? In the end, all that can be said with certainty is that the levir was...

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272 Unless noted, all biblical translations are from the *JPS Tanakh* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).
expected to marry the widow and father an offspring. It is precisely the vagueness of the passages that allowed for so many different interpretations. For the purposes of this section, however, only the clearest commandment of biblical yibbum (i.e., fathering a male heir) will be discussed.

In Genesis 38, the story of Judah, his sons, Er and Onan, and his daughter-in-law Tamar exemplify the centrality of marrying the widow and fathering an offspring.

Then Judah said to Onan, “Join with your brother’s wife and do your duty by her as a brother-in-law, and provide offspring for your brother. But Onan, knowing that the seed would not count as his, let it go to waste whenever he joined with his brother’s wife, so as not to provide offspring for his brother. What he did was displeasing to the LORD, and He took his life also. (Gen. 38:8–10)

Although Onan does not mind marrying his brother’s widow, he refuses to impregnate her and produce his brother’s son, knowing that “the seed will not be his.” Here, God’s displeasure with Onan is so great that it warranted having him killed. In this example, marriage is not enough for a completion of levirate marriage if it does not result in an offspring. Much like Deuteronomy 25, however, Genesis 38 does not clearly state the purpose of yibbum or the exact reason for Onan’s refusal to “raise up [his brother’s] seed.” What is the meaning of raising a seed? Was it an act of commemoration through an inheritor of the family name or perhaps simply the economic concern of keeping the father’s property in his family’s line, thus necessitating an inheritor of his possessions? Was Onan adamant against assisting his brother, respecting his father’s wish, and following God’s commandment because he was concerned with his own commemoration? Or did he know it would have effectively diminished his own offspring’s share of their inheritance? Evidence from the Book of Ruth suggests that the latter was likely the case. The unnamed levir in Ruth 4 clearly states that a concern with
his own estate prevented him from marrying Ruth. When introducing the levir with the opportunity to marry Ruth, Boaz states he will “raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance,” directly associating lineage and property as the commandment’s logic.273

Genesis, Deuteronomy, and Ruth each present different views about the purpose of levirate marriage, even though they all clearly define the levir’s responsibility (marrying the widow) and the desired outcome (an offspring). As hinted in the sources above, marrying the widow and fathering a child had to be accompanied by supplying the newborn with sufficient property. In this sense, the biblical texts are concerned with the survival of a patrilineal and patrilocal society, an establishment dependent on a propertied male heir. This concern is also present in biblical texts and customs that are not directly related to the levirate marriage discourse. In Numbers 27:2–7, for example, the daughters of Zelophehad:

stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the chieftains, and the whole assembly at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and they said, “Our father died in the wilderness . . . [he] died for his own sin; and he has left no sons. Let not our father’s name be lost to his clan just because he had no son! Give us a holding among our father’s kinsmen. Moses brought their case before the LORD. And the LORD said to Moses, “The plea of Zelophehad’s daughters is just: you should give them a hereditary holding among their father’s kinsmen: transfer their father’s share to them.

Although the reconstitution of a patrilineal and patrilocal lineage does not require the presence of the pater himself (Zelophehad), it does require fathering a replacement pater, a male offspring. This case also shows that though the temporary absence of a father or a male heir is acceptable, a lineage cannot survive without continuous property ownership.

273 Later in this chapter I discuss the opinion of several historians of Ottoman Jewry who view the unique Ottoman Sephardic concept of levirate marriage as a result of a concern with maintaining the husband’s material possessions in his family line. I argue that in the kabbalistic interpretations of yibbum, “inheritance” is understood as the body of the levirate offspring. Thus, raising a name unto one’s inheritance is understood as inserting a childless man’s soul into the levirate offspring’s body. See below in Chapter 5.
The case of Zelophehad’s daughters shows how the Bible also offers means other than yibbum to perpetuate one’s lineage. This is further apparent in Genesis 25, when Isaac resorts to prayer, and in Genesis 16, when Abram and Sarai prefer surrogacy through Hagar. The Bible presents offspring and property as essential elements for a viable lineage, consistently addressing the childless or the impoverished dead as possible threats to the lineages, which are considered to be the basic building blocks of a tribal communal structure. Although it leaves unanswered a variety of questions about the commandment’s particular details, it is clear that the Bible’s yibbum discourse is one of many strategies meant to counter poverty and childlessness. Consistent in each strategy is the biblical focus on the survival of a propertied male heir.

**Rabbinic Interpretations of Levirate Marriage**

Compared to the sparse biblical treatment of yibbum, rabbinic texts deal with the subject at length, constituting almost the entirety of one of the Mishnah’s tractates (Yevamot). While the biblical discourse framed yibbum as a desired reaction to the death of a childless man, the rabbinic discourse treated the practice of yibbum as a potential host of problems that should be contained and defused rather than fostered and promoted. Rabbinic interpretations of levirate marriage focus on answering two questions: (1) Does the context of the childless man’s death legitimate levirate marriage as a response? (2) If yibbum is indeed deemed legitimate, how should the couple go about realizing the commandment?

The rabbinic model assumes the levir’s commitment to the widow only under specific conditions, which are absent in the biblical yibbum discourse. Among these
conditions are: a presupposition that the widow and the levir are able to procreate and that they are not in violation of moral codes such as consanguinity,²⁷⁴ rulings of the scribes,²⁷⁵ or restrictions on a priest’s possible spouse.²⁷⁶ After the legitimacy of levirate marriage is determined, rabbinic discussion turns to how to properly realize the potential bond. Several trends emphasize the unique nature of the rabbinic idea of yibbum; however, some conditions favored the biblical interpretation. Echoing the biblical concern with producing an offspring, the rabbinic texts suggest that one should wait three months before actualizing the yibbum bond to be sure that the widow was not already pregnant with the dead brother’s child, which would thus render the entire enterprise unnecessary.²⁷⁷

This concern with procreation is also apparent in the rabbinic tradition considering sexual intercourse as the act that finalizes the process of levirate marriage.²⁷⁸ Another biblical trend apparent in the rabbinic texts is a concern with maintaining the husband’s property in the paternal family line. During the interim period between the husband’s death and before the levirate marriage, the widow was considered, much like Zelophehad’s daughters, to be a liminal figure, a propertied embodied representative of a lineage whose special status is extensively debated in rabbinic sources.²⁷⁹ Another example of this rabbinic concern is the case of levirate divorce; in such a case, the

²⁷⁴ E.g., see Jerusalem Talmud, Yevamot 2:3.
²⁷⁵ E.g., see ibid. 2:4.
²⁷⁶ Ibid. For more information on these restrictions, see Dvora E. Weisberg, Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism, 1st ed., HBI Series on Jewish Women (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2009).
²⁷⁷ Jerusalem Talmud, Yevamot 4:10.
²⁷⁸ Ibid., 6:1.
²⁷⁹ Ibid., 4:3.
widow’s marriage portion is paid from the dead husband’s inheritance rather than the levir’s.\textsuperscript{280}

Rabbinic discourses about levirate marriage differ from their biblical predecessors in one critical way: the basic assumption that levirate marriage should be avoided as often as possible. In addition to placing their own conditions on the legitimacy of the levirate bond mentioned above, the rabbinic texts offer additional loopholes to avoid actualizing the bond. For example, if a husband leaves behind multiple wives, they are treated as one unit so if one of the women is ineligible for levirate marriage, no one within the cohort can marry the levir. Other rabbinic texts require that the widow consents to \textit{halitsa} for it to be legitimate, adding yet another path to untie the levirate bond.\textsuperscript{281} Limiting the pool of possible levirs was another way the rabbinic texts enabled the avoidance of levirate marriage. For example, whereas Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth and both suggest that the parent or unnamed male relative are all eligible levirs, rabbinic texts strictly limit the pool of levirs to brothers born before the husband’s death.\textsuperscript{282}

Biblical discourse on levirate marriage aimed to satisfy the needs of the dead and the extended family, while rabbinic sources tried to accommodate the concerns of the surviving individuals who would be affected by the union: the levir, the widow, and the levir’s wife. In the biblical sources, a deceased husband’s authority over his wife extends between this world so whether a widow should marry the levir or not depends on whether the outcome would benefit the deceased. Surviving family members are also in the

\textsuperscript{280} Ibid., 4:7.
\textsuperscript{281} See, e.g., Babylonian Talmud, \textit{Yevamot} 106a. For more on this issue, see Weisberg, \textit{Levirate Marriage}, 135–36.
\textsuperscript{282} Jerusalem Talmud, \textit{Yevamot} 2:5–6.
service of the deceased, evident in how the chosen levirs are held responsible for providing the deceased with an offspring, a name, and a way to reconstitute his lineage.

The difference between the rabbinic and the biblical attitudes toward yibbum may be explained by the fact that the idealized rabbinic family is nuclear rather than an extended tribal one. In the biblical model, a household is a patrilocal extended family, led by the oldest male, where adult sons share the occupation of their father and where women join the household of the men they have married. In the rabbinic case, a head of the household could potentially be any married man. For the biblical sources, levirate marriage was a means to regulate and ensure the integrity of relationships between relatives living together in extended, agrarian households. Levirate marriage allowed the household to keep its property intact by preventing the widow from inheriting her husband’s property but instead passing the inheritance to another male family member: the levir.

With the Jewish man rather than the Jewish head of household in mind, rabbinic levirate policies contained a series of qualifications serving his interests. As stated above, the rabbis made levirate marriage a normative marriage that included a mandatory waiting period, which would have been required of any widow or divorced woman. In addition, rabbinic texts gave the deceased’s possessions to the levir, so he could divide them among all of his offspring, rather than exclusively to those born unto his brother’s widow. The rabbinic levirate discourse also assigns importance to the widow’s will, granting her a higher level of agency (even if it is at her financial expense). An additional

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transition in the rabbinic treatment of the commandment concerns where authority and legitimacy are concentrated. In the biblical sources, authority and legitimacy are attributed to the extended family; whereas, in rabbinic sources, the sages are the arbiters and conductors of the yibbum procedures; the authority of the tribal household was replaced by the authority of the rabbis.

Scholars offer several explanations as to why the rabbinic interpretation of yibbum came into favor. One argument is that the basic building block for identity became the nuclear rather than the extended family. During the monarchic age of the Israelite religion, centralized institutions such as the monarchy itself and the priesthood began to occupy the role that the extended family previously held in Jewish identity formation. The rise of rabbinic influence after the destruction of the second temple is another factor responsible for this shift in that the rabbis co-opted the family by turning it into a space of sanctity and religious ritual under their authority.

The increased urbanization of contemporary Jewish communities and the demise of an essentially tribal and agrarian interpretation of the biblical texts are other possible explanations. Urbanization led sons to live farther away from their parents, creating changes in patterns of residence and weakening the authority of the head of the household. As the argument goes, rabbinic law acknowledged the nuclear family’s ties to the extended family, but focused primarily on the head of household, his wife, and their sons. In the typical extended family of an agrarian society, ancestral land was passed from one generation to another. With increased urbanization, both small farm owners and urban rabbinic Judaism as a doctrine understood that new types of property inheritance did not necessitate patrilineal inheritance.
Although the reason for a changing perception of levirate marriage between the biblical and rabbinic discourses is important, for this chapter the most important difference between the rabbinic and biblical logic of levirate marriage is that medieval and late medieval Jewry could choose between two interpretive traditions, as they were no longer passive subjects to an absolute doctrine.

**Yibbum or Halitsa? Biblical, Rabbinic, Medieval, and Early Modern Answers**

Whether one must fulfill the commandment of levirate marriage (yibbum) was debatable from its first appearance in the Jewish textual tradition because the Torah also offered the ritual of levirate divorce (halitsa) as an alternative. This section answers the following question: In the early modern Jewish world, who preferred yibbum over halitsa and why? The short answer is: whereas early modern Sephardim preferred yibbum, the Ashkenazim preferred halitsa. However, an exploration of the logic governing these decisions reveals the basis of communal identity formation among the Ottoman Sephardim. I argue that the preference for yibbum among the Sephardim is based upon the great importance they placed on physical lineage, whereas the Ashkenazim focused mostly on the preservation of nominal lineage upon the death of a childless male.

To highlight the unique character of the Ottoman Sephardic preference of yibbum over halitsa, one must first explore the relevant biblical and rabbinic discussions of the same question. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, biblical and rabbinic discourses offer a variety of traditions, arguments, and evidence either to support or oppose yibbum, often on contradictory grounds. The biblical sources and textual foundations for later discussions of the alternative ritual of levirate divorce (halitsa) are no less varied or
complex. Deuteronomy 25:7–10, for example, offers the first biblical evidence for halitsa:

But if the man does not want to marry his brother’s widow, his brother’s widow shall appear before the elders in the gate and declare, “My husband’s brother refuses to establish a name in Israel for his brother; he will not perform the duty of a levir.” The elders of his town shall then summon him and talk to him. If he insists, saying, “I do not want to marry her,” his brother’s widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, pull the sandal off his foot, spit in his face, and make this declaration: Thus shall be done to the man who will not build up his brother’s house! And he shall go in Israel by the name of the “family of the unsandaled one.”

Although Talmudic, as well as many medieval, thinkers considered halitsa to be a preferable alternative to yibbum, it is clear this was not the opinion of the biblical text. In Deuteronomy, halitsa is meant to enable levirate marriage by coercing a reluctant levir into compliance through the threat of symbolic and public emasculation. During the halitsa ritual, gender roles are reversed as the passive, silent levir is manipulated by the active, vocal widow. The widow’s demand is joined by the elders of the community who “call him and speak unto him” because of his refusal to levirate and in attempt to persuade him to reconsider. If the levir persists in his refusal, he is shamed in a public ritual held in front of the city’s elders where the widow unshoes and spits in the levir’s face at the city gate. Not only is the levir shamed, but his entire household is declared “the house of him that hath his shoe loosed.”

The biblical logic of halitsa, meant to pressure a reluctant levir to realize the levirate bond and levirate the widow, did not serve the Talmudic sages. Because they preferred halitsa to yibbum, the sages managed to harness the biblical discourse to support their view of levirate marriage by relocating the focus from the coercion of the levir to the conditions that would be required for legitimate yibbum to occur. The
Talmudic sages assumed that the commandment’s influence is negative, and, therefore, its realization should be avoided, shifting the discussion from “how” to “when” or more often “when not,” thus placing conditions on the commandment’s realization and enabling its avoidance.

One of the potential problems associated with the ritual, which the sages tried to avoid, was the exact point that the biblical text marked as its tactical goal: the shaming of the reluctant levir. This tendency is clearly apparent in the following quotation from the Mishnah, tractate Yevamot, in which the sages debate whether all three elements comprising the halitza ritual (removal of the sandal, spitting at the levir, and a recitation of the widow’s script) were indeed essential to deem a ritual legitimate:

If she removes [the sandal] and spits, but does not recite, her halitza is valid. If she recites and spits, but does not remove, her halitza is invalid. If she removes and recites, but does not spit, R. Eliezer says, “Her halitza is invalid.” R. Akiba says, “Her halitza is valid.”

This quotation makes it clear that the recitation of the widow’s script and the subsequent shaming of the levir are completely unnecessary, whereas the removal of the sandal is completely necessary for a legitimate halitza. The necessity of spitting is also a matter of debate, and its absence does not necessarily constitute an unrecognized halitza. By focusing on the removal of the sandal alone, the purpose of the rabbinic sages is not to shame the levir into submission but to eliminate or minimize the shaming involved in halitza. Through their treatment of halitza, rabbinic discourses appear to have designed the ritual to defuse what they saw as the negative effects of the sacred tradition of yibbum rather than securing its fulfillment.
The sages’ conversation with the reluctant levir presents a similar concern with his well-being rather than the successful execution of the commandment. If in the biblical text it is clear that the sages’ expectation from the conversation is to persuade the levir to marry the widow, the rabbinic sages “offer him [the levir] advice that is suitable for him.”284 The biblical coercion of the levir, which placed the widow and the preservation of the lineage at the center of the ritual, becomes, through the rabbinic discourses, a consultation meant to resolve the levir’s problem (i.e., the need to perform levirate marriage) in a way that will best suit him. The focus shifts from the dead to the living brother, from the lost lineage to the existing nuclear family. The rabbinic discussion regarding the nature of the advice that is most “suitable for him [the levir]” is another discourse that revolves around the needs of the living nuclear family rather than the dead man and his lineage. For example, the Talmud states the following: “If he was young and she was old, or if he was old and she was young, he is told ‘What business have you with this young woman?’ or ‘What business have you with this old woman?’ Go to one who [is of the same age] as yourself, and introduce no quarrels into your home.”285

The willingness of the sages to trick a levir determined to actualize the levirate bond into halitsa is another manifestation of their negative attitude toward yibbum. In return for halitsa, for example, the rabbis suggest that the widow might offer the levir a payment though she would not actually be obligated to pay. She may also inform the levir that for a proper marriage to take place—an act the rabbis have no intention of

285 Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot, 101b.
supporting—he must first participate in a halitsa ritual. These sources show a dramatic shift in the perception of the reluctant levir in the rabbinic tradition, where the reluctant biblical levir, adamant on not marrying the widow and raising his brother’s seed, is replaced in the rabbinic sources by his complete opposite, a levir insisting on marrying the widow in order to fulfill the levirate commitment. The normative biblical levir was expected to actualize the bond, the exact position that earned his Talmudic counterpart the contempt of the sages.

Although a number of variations on the biblical and the rabbinic approaches existed (e.g., a rabbinic tendency to allow yibbum if the couple freely wished to marry), generally speaking the two traditions constituted two distinct attitudes to levirate marriage that medieval Jewries adopted and adapted according to their needs. The expulsion generation, therefore, operated in a theological context that offered two strong interpretative traditions concerning the optimal resolution for the levirate bond. However, the existence of two traditions did not generate two ethnic camps with clearly defined positions regarding levirate marriage as some scholars and early modern sages argued.

On one side of the dividing line, so the argument goes, were the Sephardim who were categorically in favor of yibbum. On the other side stood the Ashkenazim for whom halitsa was the only acceptable resolution. Such a dichotomy does not do justice to the medieval evidence. Indeed, medieval Ashkenazim and Sephardim leaned toward the absolute positions associated with them by later sources. However, their positions were far from being homogenous or exclusive. Ashkenazim and Sephardim were closest to

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286 See, e.g., Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot, 106a, and Jerusalem Talmud, Yevamot, 12:6. For more information, see Weisberg, *Levirate Marriage*, 156–57.
having categorical positions in later periods, namely, in the fourteenth century for the Ashkenazim and during the time of the expulsion generation for the Sephardim. Therefore, we must understand the emerging Ottoman Sephardic categorical position as an independent choice rather than a continuation of a traditional Sephardic notion.

Much like their predecessors, medieval Ashkenazic sages debated a series of questions concerning the proper exegesis of levirate marriage: Is polygamy acceptable in the context of yibbum? Can the levir and a widow marry if both wish to do so in spite of the general Ashkenazic preference for halitsa? If polygamy is forbidden, can a married levir marry the widow in a case where his wife dies in the time that passes between the brother’s death and halitsa is performed? Should the widow receive a dowry in a case where she refuses to marry the levir? Should the levir be forced to perform halitsa in a case where his motivation for performing yibbum is material gain? Although Ashkenazic rabbis differed in their answers to these questions, it was the general consensus among them that halitsa is preferable to yibbum.

The opinion of the famous medieval French rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (known as Rashi, 1040–1105) is a good starting point for demonstrating the medieval Ashkenazic preference for halitsa.287 Rashi argued that halitsa was the preferable resolution to the levirate bond and that a levir reluctant to divorce may be coerced to comply. However, Rashi asserted that yibbum is permissible, though not preferable, if the levir and the widow wish to marry.288

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287 Ephraim Kupfer, Teshuvot u-fesakim (Jerusalem: Mekitse Nirdamim, 1973), §143.
the fate of a widow’s inheritance, further demonstrate the general medieval Ashkenazic preference for *halitsa*.\(^{289}\) The decrees, dating from 1196, the 1220s, and 1381, include instructions only for cases where *halitsa* is employed to resolve the levirate bond. Therefore, it seems that the Ashkenazic regulations assume that the default resolution for the levirate bond is *halitsa* rather than *yibbum*.

Judah ben Meir was a German rabbi, Talmudic scholar, and traveler of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. Ben Meir, much like Rashi, argued that *yibbum* was permissible if both sides wished it. Katz notes the fact that Rashi, ben Meir, and other Ashkenazic rabbis debated exceptional cases in which *yibbum* was permissible, which shows that *halitsa* was the expected Ashkenazic resolution for the levirate bond. In addition, this fact shows that before the turn of the fourteenth century, the Ashkenazic attitude toward the commandment was varied rather than homogenous or categorical.\(^{290}\)

Going further than Rashi and Judah ben Meir, some Ashkenazic sages perceived *yibbum* as the optimal resolution to the levirate bond. Among these rabbis, one finds Samuel ben Meir (known as Rashbam, 1085–1158), who was a leading French rabbi and the grandson of Rashi, Isaac ben Asher from Speyer, and the French rabbi Simha of Vitry (the latter two were active at the turn of the twelfth century).\(^{291}\) In fact, in the mid-twelfth century a gathering of the rabbis of Speyer, Worms, and Mainz ruled that Rabbenu


Gershom’s (Gershom ben Judah) ban on polygamy should be removed in favor of *yibbum.*

Evidence from outside the ranks of the theologians further demonstrates that the medieval Ashkenazic preference for *halitsa* was not categorical. One example is found in the case of an Ashkenazic levir who insisted on marrying the widow although he was already married and thus forbidden from taking another wife according to Rabbenu Gershom’s ban. The levir’s persistence paid off, and the rabbis decided that the levir should not be coerced to perform *halitsa* and therefore, in effect, allowed *yibbum.*

The medieval Ashkenazic sources present various opinions concerning the preferable resolution to the levirate bond. However, by the mid-fifteenth century the norm among Ashkenazic circles was to prefer *halitsa.* Jacob Katz identified late thirteenth-century France as the time of the Ashkenazic turn to a categorical preference for *halitsa.* More specifically, Katz points to the works of the French rabbi Perez ben Elijah of Corbeil (d. 1295) and his contemporary Isaac ben Elijah. More recently, Elimelech Westreich noted that during the thirteenth century, Ashkenazic rabbis began to uphold Rabbenu Gershom’s ban and prohibit *yibbum* in cases where the levir was already married. Westreich notes that “[by] the 14th century Rosh (R. Asher b. Jehiel) ruled unequivocally that in Ashkenaz a married *yabbam* had no other option than *chalitza.*”

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295 Ibid.
Katz dated the categorical turn of the German rabbis to the late fourteenth century through the mid-fifteenth century, somewhat later than their French counterparts. The German categorical turn is evidenced in the work of Jacob ben Moses Levi Moelin (1365–1427), Israel Isserlein (1390–1460), Judah Obernik of Mestre (d. 1468), and the Polish rabbi Solomon Luria (1510–73).298

An example for the Ashkenazic categorical turn appears in Judah Obernik’s responsum sent to Moses Ashkenazi in 1466. The responsum addressed the conflict that took place in Crete over the transmigration interpretation of yibbum. Obernik writes: “I am fifty-five years old and remember three preceding generations of great sages, all of them, and their ancestors, kept yibbum far away, and it was a strange thing of great ugliness to them, so we cannot remember even one [of those sages] who had approved to levirate.”299

Much like the Ashkenazic approach, the medieval Sephardic attitude toward levirate marriage presented a mixture of Talmudic and biblical opinions. In general, the Sephardic attitude leaned toward yibbum as the preferred resolution of the levirate bond. However, it was not until the expulsion generation that Sephardim came to identify their tradition with a strong tendency to levirate. The opinions of leading medieval Sephardic rabbis demonstrate this trajectory.

The works of Isaac ben Jacob Alfasi ha-Cohen (known as Rif, 1013–1103) and Joseph ben Meir ibn Migash, (known as Ri, 1077–1141) are good stepping stones for a brief survey of the medieval Sephardic approach. Born in the Algerian city of Al Qal’a of

Beni Hammad, Alfasi was a Talmudist and posek (judge) in halakhic matters who had spent the majority of his career in Fez. In 1088 Rif left for Spain and settled in Lucena (Cordoba) where he became the head of the yeshiva. Ibn Migash was a posek and became the head of the Andalusian yeshiva in Lucena where he had studied under Alfasi.

In their responsa Alfasi and ibn Migash address the matter of a widow reluctant to marry the levir. Both sages are concerned with the sum of money that should be removed from the reluctant widow’s dowry as a penalty. Therefore, it seems that both sages preferred yibbum over halitsa as the optimal resolution of the levirate bond. Moses Maimonides (known as Rambam, 1135–1204), the preeminent medieval Sephardic philosopher, astronomer, and physician, and one of the most prolific and influential Torah scholars, shared the opinion of Alfasi and ibn Migash concerning the reluctant widow. Thus it may be argued that leading Sephardic authorities of the late eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries preferred yibbum over halitsa as the outcome of a levirate bond.

Although preferring yibbum was the rule among medieval Sephardim, there is evidence for occasional Sephardic preference for halitsa. Usually these cases involved a levir who was reluctant to perform halitsa until he was offered a monetary compensation. Other cases involved a widow uninterested in marrying the levir. One Iberian rabbi that preferred halitsa to yibbum was Isaac ben Sheshet Perfet (known as Ribash, 1326–1408).

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300 Isaac Alfasi, Hilkhot rav alfas (Vilna, 1924), 27b. Joseph ibn Migash, Teshuvot yosef ha-levi ibn megas (Warsaw, 1870), #139.
301 Maimonides addresses the case of an Egyptian levir who divorced his wife to marry the widow. Maimonides does not comment on the act directly but says that the terms of divorce, agreed upon by the couple before the formation of the levirate bond, are now invalid. Maimonides, Teshuvot ha-rambam (Jerusalem, 1957), #373.
Ben Sheshet was born in Valencia and settled in Barcelona where he studied under Rabbi Hasdai Crescas and Nissim ben Reuben Gerondi (known as Ran). He argued that it would be permissible or even preferable to perform halitsa if performing yibbum further increased the chances that a levirate union would be an ill-fated one, for example, if the levir is already married or if a significant age difference existed between the levir and the widow.

Yom Tov ben Abraham Ishbili (known as Ritba, 1250–1330) was a medieval rabbi and halakhist famous for his commentary on the Talmud. Ishbili was born in Seville, educated in the north of Spain, and became the rabbi of Saragossa. He argued that the single brother of a married levir should marry the widow. Based on this and other sources, Katz argues that in medieval Iberia it was customary to keep monogamous families even though Rabbenu Gershom’s ban did not affect this population. Therefore, the medieval Sephardic custom to prefer halitsa if the levir was already married deems their inclination to perform yibbum as a general preference rather than a categorical rule.

The evidence above shows that medieval Ashkenazic and Sephardic halakhic authorities presented a variety of opinions concerning the optimal resolution of the levirate bond. Yet most early modern rabbis and modern scholars argue that medieval Sephardim and Ashkenazim held distinct categorical opinions. However, such ethnic division did not exist before the expulsion from Spain. This fact further demonstrates the unique quality of the Ottoman Sephardic interpretation of yibbum.

303 Isaac ben Sheshet Perfet, Sheelot u-teshuvot bar sheshet (Istanbul, 1547), #320.
304 Yom Tov ben Abraham Ishbili, Shut ha-ritba (Jerusalem, 1958), #178.
By the third quarter of the fifteenth century Ashkenazic sages came to perceive the different attitudes toward the commandment as a derivative of one’s ethnic identity. The Ashkenazic rabbi Moses ha-Cohen Ashkenazi demonstrates this trend in his 1466 attack on the Sephardic interpretation of *yibbum*. Ashkenazi mentions the following as authorities in support of *yibbum*: “[the] author of the *Ma’arekhet*, and Nahmanides, and the book *Meirat Einayim*, and many of the kabbalists”; all of the authorities Ashkenazi mentions, as well as the kabbala sages, are of Sephardic origin.\(^{306}\)

The Sephardim of the expulsion generation shared their Ashkenazic brethren’s notion of an ethnic divide concerning the optimal resolution of the levirate bond. Similar to the other rabbis expelled from Iberia, Rabbi Jacob Berab (1474–1546) attributes the different attitudes toward levirate marriage as falling along different ethnic lines. Berab was born in the Iberian town of Moqueda when the process of expulsion was well underway. Berab settled in the North African town of Tlemcen where he served as a rabbi. Sometime before 1522, Berab settled in the land of Israel. While in Tlemcen, Berab wrote the following responsum regarding the precedence of *yibbum* or *halitsa*:

> The rule is that the sages of Spain such as Rif [the eleventh-century rabbi Isaac Alfasi], [and] Maimonides, of blessed memory, ruled that *yibbum* precedes [*halitsa*]. Others and the sages of France such as Rashi, the tosafists, and Ri [the twelfth-century rabbi Joseph ben Meir ibn Migash] . . . ruled that *halitsa* precedes.\(^{307}\)

If Berab wished to do so, he had ample evidence to describe the much more complicated halakhic tradition that preceded him. Therefore, the decision to contrast two groups of

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\(^{306}\) Moses ha-Cohen Ashkenazi in a letter in 1476 to Mestre and Jerusalem, Vatican ms. 254, fol. 84b in Brian Ogren, *Renaissance and Rebirth: Reincarnation in Early Modern Italian Kabbalah* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 88. For more on Ashkenazi and the historical context in which he made this comment, see Ogren, *Renaissance and Rebirth*, 22–41.

\(^{307}\) Jacob Berab, *Sheetot u-teshuvot* (Jerusalem, 1957), #59.
scholars and divide them according to their ethnicity is Berab’s alone and does not reflect the evidence itself.

Moses ben Joseph di Trani (known as Mabit, 1505–85) further demonstrates the expulsion generation’s perception of the ethnic divide concerning the interpretation of levirate marriage. Born in Salonica in 1505, di Trani, who later immigrated to the land of Israel, tells of a dispute concerning *yibbum* that took place in Jerusalem: “The Ashkenazic sages there wrote that he [the levir] should be forced [to divorce the widow]. One Sephardic sage was persuaded by the Ashkenazim, yet another disagreed with them.”

In this example, a Sephardic sage indeed preferred *halitsa* to *yibbum*. Although the example appears contradictory to an argument that *yibbum* and *halitsa* preferences fell along ethnic lines, note that di Trani took pains to mention the rabbi’s ethnicity, suggesting there were indeed different attitudes expected from Sephardic and Ashkenazic rabbis. It is also implied that it is not the natural opinion of the Sephardic rabbi to prefer *halitsa*; he had to be “persuaded” rather than reaching such a conclusion on his own.

Levi ibn Habib supplies additional evidence for the emerging ethnic divide regarding levirate marriage in the aftermath of the expulsion. Born in Zamora (Spain, 1480), ibn Habib was Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem from 1525 until his death (c. 1545). In 1497 ibn Habib was forcibly baptized in Portugal and subsequently fled to Salonika. In a responsum ibn Habib describes a case that clearly demonstrates the conflict and consequent polarization of Ashkenazic and Sephardic traditions in Salonika in 1515.

The childless deceased stated in his will what should be done with his assets, depending

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309 Levi ibn Habib, *Sefer sheelot u-teshuvot* (Lamberg, 1865), #36. The case was considered in 1515 in Salonika.
on whether his widow prefers *yibbum* or *halitsa*. Thus, the evidence shows that the interpretation of the commandment was not a strictly theoretical matter. However, things did not proceed smoothly in spite of the prearrangements of the deceased. The widow refused to marry the levir, generating a dispute concerning the fate of the inheritance. The matter was brought to rabbinic attention and evolved into a theological discussion of whether *halitsa* or *yibbum* took precedence.

The consulted rabbis offered several opinions. An Ashkenazic rabbi named David ha-Cohen from Corfu argued that the levir should be coerced to perform *halitsa*. Ibn Habib, however, supported the Sephardic tradition preferring *yibbum*. Most other sages mentioned in the responsum are somewhat undecided. One of the undecided Ashkenazic rabbis reverted to what he perceived as a long-standing ethnic division of opinions concerning the matter as a possible way out of the legal impasse. The rabbi claimed that “if the levir wishes to levirate and he aims at [performing] a commandment [i.e., his motives are pious], one does not protest [against it] . . . all the more so as you are Sephardim [who are] in the habit of levirating.” The position of the Ashkenazic sage clearly shows that the Sephardim came to be identified with a clear preference for *yibbum*.

The evidence above demonstrates that early modern Ashkenazim and Sephardim came to identify distinct ethnic approaches to levirate marriage. Scholars offer six reasons for the different and distinct early modern attitudes toward *yibbum*. One explanation assumes the moral superiority of the Ashkenazic sages. For example, Israel

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310 Berab, *Sheelot u-teshuvot*, #184; Isaac Adrabi (Salonika, 1520–84) makes a similar claim in his responsa *Divre rivot* (Venice, 1587), #13.
Abrahams, according to whom bigamy was common among the Sephardim until the fourteenth century, argues this was not the case among “the greatest Jewish authorities, the men of light and leading in the middle ages, [who] forbade bigamy under each and every circumstance [including yibbum].”\(^\text{311}\) Although the argument about the Sephardic inclination to prefer bigamy and its absolute absence in the Ashkenazic world is debatable in itself, this argument’s weakest quality is its willingness to morally judge and qualify pre-modern communities instead of making an effort to understand them.\(^\text{312}\)

A second explanation suggests that the difference emanates from an Ashkenazic allegiance to the Jerusalem Talmud and the traditions associated with the land of Israel whereas the Sephardim had a similar connection to the Babylonian Talmud and Geonim.\(^\text{313}\) Jacob Katz rejects this explanation because some medieval Sephardim clearly preferred halitsa, and some Ashkenazic sages defended their choice of yibbum.\(^\text{314}\) Therefore, Katz argues, we cannot consider the early modern attitudes toward levirate marriage as a simple continuation of ancient trends.

A third thesis suggests that the approach to polygamy dictated the attitude toward yibbum. Where polygamy was acceptable, so the argument goes, yibbum would be preferable to halitsa.\(^\text{315}\) According to this theory Rabbenu Gershom’s ban made yibbum impossible for the Ashkenazim, whereas the ban’s absence among the Sephardim allowed them to prefer yibbum. As Katz and others show, and as demonstrated above, this theory

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\(^\text{312}\) The resulting moral stratification of world Jewry, which views the Ashkenazic community as superior to the Sephardic one is a phenomenon that is beyond the scope of this research.


\(^\text{315}\) Ibid.
is not convincing because we know of cases of polygamy among Ashkenazim and of a tendency to maintain monogamous families among Sephardim.

Some historians offer a fourth explanation, namely, that highly influential rabbis were the reason for the different Ashkenazic and Sephardic attitudes to yibbum. One such rabbi was the eleventh-century Rabbenu Gershom, who as noted previously banned polygamy. As mentioned above, some argued that because Rabbenu Gershom’s ban was accepted more widely among Ashkenazim than Sephardim, the former considered halitsa preferable to yibbum to prevent a potential polygamous union.\footnote{See the sources presented in Howard Adelman, “Custom, Law, and Gender: Levirate Union among Ashkenazim and Sephardim in Italy after the Expulsion from Spain” in Raymond B. Waddington, The Expulsion of the Jews: 1492 and After (New York: Garland, 1994), 122. For a criticism of this speculation, see J. Katz “Levirate Marriage,” 86, 88. Although Katz claims that “the woman’s status in Northern France and Ashkenaz was higher than anywhere else in the middle ages,” he also makes the argument that Rabbenu Gershom’s ban did not prohibit yibbum of a single levir and that from Sephardic sources, we learn that yibbum usually did not take place in cases where the levir was already married.} According to Jacob Katz, the French tosafist Jacob ben Meir (known as Rabbenu Tam, 1100–1171), the dominant rabbinic figure of the twelfth-century was responsible for the Ashkenazic preference for halitsa. As we saw above, Katz dates the Ashkenazic turn toward halitsa between the mid-thirteenth and the mid-fifteenth centuries.

According to Katz, the reason for this turn was the dominant character of Rabbenu Tam: “The establishment of R. Tam’s method is the reason for the disappearance of yibbum from the life of the Ashkenazic communities.”\footnote{J. Katz, “Post-Zoharic Relations,” 87.} Rabbenu Tam, in addition to being one of the most renowned French tosafists, was a leading halakhic authority and the grandson of Rashi. He argued that even if both sides wish to levirate they are forbidden from doing so.\footnote{Isaac ben Moses, Or zarua (Zhytomyr, 1861), part A, #638.} However, his successors were reluctant to adopt his view as a whole. For example, his student Isaac ben Jacob ha-Lavan of Prague argued
that the main reason a levir should be coerced to perform halitsa is that Rabbenu Gershom’s ban forbids polygamy and, therefore, if such an outcome can be avoided, yibbum is permissible.\(^{319}\)

Although I agree with Katz’s dating of the Ashkenazic turn to a less flexible stance, I am less convinced by the explanation. One may agree that Rabbenu Tam’s work or Rabbenu Gershon’s ban were a considerable source of influence on fifteenth-century Ashkenazim, but this does not explain the long time that passed between Rabbenu Gershon’s ban (c. 1000) or Rabbenu Tam’s death (1171) and the establishment of the Ashkenazic preference for halitsa. Even if Katz’s thesis is correct, it does not explain what made Rabbenu Tam’s opinion, or for that matter a preference for halitsa in general, the attractive alternative for fifteenth-century Ashkenazim. A tradition alone—textual, personal, theological, or ethnic—did not shape the distinct early modern Ashkenazic or Sephardic attitudes toward levirate marriage. Instead, I argue, it was a contemporary moment in Jewish history (i.e., a restructuring of the Sephardic communal identity around the embodied lineage as a response to a crisis of communal identity) rather than an influential theological, textual, or personal tradition that restructured the contemporary attitude toward levirate marriage.

A fifth explanation posits that, in fact, Ashkenazim and Sephardim did not hold contradictory opinions on the matter of levirate marriage at all and that the mixture of attitudes characteristic of the Middle Ages continued into early modernity. Howard Adelman, for example, offers a careful and compelling thesis: “Neat categorizations of Ashkenazim and Sephardim do not hold up. . . . Rabbinic proscriptions did not always

\(^{319}\) Ibid.
determine the way that Jews actually lived . . . it is necessary to read rabbinic literature as responses to a much more variegated reality than the rabbis wanted.” Adelman convincingly argues that the varying opinions of the rabbis were a result of a disjuncture between their opinions and the beliefs of their communities, of disagreements between rabbis from different schools of theology, and of:

extra-halakhic variables [that] influenced the decisions of the rabbis. These included factors as diverse as papal policies, English royal romances, and Protestant politics; considerations of gender, finances, mysticism, and lineage; personal preferences; and the strength of individual rabbis.  

For two reasons, however, it is hard to accept Adelman’s argument regarding the utility or lack thereof for the ethnic categories of Ashkenazim and Sephardim in discussing late-medieval attitudes toward yibbum. Although a spectrum of opinions and customs regarding yibbum did characterize the late-medieval discourse of levirate marriage, the opinions of Ashkenazic and Sephardic thinkers did not float amorphously but instead revolved around distinct and contradictory poles of interpretation. These poles differ on all three issues discussed in this chapter, namely, whether to prefer yibbum or halitsa and the logic and purpose of yibbum or halitsa. Second, Adelman’s thesis runs the risk of denying credibility to late medieval sources who themselves imagined their

320 Adelman, “Custom, Law, and Gender,” 117.
321 Ibid., 118. Adelman’s emphasis on the discrepancy between the official rabbinic theology and the behavior of the general community provides a useful model for explaining the changes in early modern Sephardic communal identity. I argue below that such discrepancies led to a cultural negotiation between the rabbinic and popular culture. The model may explain the unique characteristic of the Ottoman Sephardic interpretation of the commandment as well as Adelman’s astute observations regarding the absence of a complete dichotomy in Italian-Sephardic and Ashkenazic interpretations of yibbum. The unique predicament of the expellees in the Ottoman Empire (i.e., lack of material possessions, loss of family members, and a relatively egalitarian social structure), essentially different than its Italian counterpart, resulted in a different cultural negotiation and thus a characteristic interpretation of yibbum. For more information, see chapter 8.
cultural space in dichotomous terms and saw their differing attitudes toward levirate marriage, true or false, as defining cultural markers.\textsuperscript{322}

The sixth explanation cites a growing popularity of kabbala among Sephardim during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which also is often cited for the differing attitudes toward \textit{yibbum}.\textsuperscript{323} This approach is apparent, for example, in Jacob Katz’s criticism of the following observation by ibn Zimra:

\begin{quote}
It [preferring \textit{yibbum}] was the custom of all Spain, Catalonia, Provence, and Ashkenaz . . . and all of the west, and the kingdom of Egypt, and the land of the deer [the land of Israel], and Damascus, and the land of Tugrema [the Ottoman Empire], Spire, Worms, Mainz . . . [all habitually] perform the commandment of \textit{yibbum} to raise the name of the dead . . . other than a few Loazim and Ashkenazim.\textsuperscript{324}
\end{quote}

Katz critiqued the above observation as being an essentially reductionist attitude toward the complex attitudes surrounding levirate marriage. The reason for ibn Zimra’s flawed assessment, Katz argued, was due to his interest in kabbala: “Radbaz, just like his fellow for being drawn after kabbala, Rabbi Isaac Caro, was willing to place the opposite opinion outside of the area of halakhic legitimacy.”\textsuperscript{325}

While I accept the observations sustaining this thesis (i.e., the kabbalistic logic used to support the rabbis’ legal opinions), I find less convincing the argument that an increase in the influence of kabbala caused the rabbis to read reality in kabbalistic terms. The fact that there is more than one kabbalistic interpretation of \textit{yibbum} requires an explanation as to why this specific interpretation was deemed more convincing than

\textsuperscript{322} Adelman argues that an assertion of ethnic identity in a time of identity crisis was one of the reasons for the ethnic division of the opinions concerning \textit{yibbum}. However, he does not ask why the different sages chose their particular opinions. See Adelman, “Custom, Law, and Gender,” 113.
\textsuperscript{323} Ibid., 112. Adelman shows that married Ashkenazic men asked for the approval of their rabbis to marry the widows; at the same time Sephardic men, though officially preferring \textit{yibbum} over \textit{halitsa}, often chose the latter.
\textsuperscript{324} David ibn Zimra, \textit{Sheelot u-teshuvot ha-radbaz} (Livorno, 1651), 40b.
\textsuperscript{325} J. Katz “Levirate Marriage,” 102.
others. Second, much like Rabbenu Tam’s delayed influence on Ashkenazic Jewry, one must wonder about the long time it took kabbala to take hold over the Sephardic idea of levirate marriage. Third, for this argument to work, one must deny ibn Zimra the agency to imagine his own spiritual world. Such logic cannot cancel contemporary sources imagining a Jewish world divided along ethnic lines regarding the question of yibbum and thus cannot serve to discredit ibn Zimra’s ability to make up his own mind.

The causal explanations presented above for the differences in the interpretation of yibbum are lacking in various ways. However, the principle flaw of each explanation is that it assumes that the religious affected the social in a one-way direction. For example, the second explanation suggests that long-standing associations—of the Ashkenazim with the Babylonian Talmud and the Sephardim with the Jerusalem Talmud—determined early modern attitudes. The third explanation considers Rabbenu Gershom’s ban on polygamy to be the reason for the differences in the practice of levirate marriage. The fourth explanation proposes that individual leading rabbis were the sources of the different interpretations or of a preference for yibbum or halitsa. And finally, the sixth explanation cites the growing popularity of kabbala as the source for the distinct early modern attitudes to the commandment. The dissertation posits that it is worthwhile to consider a different explanatory path. Namely, theology was not the only influence on the Ottoman Sephardic society; rather, a mutual and ongoing influence of the theological and the social affected the community. I propose that the restructuring of early modern, Sephardic communal identity, around the lineages stemming from historical developments that later generated the popularity of kabbala, shaped the Ottoman Sephardic beliefs in hybrid offspring and dictated the Sephardic preference for yibbum.
over *halitsa*. These powerful factors worked together and on each other to establish a unique Ottoman Sephardic identity.

Adelman charts one such path when asking why did “Modena\(^\text{326}\) and some of his colleagues connect rabbinic attitudes toward *halitza* and *yibbum* to Ashkenazim and Sephardim, respectively” even though these same sages were aware of earlier approaches to levirate marriage that were complicated and varied rather than categorical or exclusive. Adelman answers with a fascinating speculation:

> It seems that this was a way for individual Jews and Jewish subgroups to assert their identity in a culturally-mixed community . . . the emphasis on these differences may have been part of a process of boundary definition by religious leaders . . . competing groups formulated a program of ethnic awareness based on perceptions of ritual difference.\(^\text{327}\)

Jacob Katz noticed a phenomenon similar to one that Adelman discerned in Italy in the post-exilic, Sephardic turn to a categorical preference for *yibbum*. Katz wondered why Ottoman Sephardim overlooked the complex history of medieval attitudes toward the commandment and only associated the attitudes toward levirate marriage with one’s ethnicity. Katz responds that the expellees’ project was to make the case for an existing preference for *yibbum* rather than to conduct unbiased research into the complex history of the medieval interpretations. For evidence, Katz points to the work of ibn Zimra and Isaac Caro.

Ibn Zimra made significant efforts to show that *yibbum* was the traditional Sephardic resolution of the levirate bond. Ibn Zimra began his endeavor by asserting that

\(^326\) Leon Modena (b.1571) was the leader of the Italian and German Jewish communities of Venice.

\(^327\) Adelman, “Custom, Law, and Gender,” 113.
only “a few” sages of the past in fact preferred halitsa over yibbum. In addition, and contrary to the evidence, ibn Zimra argues that performing yibbum was the first choice of all medieval Jews “other than a few loazim [foreigners, i.e., Italians] and Ashkenazim”. The previous assertions by ibn Zimra are as inaccurate as the following one: “in that place called shum [i.e., Speyer, Worms, and Mainz] they were forced to make decrees to coerce halitsa, therefore [we can assume that] in other places in Ashkenaz they levirated.” However, Katz shows that these decrees in fact demonstrate the preference for halitsa as they regulated its monetary aspects rather than created mechanisms for its enforcement.

Thus ibn Zimra manipulates the evidence to paint a picture of an overwhelming, almost universal, and long-standing preference of yibbum. Katz explains that ibn Zimra had to wield the available evidence to support “his opinion of quite some time.” Ibn Zimra’s goal was to justify his and his fellow expellees’ preference of yibbum rather than to conduct an unbiased examination of the commandments’ origins.

Katz convincingly argues that ibn Zimra’s radical interpretation of halitsa further demonstrates his effort to legitimate the expellees’ preference for yibbum. Ibn Zimra re-signifies halitsa from an equal alternative to yibbum, meant to resolve an existing levirate bond, to a preventive measure meant to thwart the bond’s formation. Ibn Zimra claims that halitsa is an actualization of a measure agreed upon before the betrothal rather than a means to untie the levirate bond postmortem. If the measure is employed, the levirate

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328 David ibn Zimra, Sheelot u-teshuvot, 40a–b.
329 Ibid., 40b–41b.
330 Ibid., 41b.
332 Ibid, 102.
bond does not form, and therefore there is no direct competition between yibbum and halitsa for the proper means to end such a bond. On the other hand, if such a preventive measure is not agreed upon before the childless man’s death, then yibbum is the preferable resolution for the widow’s predicament. Ibn Zimra further claims that using such a preventive custom is an Ashkenazic tradition. In this way ibn Zimra deems halitsa redundant for Sephardim and customary among Ashkenazim, further establishing the ethnic dichotomy in the preference for yibbum or halitsa.

Isaac Caro offers a similar attempt to re-signify halitsa and downplay the challenge it poses to the primacy of yibbum. As many did before him, Caro argued halitsa was the preferable resolution only if the levir was insincere in his wish to levirate (i.e., he wished to levirate for material gain rather than for the sake of his dead brother). However, unlike the majority of preceding sages, Caro argued that the average levir should not be suspected of lack of sincerity. Thus Caro reversed the order of preference between yibbum and halitsa; now that the levir’s sincerity is assumed, yibbum should be the preferred resolution unless insincere intents are proven. Ibn Zimra and Caro sought to legitimate a general preference for yibbum by re-signifying halitsa and rewriting long-standing halakhic traditions.

Ibn Zimra, Caro, and other members of the expulsion generation, as well as the Italian rabbis examined by Adelman, all negotiated a new communal identity through the yibbum discourse. In the following chapters I shall explain the sources of the popularity of the yibbum discourse as the basis on which the sages of the expulsion generation negotiated the expellees’ social imagination and communal identity.

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333 Caro, Bet yosef, #2.
Chapter 5

The Logic of Yibbum (Levirate Marriage)

In the previous chapter, I established the early modern Sephardic preference of yibbum over halitsa and argued it was a reaction to a crisis of communal identity rather than a theological, personal, or textual tradition that was responsible for the ethnic division of attitudes toward the practice. To further uncover the Sephardic interpretation of yibbum, this section raises the following questions: What did the thinkers discussing the commandment’s nature see as its purpose? What was their idea of the commandment’s mechanics? In other words, what did they imagine happened during and as a result of levirate marriage? The short answers to the above questions indicate that early modern Ashkenazic and Sephardic thinkers differed not only on whether to prefer yibbum or halitsa but on their understanding of the purpose and mechanics of yibbum as well. Ashkenazic thinkers tended to reject yibbum completely. When they did explore its significance, Ashkenazic sources portray the commandment as means to commemorate the childless dead and reconstitute a lineage by name. Ottoman Sephardim, however, saw the commandment as means to remake an interrupted blood line through physical means.

While the biblical and rabbinic discourses on levirate marriage differ on whether to perform the commandment or not, they agreed that the commandment’s purpose was to “establish a name in Israel for his brother” and to achieve this goal, one must “build up his brother’s house.”334 Early modern sages, however, did not take the biblical or the rabbinic approach part and parcel, but restructured the received traditions to suit their needs in specific cases. At the most basic level, these differences came about because

early modern Ashkenazim and Sephardim disagreed about the levirate progeny’s nature: for Ashkenazic thinkers, the yibbum offspring was the living brother’s son and the lineage was the dead man’s by name; for early modern Sephardim, the offspring was the dead brother’s progeny and the lineage was his in name and blood.

Disagreements between the Ashkenazim and Sephardim over yibbum were not limited to the commandment’s product (i.e., the reproduction of nominal vs. blood lineage) and included the mechanics of the act as well. Ashkenazim, for example, believed that simply naming a son after a deceased relative served to commemorate the individual, whereas the Sephardim believed a broken blood lineage could be restored. Sephardic theological texts incorporated medieval physiology, kabbala, and beliefs in metempsychosis in discussions of yibbum, emphasizing the importance of the child born unto the childless dead being similar in form and matter (i.e., in its physiology and appearance), and not simply spiritually or symbolically. The work of the expulsion generation rabbis Avraham Saba and Menahem Bavli offers an excellent inroad into the Ottoman Sephardic ideas about yibbum’s purpose and logic. Born in Castile in 1440, Saba fled to Portugal and then Morocco before finally ending his journey in the Ottoman capital of Adrianople. In his commentary on the Torah Tseror ha-mor, Saba explains that the levir rather than the dead husband’s other relatives is best suited to perform the commandment due to his physiological resemblance to his brother, “because he is his brother [in the] flesh; they are as one flesh.”

Menahem Bavli offers his interpretation of the levirate offspring’s nature in Ta’amei ha-mitsvot (the reason, logic, or purpose of the commandments), a genre that, as

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335 Saba, Tseror ha-mor, [149b].
its name suggests, addresses the perceived logic governing the different commandments. When discussing levirate marriage, Bavli makes the following argument: “the widow is [as] the dead man’s body in reality [mamash], [as if she were] one of his limbs, and he [the levir] is his brother in reality . . . [therefore] the firstborn child is the dead man himself.” 336 Both Saba and Bavli emphasize the importance of the widow, the dead husband, and the levir’s physical and material qualities, as the levir and his dead brother are of “one flesh”, while the widow is in, fact, “the dead man’s body in reality, one of his limbs”, thus suggesting it was the physiological identity of the levirate offspring, his “flesh” and “limbs” that formed the axis of the Sephardic idea of yibbum. Although the material or physical identity of the progeny is specific, it is not exclusively linked to one party but is instead shared by the family members involved in the levirate. This is apparent in Saba’s claim that the levir “is his brother [in the] flesh” and in Bavli’s assertions that “the widow is [as] the dead man’s body” and that “the firstborn child . . . is the dead man himself.” Given such context, the levirate offspring, the widow, and the levir all share a unique familial physical identity that, once lost with the childless husband’s death, can be recreated through levirate marriage alone. Also important is the idea that the physiological connection between the brothers, the widow, and the offspring, is clearly not just metaphorical but instead happens “in reality,” as Bavli argues.

Yet, what was culturally significant about the Sephardic emphasis on the physiological nature of yibbum and the dependent connections between the brother, the widow, and the offspring? The Sephardim were clearly drawing on pre-modern

physiology and theories of regeneration in particular, as well as late medieval and early modern tenets of kabbala. Both approaches share one common denominator, namely a concern with the recreation of a specific unique blood lineage and, as a result, the recreation of the community’s corporate identity.

The Body

In *Toldot yitshak* (the Hebrew *toldot* may be translated as genealogy, history, or offspring), the Sephardic rabbi Isaac Caro (c. 1458–1535) offers a collection of sermons edited to serve as a running commentary on the Torah. Caro’s interpretation of *yibbum* as it appears in *Toldot yitshak* and much like Saba and Bavli, emphasizes, the physiological qualities of the participants and product of levirate marriage:

> Since these brothers [the dead husband and the levir] have the same mother, and [since] the man gives the form and the woman the matter, [therefore] the brothers have the same form. Therefore the form of the fetus born to the brother [the levir] is the same as [the one] born to the deceased, if he were alive. Therefore the form [of the fetus] is the form the deceased would have given birth to. And truly, the matter destined for the dead man’s son, if he were alive, since the mother, the wife of the deceased, and the wife of the living is one and the same, therefore the son of the living [brother] is the son of the dead [brother] in form and matter. And that is the meaning of “raise up the name of the dead.”

To simplify Caro’s explanation, because brothers carry “the same form” and the widow consistently carries the same “matter,” the union between a levir and a widow produces an offspring that is identical “in form and matter” to the child that would have been born if the levir were still alive. In addition to the newborn’s matter, the widow also contributes the formation of the offspring’s facial features. According to Caro, “when she

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337 Caro was born in Toledo, fled to Portugal in 1492 and then to Istanbul in 1498, finally setting in Israel in 1517 where he passed away, probably in 1535. For more on Caro, see Shaul Regev, *Derashot r. yitshak karo*, Pirsume ha-makhon le-heker ha-yahadut ba-mizrah (Ramat Gan: Universitat Bar-Ilan, 1995), 9–39.

has sexual intercourse with his brother, [she] imagines her first husband and therefore will have a male son as if he were the son of the deceased.”

At this point in the text, Caro had already informed the reader that the newborn “is the son of the dead [brother] in form and matter,” therefore, initially it may appear unclear why he must repeat that the newborn is “as if he were the son of the deceased”; however, it follows a clear line of medieval theory regarding impregnation. In Caro’s theoretical reflections on a biblical reiteration found in Genesis 25:19 that states, “Abraham begot Isaac” immediately after declaring that what follows “are the generations [lit., toldot] of Isaac, Abraham’s son,” Caro argues that

[T]he sages said it [the reiteration] was because the fools of the generation used to say, she [Sarah] was impregnated by Abimelech; and therefore God created Isaac’s face in similarity to Abraham so that all will say Abraham fathered him. This [explanation] is doubtful because always the face of the fornicator’s son is that of her husband. This is so because of her imagination . . . when she sleeps with the molester [lit., the man who is having intercourse with the woman], the fornicator thinks of her husband learning of her fornication or killing her, or of the people saying her son is a mamzer.

Through imagining her deceased husband, the widow gave the newborn not only the matter he would have gotten if her former husband were still alive, but also a face identical to that of the offspring that was never born. This is an extreme example of the Ottoman Sephardic interest, even obsession, with remaking or reconnecting the broken embodied chain up to its missing link’s finest details.

In Metsudat David, the Spanish-born ibn Zimra describes a similar set of physiological principles of yibbum. Ibn Zimra suggests that the widow should be

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339 Ibid., 124a; see also 34a for a discussion of the widow’s role in the process of impregnation and her influence on the newborn’s appearance. For a discussion of this phenomenon, see Chapters 5 and 6.
340 Ibid., 34a.
341 Ibn Zimra was born in 1479 in Spain, left with his family for Fez in 1492, then shortly after to Safed, Jerusalem, and sometime before 1514, to Egypt where he resided in Alexandria and Cairo. In 1553 he left
levirated by the living brother rather than just any available male family member so that
the similarity between the levirate offspring and the dead husband or his unborn offspring
is of the highest degree. This is so because:

A man does not have a [relative] closer than his wife, who is a bone of his bones,
and his brother who came out from the same source, who is as a half of the dead
brother, and they have the same blood. And the seed coming out of both of them
[the widow and the levir] takes his place [the dead husband].

Much like Saba, Bavli, and Caro, ibn Zimra emphasizes the familial proximity in
physiological terms and not in ones of emotions, property, or the lineage’s genealogical
exclusivity. It was the physiological material qualities that the widow and the levir shared
with the dead husband that made them best suited for replacing him as the offspring’s
creators. Being “a bone of his [the levir’s] bones . . . half the dead brother,” and coming
from “the same source” or having “the same blood,” allowed the widow and the levir to
“take his [the dead childless husband’s] place” and recreate the disrupted embodied
sequence in the closest way possible.

The physiological logic of yibbum is apparent in Sefer ta’amei ha-mitsvot [STM]
as well; however, before delving into the contribution of STM to the current discussion, a
few comments on its authorship are in order. The work’s author is identified by Ottoman
Sephardic scholars, namely, Solomon Alkabets (1500–1584), Cordovero, and di Vidas as
Isaac ibn-Farhi, a sixteenth-century Sephardic rabbi from Salonika. Modern scholars
convincingly argue the work was authored much earlier, probably not later than the
fourteenth century. The reason for the incorrect dating, many argue, rested on Farhi’s

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342 David ibn Zimra, Sefer metsudat david (Jerusalem: Hotsaat yerid ha-sefarim, 2003), 195.

Egypt for the land of Israel and lived the last two decades of his life in Jerusalem and Safed. Ibn Zimra’s
biography is a contentious issue among scholars. For more on this issue and ibn Zimra’s theory of
metempsychosis, see Melila Helner, “The Doctrine of Transmigration in the Kabbalistic Books of Rabbi
claim to ownership in the introduction to three of the existing manuscripts. Despite its early dating, there is ample evidence to consider *STM* representative of Ottoman Sephardic ideas of levirate marriage because a large number of manuscripts survived, because a contemporary scholar claimed to author *STM*, and because such ownership was widely accepted by his peers.  

*STM* justifies the necessity of the brother as levir on the basis of the “wife [the widow] is as his body . . . and the commandment is more to the brother than to other relatives because both brothers are [of] one blood and they are one thing. And the brother himself in actuality [mamash] reinforces his brother’s nature in actuality.”

While preference for the deceased brother as levir remains consistent, there are some variations on the physiological aspects of *yibbum*. One such example includes a commentary on the Book of Ruth by the Spanish-born rabbi Isaac Arama (1420–94) that is focused instead on the dead husband’s contribution to this process.  

When a man dies childless . . . he leaves his wife in the world which is as his body, a bone of his bones, a flesh of his flesh, and in the folds of her womb [there are] still remnants of his semen . . . And he also left his brother, half of his flesh, because they were created and got out of one place. [The brother], by the grace of God, fathers a child so it [the newborn] completely relates to the deceased, because the living brother helped [the deceased] only a little to give form to the matter of his brother’s semen hidden in the folds of her womb.

Arama’s take on the physiological process involved in levirate marriage is similar to Saba, Caro, Bavli, *STM*, and ibn Zimra in that he sees the widow and the levir as keys for

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346 Ibid., 285b.
a material reconstruction of the embodied lineage; however, Arama is conclusive that the
dead husband is active in the process, with the levir only acting as an assistant. If STM,
Saba, Caro, and ibn Zimra argue the levir contributes the offspring’s form while the
widow supplies the matter, Arama argues both living and dead halves of the original
married couple, the widow and her dead husband, contribute the matter (in this case the
dead husband’s semen and, most probably, the widow’s menstrual blood). In this version,
the living brother only contributes the newborn’s form. While the goal and
responsibilities of the wife and levir are the same in Arama’s version of yibbum as in his
predecessors, it is the internal processes, the unseen combination that is distinct. Arama
minimizes the levir’s contribution to the levirate offspring by considering him to have
“helped only a little” and reaffirming that the offspring “completely relates to the
deceased” rather than the levir.

The Soul

The physiological model of yibbum presented above was not the exclusive early
modern Sephardic interpretation of the commandment. Indeed, a discussion of the
Sephardic yibbum discourse is incomplete without an examination of the spiritual model
as well.347 According to this model, the soul of the childless dead reincarnates in his
widow’s newborn, using his new body to father a child, and by doing so allows his soul

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347 In some sources the model is referred to as the “kabbalistic explanation” or an explanation “according to
the kabbalah.” E.g., see Regev, “Reasons for the Levirate Command.” I chose “spiritual” over “kabbalistic”
because the latter could mislead a modern reader to think that kabbalists belonged to a homogenous group,
clearly differentiated from the rest of the community or from non-kabbalistic rabbis, and following a
clearly articulated doctrine. The same can be said about genres and rabbis; how should we call a classic,
halakhic genre (e.g., the purpose of the commandments or Torah commentaries) that employs kabbalistic
interpretations? How should we tag someone like Joseph Caro who was the author of the greatest code of
Jewish law (Shulhan arukh) and the mystical diary Maggid mesharim? Thus, I chose to avoid such
misunderstandings and anachronisms by designating the model “spiritual” rather than “kabbalistic.”
to continue to the *olam ha-ba* (world to come or afterworld). Menahem Bavli presents this interpretation when asserting that “the firstborn child is the dead man himself.”

Bavli continues to explain his assertion: “as it is said ‘snuffing the wind [*ruah*, spirit of the dead] in her eagerness’ [Jer. 2:24], [she inhaled] the dead man’s spirit . . . it [i.e., inhaling the spirit and later *yibbum*] is surely better than [producing] *keri* [wasteful emission], which creates *ruhin* and *shidin* [evil spirits and demons].”

Bavli presents the predicament of the childless man’s disembodied soul that is roaming in the world of the living, unable to return to its old body or move on to the afterworld. For Bavli, the only proper solution to the soul’s predicament is reincarnation in the levirate offspring. Failure to inhale the soul and follow the commandment does not leave a vacuum in the imagined economy of bodies and souls. Rather, such failure results in a cohort of demons that join the side of cosmic evil.

Joseph Caro (1488–1575) offers a very similar interpretation in his responsa:

“[T]he commandment of *yibbum* is [of a] great benefit to the soul of the deceased since the soul’s delight will grow [when it is] reincarnated in a [body of] a relative [who is a member of the] family because it has a greater affinity to it.”

In *Toldot ytshak*, Joseph’s uncle Isaac Caro clarifies that it is not just any family member into which the husband’s soul may enter, but only “the body of the fetus” that results in “a great delight to the dead man’s soul.”

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349 Ibid.
351 Isaac Caro, *Sefer toldot ytshak*, 125b.
Abraham Saba further argues that the widow is “in need of her husband’s brother and is impregnated; in the very same newborn the dead man’s soul will get out [of her body].”\textsuperscript{352} After reporting the physiological model of \textit{yibbum}, \textit{STM} presents what it perceives as a kabbalistic one (by way of the kabbala) as well, arguing that the childless man’s soul is in danger of being tormented by a host of demons and evil spirits.\textsuperscript{353} To save the soul from its demonic tormentors, God “gives it to one known angel to be saved and reincarnated in his wife in reality [\textit{mamash}]. And the first born will be the deceased man himself.”\textsuperscript{354} The unique quality of the spiritual interpretation of levirate marriage placed a reincarnation of the childless man’s soul into the levirate offspring at the center of the logic of the commandment.

Not all Sephardic thinkers envisioned the spiritual logic of \textit{yibbum} that incorporated a process of metempsychosis.\textsuperscript{355} Shaul Regev cites \textit{Metsudat david} by Radbaz as a manifestation of such disagreement.

\begin{quote}
And I saw it was written . . . that the soul is in the body [is] as the foot is in the shoe . . . and therefore if he [the levir] wanted to levirate it is better he redeems his brother [by] wearing a shoe [since] he was barefoot. And if [he does] not [i.e., prefer \textit{halitsa} over \textit{yibbum}] it will be done to him as he did. He took off the shoe for his brother who was left without a body and God the blessed commanded that he be un-shoed. . . . These things have no flavor or salt [i.e., are unmerited].\textsuperscript{356}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{352} Saba, \textit{Tseror ha-mor}, [149b].
\textsuperscript{353} Meier, “\textit{Sefer Ta’amey ha-Mitzwoth},” 252–53; “[H]is soul is given to \textit{mazzikin}, \textit{shedin}, \textit{ruhin}, and \textit{mazzikin} [sic].”
\textsuperscript{354} Ibid. In the following lines, the author reiterates the danger awaiting the childless man’s soul: “The soul who has no sons is wandering ashamed [lit., ‘shy’ or ‘embarrassed’] to the \textit{mazzikin’s} hands,” and that the same soul is that of the first child to be born from the levirate: “they will find it anew in the firstborn of the levir.”
\textsuperscript{355} Consider, e.g., Regev’s comment on this quotation by ibn Zimra: “Radbaz does not bring [up] the issue of metempsychosis as the purpose of the \textit{yibbum} commandment, but the continuation of the dead man’s name and his lineage, and saving the soul from its judgment.” Regev, “Reasons for the Levirate Command,” 84.
\textsuperscript{356} Ibn Zimra, \textit{Sefer metsudat david}, 212.
Ibn Zimra criticizes those who believed halitsa serves as a symbolic shaming of the reluctant levir for “un-shoeing” or taking away a potential embodied existence from his dead brother. Is such a statement to be interpreted as criticism of the spiritual or kabbalistic logic of yibbum? Since ibn Zimra accepted the physiological logic of yibbum, it is possible to argue he preferred it to the spiritual interpretation, however this is unlikely the case. During the period, it was common for a source to present several interpretations of a commandment, rendering both the physiological and spiritual interpretations compatible rather than mutually exclusive. It is also necessary to reexamine ibn Zimra’s statement following the quotation above, “What kind of punishment is that [i.e., halitsa]? He [the levir] is receiving his shoe back immediately [after the ritual]. . . . He expelled his brother from the family and his punishment is to be barefoot for a short while?” Here, it may appear that ibn Zimra is not critiquing the metempsychosis or removal of the shoe per se, but instead that the retribution for such an incredible offense is only a short ritual involving minor humiliation.

It is also possible that ibn Zimra was simply being sarcastic, though such an interpretation of the quotation is unlikely given ibn Zimra’s belief that metempsychosis was integral to yibbum, evident in his critique of Muslim levirate marriage, which he took to be solely for the purpose of inheritance. “Bless him who gave us his Torah and differentiated us [i.e., Jews] from them [i.e., Ottoman Muslims], because this commandment has a great kabbala secret from the sages.”

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357 Ibid.
358 “[A]nd I saw the Ishmaelites . . . and they do not differentiate whether he [the dead husband] has offspring or not. . . . And I asked [them] why are they doing this? And they said it was for the purpose of inheritance.” Ibid., 195.
359 Ibid.
by an extensive discussion of the “secret from [the] sages” itself, namely, the concepts of *ibbur* (impregnation, a union of two souls) and *gilgul* (metempsychosis at the moment of birth), two types of metempsychosis that are essential components in the spiritual or kabbalistic idea of *yibbum*.

If ibn Zimra agreed with both the physiological and spiritual approaches to *yibbum*, exactly which elements does he claim “have no flavor or salt”? Some scholars answer this question by pointing toward ibn Zimra’s ideas regarding the place of metempsychosis (*gilgul* and *ibbur*) in levirate marriage; they see ibn Zimra’s disagreement with the spiritual thesis in his belief that a levirate offspring received its soul in a process of *ibbur* rather than *gilgul*. According to Regev:

Radbaz differentiates between *ibbur* [impregnation] and *gilgul* [metempsychosis]. The significance of the first is a continuation of the lineage, and it is essentially positive. The second is usually understood as punishment. . . . *Ibbur* is an influence and an emanation of one [soul] to the other [body] . . . the second receives [a soul] in reality and the first [the righteous man from which the new soul branched] is lacking nothing. 360

According to this interpretation, the levirate offspring’s soul originates in a process of *ibbur* rather than *gilgul*; it is not the actual childless man’s soul but a replicated righteous man’s soul that animates the levirate offspring’s body. In the end, only two major interpretations of *ibbur* were available to sixteenth-century Sephardim. According to one interpretation, *ibbur* was a temporary entrance of a *tsaddik*’s (a righteous man) soul to a living man’s body, an instrument to supply him and his community with spiritual guidance. For ibn Zimra, however, it was a process during which a *tsaddik* produced soul-sparks (*nizozot*) that are identical to his soul yet do not diminish it. The purpose of such sparks, ibn Zimra argues, was to incarnate in the bodies of newborn righteous

people who would then assist the Jewish people. Therefore, it was only the *tsaddik* who could recreate a lineage by emanating an old-new soul to replace the one that was never conceived. In this interpretation, the ordinary, childless dead had to resort to *gilgul*.

The newborn in ibn Zimra’s quotation above receives a new soul that is drawn from a righteous man and is not the reincarnated husband’s soul. Because ibn Zimra’s idea of *ibbur* does not require the childless man’s soul to return from the afterworld, this condition constitutes for Regev: “a continuation of the lineage as it would have taken place if the deceased has not died but stayed alive and fathered children.”

Although recreation of a lost lineage was clearly a major goal of Sephardic *yibbum*, it is difficult to believe *ibbur* alone constituted such recreation of the lost link, and that *gilgul* was merely a form of punishment. The reason for both issues is that ibn Zimra’s theory of *ibbur* is an exceptional case that proves the rule in applying to the righteous alone, whereas the majority of believers that were unfortunate enough to die childless were believed to have been reincarnated in the levirate offspring.

**An Exceptional Yibbum: A Tsaddik’s Widow**

Who exactly was a *tsaddik* (righteous man) among the early modern Sephardim? As scholars show, the traditional division in terms of the Jewish man’s moral standing is between the righteous (*tsaddikim*), mediocre (*beinonim*), and evil (*reshaim*). According to Scholem, the righteous were usually exempted from reincarnation, the mediocre were

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361 Ibid., 79.
exempted in earlier kabbalistic texts (though present in the late fifteenth-century texts), and the evil were thought to reincarnate as a means of atonement for their sins.\textsuperscript{362}

Such definitions are further complicated upon closer examination of the elite themselves, who were categorized according to religious ideals: the tsaddik, the talmid hakham (scholar of sacred texts), and the hasid (the pious man).\textsuperscript{363} Whereas a scholar’s status is due to his learning of the sacred texts, the righteous and pious derive their legitimacy from their attempts to fulfill the sacred laws. A righteous man is one who has succeeded in fulfilling the demands of the Torah, and whose merits equal his transgressions. As Scholem noted “[t]he attainment of this level requires no more than a decision of the will and exertion of human effort; no special grace is necessary. It is an ideal accessible to all.”\textsuperscript{364}

The pious man, however, is an extraordinarily special man who goes to extreme measures to realize his piety rather than a manifestation of the ideal norm. As a result of his excessive effort in following the commandments, the pious man receives divine grace that exposes to him knowledge otherwise hidden to the ordinary righteous man. As Scholem notes, the tsaddik represents a “sober, balanced figure” that is in equilibrium, whereas the hasid is in a state of “extremism . . . never in equilibrium . . . contains an anarchistic element” and is “deeply ‘non-bourgeois.’”\textsuperscript{365} Therefore, when discussing tsaddikim rather than hasidim, the texts have in mind an ideal ordinary Jewish man rather than some sort of a holy man.

\textsuperscript{363} For more on the tsaddik in the kabbalistic context, see Scholem, “Tsadik” in \textit{Mystical Shape of the Godhead}, 88–139.
\textsuperscript{364} Scholem, \textit{Mystical Shape of the Godhead}, 90.
\textsuperscript{365} Ibid.
As the following quotation from Metsudat david shows, ibn Zimra was of the opinion that the majority of the mediocre childless dead, neither evil nor righteous, were not thought to experience *ibbur* and instead required metempsychosis to maintain their embodied lineage and redeem their souls:

And I asked one of the kabbalah sages, “What is the difference between *gilgul* and *ibbur*?” He responded that [the word] *ibbur* reflects the secret that, as a pregnant woman who is giving birth without losing anything, the souls of the righteous and the pious [*tsaddikim* and *hasidim*] are impregnated and give birth . . . as [if lighting] a candle from a candle.\(^{366}\)

Ibn Zimra clearly states that only “the righteous and the pious” can benefit from *ibbur*, losing nothing in the attainment of their eternal existence. Ibn Zimra clearly argues that *gilgul* was an integral part of a successful *yibbum*. In a transition from a discussion of *ibbur* to examining the matter of *gilgul*, ibn Zimra brings up the following condition for a proper *yibbum* to take place:

[A]nd for this reason the Torah commanded the brother [to marry the widow] since there is none closer [to the deceased]. But even if indeed the brother actualizes the levirate bond [it is always required that they [the levir and the widow] mean [to] continue the dead man’s spirit and he will return to her womb [lit., bosom] and be collected in a drop.\(^{367}\)

Echoing Caro, metempsychosis requires that during the intercourse both the levir and the widow actively think about the act’s purpose, a continuation of the dead man’s line. For ibn Zimra, if executed in a proper manner, the dead man’s spirit returns into a “drop” of semen later delivered by the levir into the widow’s womb, and, one can only assume, form the new couple’s levirate offspring. What is missing from the quotation above is the sense that either the levir or the widow is being punished; rather, the quotation echoes the spiritual logic of *yibbum* by emphasizing the necessity of

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\(^{366}\) Ibn Zimra, *Sefer metsudat david*, 196.

\(^{367}\) Ibid., 197.
metempsychosis for a successful *yibbum* and for a continuous lineage. Another missing element in the quotation above is the absence of the association of transmigration with “the righteous and the pious,” rendering the commandment essentially positive and applicable for the vast majority of average believers who are considered neither righteous nor evil.\(^{368}\) Much can be learned from ibn Zimra’s different notions of metempsychosis (i.e., *gilgul* and *ibbur*), but even more can be learned from an exploration of their shared qualities.

In a letter written a decade before the expulsion from Spain, the kabbalist Joseph Alcastiel answers eighteen questions from his colleague Judah Hayat about kabbala.\(^{369}\) Alcastiel’s answers serve to further contextualize the place of metempsychosis (*gilgul* and *ibbur*) in the spiritual theory of *yibbum*. Hayat had expressed several doubts, including: What happens to a soul that transmigrated to several bodies before the time of resurrection at the end of days? Which one of the multiple bodies will be fortunate enough to reunite with their one shared soul? Alcastiel writes:

\[\text{[I]t is said that the most distinguished of them [the bodies] shall rise. Therefore the rest shall remain [in a state of] dirt [afar] so that they [had] suffered with the soul [during their lives] yet did not witness the goodness [i.e., resurrection] with her. For this reason they said that the soul, after it had transmigrated and redeemed, will emanate branches as one candle to the other, and they will spread to the bodies [corpses]. [This is so] because it is impossible to say that new forms [souls] descended [from heaven] and entered those bodies because then it is not resurrection but new creations.}\(^{370}\)

This quotation presents several relevant observations. In accordance with Regev’s argument, *ibbur* is presented as an act of soul emanation, a branching of the original soul

\(^{368}\) For a similar interpretation of ibn Zimra’s theory of *gilgul* and *ibbur*, see Melila Helner, “Transmigration of Souls in the Kabbalistic Writings of R. David ibn Zimra,” *Pe’amim* 43 (1990): 29.


\(^{370}\) Ibid., 195.
to several identical copies that inhabit its former bodies, whereas *gilgul* is a punitive means of atonement.

However, a second glance complicates this observation. First, because *ibbur* takes place in the post-temporal extraordinary and singular time of resurrection whereas *gilgul*, as an element in *yibbum*, is a benign, recurrent event taking place in time rather than out of time. It is not only the time that is extraordinary, but the branching soul itself. Only after the soul atoned for its sins, is it able to divide itself into identical parts that are equal to the original soul. In other words, it is the soul of the spotless, unblemished righteous man rather than the average believer’s that is capable of performing *ibbur*, an act reserved for extraordinary people and in extraordinary time, leaving the spiritual transmigratory *yibbum* to the majority of “ordinary” believers.\(^\text{371}\)

To conclude this section, above I presented two Ottoman Sephardic ideas of the purpose and mechanics of *yibbum*. The physiological and spiritual interpretations are indeed different; one emphasizes the physical qualities of the unborn and the physiological process of its (re)creation, whereas the other emphasizes the spiritual qualities and the process of transmigration of the husband’s soul to the newborn’s body. However, these interpretations should not be seen as contradictory but instead as complimentary. First, as I showed above, several sources find no difficulty in presenting both theories and do not find them contradictory. Second, the physiological approach

\(^{371}\) As I show in Chapter 6, although her *tsaddik* husband may not be required to leave a son behind him, this is not true for the widow. She must levirate and thereby continue the line of the *tsaddik* de facto. This evidence supports my interpretation that even the unusual case of the *tsaddik* supports a social imagination that necessitates an uninterrupted lineage and demographic structure.
may be seen as a preparation of the matter (i.e., the newborn’s body) to receive the proper form (i.e., the husband’s spirit).\textsuperscript{372}

However, a third and more significant shared characteristic is the logic governing both interpretations. As I already argued above, the end result of both is a physically re-grown particular, rather than a generic, member of the lineage, itself a member of the body of the Jewish people; for the Ottoman Sephardim, regenerating a lost limb was a personal, familial, and communal matter. Both the physiological and the spiritual interpretations of \textit{yibbum} serve to recreate the missing embodied lineage link with the highest degree of accuracy, to truly make the crooked demographic structure straight again.

\textbf{The Early Modern Ashkenazic Logic of Yibbum}

Deciphering the Ashkenazic logic of \textit{yibbum} is not an easy task due to the relative scarcity and the dry, halakhic nature of the Ashkenazic discourse. It may be that the relative silence of Ashkenazic sources on the subject is precisely because the majority of Ashkenazic sages rejected the primacy of \textit{yibbum} and preferred \textit{halitsa}, rendering pointless a lengthy discussion of the purpose and mechanics of \textit{yibbum}. Historian Brian Ogren is one of the few scholars who offer an explanation of the Ashkenazic rabbis’ opinions on this matter and their direct opposition to the Sephardic sages’ logic. As Ogren shows, the Ashkenazic discourse on \textit{yibbum} was reactionary in nature:

\begin{quote}
[T]he main issue comes down to kabbalah and the kabbalistic reasoning given for the commandment, as it opposes the intellect and seals off the commandment from rigorous philosophical speculation.\textsuperscript{373}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{372} For more on this notion, see Joseph Caro, \textit{Hesde david}, 125a, examined in n517.
\textsuperscript{373} Ogren, \textit{Renaissance and Rebirth}, 91.
Ogren examines this dynamic as it appears in a debate between a Sephardic rabbi, Michael Balbo, and an Ashkenazic rabbi, Moses ha-Cohen Ashkenazi, that took place in 1466 in Crete regarding the veracity of metempsychosis. During the debate, Ashkenazi argued that the woman is the husband’s body, a statement that, as I show in this chapter, received several meanings in the Ottoman Sephardic discourse. Ashkenazi’s allegory compares the relationship between body and soul to that between a man and his wife. The widow of a childless man, representing the generic dead body, cannot reunite with her husband’s soul more than any dead body can reunite with its former soul. In this logic, it is impossible for a dead man’s soul to be re-embodied either by entering the levirate offspring or by reuniting with its former body as it is impossible for a widow, separated from her husband by death, to unite with him. The childless man’s soul, similar to the dead man’s soul, has finished its embodied existence and is bound to leave the world of the living and, disembodied, to continue its journey to the afterworld.

For Ashkenazi, the purpose of the biblical levirate marriage narratives was to demonstrate the fallacy of the Sephardic logic of yibbum, which is due to the impossible reincarnation of a childless man’s soul. Ashkenazi’s choice of a kabbalistic motif (“the woman is the man’s body”) to attack the kabbalistic idea of yibbum itself was a conscious and not unfamiliar attempt to use one of kabbala’s most popular expressions in an effort to debunk the very same interpretation. By choosing to attack the kabbalistic thesis through a deconstruction of metempsychosis, Ashkenazi emphasizes both the centrality of metempsychosis to the kabbalistic interpretation of yibbum and that its precepts were recognized beyond the circles of elite Sephardic kabbalists.
For Ashkenazi, a Jewish man must father children of the intellective soul (i.e., intellectual achievements) and children of the vital soul (i.e., flesh and blood). Levirate marriage, Ashkenazi argues, is appropriate only if a man left no physical children behind, yet he differs from the kabbalists by stating that: “the brother of the deceased . . . comes to preserve his name by having children on his behalf.” In a short phrase, Ashkenazi declares that the benefit of yibbum is the commemoration of the dead father in name rather than the recreation of his embodied soul, the levir thus fathering a son on his brother’s “behalf” to sustain his memory.

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375 Ibid., 61.
Chapter 6

The Logic of Halitsa (Levirate Divorce)

The discourse of halitsa (levirate divorce), a ritual untying the levirate bond, presents the characteristic Sephardic interpretation of levirate marriage by emphasizing metempsychosis as a means to maintain a continuous embodied lineage. Much like the previous chapter, the current one revolves around questions of the purpose and mechanics of the phenomenon: According to contemporary thinkers, what was achieved by performing the ritual? How did they imagine it worked?

Evidence from my research suggests that the Ottoman Sephardim’s concept of halitsa is a derivative of the logic guiding their general idea of levirate marriage, namely, a way to remake a broken link in the embodied lineage—either the childless dead himself or an exact replacement of his unborn son—and through it to recreate a lost demographic structure and communal identity. In accordance with this logic, the act of spitting was perceived as a method to release the husband’s soul from its temporary abode in the widow’s body and consequently to embody a disembodied soul by planting it in a different Jewish family line. Though an inferior alternative to yibbum because it did not keep the soul in its original family, halitsa was seen as preferable to the alternatives, namely, remaining trapped in the widow’s body or roaming the world of the living in a state of disembodiment, running the risks of harassment by evil spirits and joining the ranks of the cosmic evil.
A curious story is told in a question presented to Rabbi Moses ben Mordecai (Maharam) Galante (c. 1540–1608). The future of a certain childless man’s widow was the cause of “quarrels and arguments” between the levir and the widow’s relatives. The disagreement was due to the levir’s insistence on marrying the widow while she preferred to untie their bond by performing halitsa. On a certain Monday, the widow tried to end the stalemate:

One day the widow’s relatives told her she should go to the synagogue where the levir used to pray while the Torah was being read. She should [then] spit in the levir’s face; and so she did. On a [certain] Monday she entered [the synagogue] while the Torah was being read, stood in front of the levir, and then spat in his face three times, every time [she spat] she said “this is the levir that wishes to marry me—I do not want you, I do not want you”; then she spat three additional times.

This and similar narratives present the many differences between a widow’s unofficial improvised halitsa and the halakhic ritual.

The first difference is the ritual’s setting. The halakhic halitsa located at the city gate, an open public space, is now relocated to the closed local synagogue. Second, levirate marriage, as it is presented in the Torah or the rabbinic tradition, is a manifestation of communal agreement, either a celebration of the completion of yibbum or a coercion of the reluctant levir to follow the community’s will. In Galante’s tale, however, halitsa does not serve as a culmination of but rather as a tool in an ongoing struggle between opposing ideological, theological, economic, familial, and gendered

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376 Galante was Joseph Caro’s student and was ordained as a rabbi in 1566.
378 Moses Alshekh (b. 1507) reports a similar case in a responsum: “[a matter of] a widow who spat at a levir . . . a widow, to disqualify herself for the levir who wanted to levirate, suddenly came while he was sitting among [other] people and spat in his face against his will.” Moses Alshekh, Yosef ben Shim’on Shevah, and Meir Benayahu, She’elot u-teshuvot maharam alshekh. (Jerusalem: Mekhon ha-ketav, 2010), #92. See also the report by Yom Tov Tzahalon (b. 1559) in a responsum, Yom Tov ben Moses Tzahalon, Shut maharitz (Venice, 1694), 31.
camps. Third, the importance of the act of spitting increased in the non-halakhic ritual; if in the Talmudic halitsa the widow is supposed to spit only once, Galante’s widow chose to dispatch two rounds of three torrents each in the levir’s face, a fact the responsum writer thought important (or shocking) enough to emphasize.

Why did the unofficial halitsa narrative deviate from the halakhic scenario in the ways it did? Regarding the location, choosing the synagogue may have been motivated by two reasons. First, the synagogue had replaced the city gates as the community’s public space in post-exilic Ottoman communities. Second, what better time and place exists for intercepting an evasive levir who is reluctant to perform halitsa, as well as for ensuring the presence of potential witnesses, than during the Torah reading in the synagogue where the levir prays?

The turn from a space of communal cohesion to one of competition for communal support, offers an unusual glimpse at the Ottoman Sephardic interpretation of levirate marriage. The question is, of course, whose interpretation is it, what group is represented by the widow? One plausible answer emphasizes the crucial influence of family members on the levir and the widow’s behavior; it may be argued that the families functioned as an alternative source of authority that was in competition with the declining rabbinic elite. It is also possible to look at these practices through the lens of popular culture, in which the alternative halitsa scenario represents the response of the reactionary masses to weak religious elite that came to be dominated by an increasingly oppressive and affluent minority lay leadership in the middle of the sixteenth century.

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Another possible explanation highlights the spitting widow’s sex and sees her as an example of an empowered Ottoman Sephardic woman. Women were discouraged from public areas, and this culture had gendered spaces. *Halitsa* traditionally took place in spaces clearly demarcated by gendered norms; the synagogue represented a hyper-gendered spatial segregation. The rabbinic city gate, by comparison, seems benign and neutral. Were the widows in the alternative *halitsa* narrative representatives of an empowered femininity, a growing influence of Sephardic popular culture, or representatives of the family’s growing power at the expense of rabbinic authority?

The communal significance of the synagogue, as well as communal tensions among men and women or among different groups struggling over the identity of Ottoman Jewry, are all relevant to the dissertation’s argument and are considered in later chapters. In this section, however, I examine the commandment’s logic and purpose by focusing on the third difference between the halakhic and the improvised *halitsa* by asking why the act of spitting assumed increased importance in the postexilic reincarnation of the commandment. For example, it is not too difficult to imagine how nervous a young woman who had recently lost her husband may feel as she transitions from a realm of marital stability to liminality, compounded by the potential feuding between her husband’s family members.

The key for understanding the roots of the Ottoman Sephardic interpretation of the act of spitting in particular and *halitsa* in general is the importance of the widow to this act by carrying her dead husband’s spirit in her womb in order to reincarnate it in a levirate offspring. In accordance with this logic, the act of spitting was perceived by Ottoman Sephardic thinkers as a way to release the husband’s soul from its temporary
havens so that it does not remain captive in his widow’s body but instead will be
reintegrated into the Jewish people’s social fabric by re-placement in a new Jewish body,
family, and lineage—a solution that was perceived as inferior to yibbum yet superior to
the unfortunate alternatives.

**Biblical, Rabbinic, and Early Modern Logic of Halitsa**

As I stated above, the purpose of spitting in the context of biblical halitsa was to
humiliate or threaten a reluctant levir who was refusing to levirate. This purpose was
served by spitting in the levir’s face, un-shoeing him, and proclaiming his shame in
public. The Talmud discusses the place of spitting in halitsa in two different contexts.
First, the sages contemplate the meaning of the verse in Deuteronomy (25:9), which
instructs the widow to “spit in his face.” What should one do in case the wind carries the
spittle off “his face”?

The second rabbinic discussion revolved around the nature and origin of the
spittle itself. Consider, for example, the following quotation from the Talmud, “Raba
stated: If she ate garlic and then spat or if she ate a clod of dirt . . . her act is invalid. What
is the reason? Because it is necessary that she shall spit of her own free will.”

There was great concern over whether any artificial means were used to coerce the widow to
spit during the ritual or if the widow participated of her own free will. Such
apprehensions reflect the rabbis’ justification of a way to avoid the commandment
through the legal loophole of the widow’s consent.

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The early modern concern with the spittle’s purity is technical and legalistic in nature as well: Was the spittle artificially induced by exposure to mouth-watering matter or fragrance (garlic, dirt, or fried fish to name a few) or naturally produced by the widow, rendering the procedure legal. This discourse does not see the purity of spittle as a marker of intent or at least does not mention this concern as its guiding logic. Much like the question of the preference of yibbum or halitsa, and the purpose and mechanics of yibbum itself, the early modern discourse of halitsa had a variety of traditions to choose from and therefore the ability to shape its own interpretation.

Abraham Saba expresses the Ottoman Sephardic logic of halitsa in particular and levirate marriage in general in his Torah commentary Tseror ha-mor. Saba writes:

The dead man’s spirit wanders and jingles as a bell in his wife’s bowels, and he cannot exit. . . . if she is impregnated [by the levir] the spirit exits in the offspring. If he [the levir] does not wish to fulfill the commandment [of levirate] the spirit exits immediately; and when she spits the spirit exits.

The state of quasi-spirit possession alluded to in this quotation raises several interesting questions about the introduction (or reintroduction) of spirit-possession narratives to the Jewish cultural world. Was the Sephardic logic of halitsa a sub-genre of the contemporary interest in spirit possession? Although the two phenomena were certainly connected, both are more accurately explained as reactions to a crisis of communal identity, one which placed the body and the lineage at its center.

In another treatise, Saba reiterates and clarifies the importance of spitting for a successful exit of the husband’s soul: “and that is why the Torah commanded [that] she spit in his face, to take out from her that remaining spirit so it could go up instead of
Saba’s theory of halitsa contributes a new interpretation to the trope according to which the widow is the dead husband’s body. For Saba, the woman literally serves as the dead man’s body, a receptacle containing the husband’s spirit until a successful yibbum or halitsa takes place.

Joseph Caro presents a similar interpretation of the purpose and mechanics of the spitting act. Caro discusses the issue in a responsum regarding a widow who refused to participate in halitsa until her brother-in-law acknowledged her ownership of the husband’s property.

And [of] the matter of spitting, the spewed spittle implies [stands for] that spewed thing that rolls outside of the body from the spine with which the soul clothes and wraps itself [i.e., semen]. For this reason the sages [Talmudic sources] argued the spittle must be insipid [as it is] before the widow eats so it is not from [created due to] eating but from her body’s humors, as that thing spewed from the body.

This is a wonderful source for several reasons. First, much like Saba, Caro sees the act of spitting as a means of releasing the husband’s soul from its captivity in the widow’s body. The second important aspect of Caro’s theory is the mechanic and symbiotic relationship between God and his people, the supernatural and the natural, the divine and the world of the living. As for the mechanical aspect, it manifests not only in the obvious way (i.e., the mechanical embodied acts of spitting or ejaculation) but also in the Jewish people’s influence on the divine. According to late medieval and early modern kabbala, procreation or its absence, directly affects the flow of the vital divine energy to the land of the living and consequently affects the well-being and the continuous existence of the Jewish people and the world. The same dynamic applies for both yibbum

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381 Abraham Saba, *Sefer ketav yad eshkol ha-kofer al megilat rut* (Bartfeld [Bardejov]: Bi-defus Y. M. Blayer, 1907), 15b.
382 Joseph Caro, *She’elot u-teshuvot bet yosef*, #1.
and halitsa, presenting a mechanical and symbiotic relationship between the natural and the supernatural, God and his people.

Third, the perception of spitting as a release of the trapped soul re-signified the traditional rabbinic discourse of the spittle’s nature. The spittle’s composition, significant to previous generations as a way to show the widow’s intent or as a means to fulfill halakhic legal requirements to the letter, receives a kabbalistic spin in the early modern Sephardic interpretation of the commandment. The spittle’s purity serves to ensure it will deliver the trapped soul rather than some benign digestion fluid. Fourth, Caro equates the spittle itself to “that spewed thing that rolls . . . from the spine,” that is semen.

The Ottoman Sephardic logic of halitsa seems to empower the widow, enables her to take an active part in the maintenance of the Jewish people’s demographic integrity, and, in a way, turns her into a man by equating her spitting to an act of ejaculation. An examination of the Ottoman Sephardic logic of spitting reveals the kabbalistic logic of levirate marriage, the way in which this logic re-signified past traditions regarding the matter, and its implications for the perceived nature of the connection between the natural and the supernatural and for research of contemporary gender relations.

However, spitting was only one out of a variety of activities the widow performed in her faculty as a temporary caretaker for her husband’s soul until its release in yibbum or halitsa. The widow was believed to inhale the dead man’s disembodied soul, protect it from a hostile external environment, and enable a spiritual alchemy of sorts during which it was fused to the levir and the widow’s contributions to eventually form the levirate
offspring. In the following discussion I examine these functions to better contextualize the widow’s role in levirate marriage and *halitsa*.

**Halitsa as a Manifestation of Communal Identity**

**Did Halitsa Empower the Widow?**

Spitting and the transmission of fluids during *halitsa* must be imagined through a lens of late medieval and early modern female physiology. The female body was imagined to be porous enough to allow an entrance and exit of the husband’s soul, yet also sufficiently solid to protect the soul from evil spirits, serving as an alchemical laboratory of sorts in which the levirate offspring was produced by fusing matter and the soul of two (widow and levir) or three (remnants of the husband’s semen) contributors, dead and alive. In addition to her physiology, the widow’s liminality manifested in several acts, most importantly inhaling the roaming soul into the safety of her porous body and actively shaping the fetus by imagining the dead husband. Through an examination of these characteristics and acts, it becomes clear that the re-signification of the widow’s contribution to *halitsa* in the Ottoman Sephardic sources (i.e., spitting seen as releasing of the husband’s soul) was in tune with the contemporary interpretation of the commandment.

*STM* tells of the widow’s first and second liminal qualities, her porosity and her ability to protect the soul from evil spirits. The author describes these while recounting the process preceding *yibbum*; the discussion’s axis is a commentary on Jer. 2:24:
Or like a wild ass used to the desert,
Snuffing the wind in her eagerness,
Whose passion none can restrain,
None that seek her need grow weary—
In her season [month], they’ll find her!

The following is the interpretation in STM:

The meaning is that . . . the soul who has no sons, she is wandering . . . And therefore it is written “Or like a wild ass used to the desert, snuffing the wind in her eagerness”; that is referring to the will of the wife who is longing to her husband of youth . . . [and] she inhaled her actual husband’s spirit . . . “in her season [month], they’ll find her!” meaning they will find it [the husband’s soul] anew in the firstborn . . . as the Torah said “The first son that she bears shall be accounted to the dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out in Israel” [Deut. 25:6] not to mean that the firstborn’s name will be the dead man’s . . . but that the same soul of the dead man will be risen with the same family.

According to STM, the “actual husband’s spirit” [the dead husband’s soul] will be reborn in the widow’s levirate offspring. What is notable in the context of the widow’s role in the Jewish people’s economy of bodies and souls is that the spirit enters the widow’s body not by a miraculous process but in a benign physiological one: breathing.

Another source that emphasizes the physical rather than spiritual or metaphorical nature of the widow’s contribution is Alshekh’s commentary on the Book of Ruth (Sefer ene mosheh), where it seems hosting a rattling spirit is physically painful. When explaining the process of levirate marriage to Ruth, Naomi suggested that the seed of David will come out of her, bringing about “the rest of her rattling bowels.”

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383 The Hebrew root of “her season [i.e., her month, hodshah] is the same as the root for “anew” [hadash].
384 Meier, Sefer Ta ‘amey ha-Mitzwoth, 253.
385 Bavli, Sefer ta’amei ha-mitsevot, “Positive Commandments,” §241: “[T]he firstborn is the dead [man] himself, as it is said “that snuffeth up the wind at her pleasure.” Avraham Saba “The dead man’s spirit wanders and jingles as a bell in his wife’s bowels, and he cannot exit. [That is so] because she [the widow] “snuffing the wind in her eagerness.” Saba, Tseror ha-mor, [149b].
Ruth’s levir, indeed eventually brings about Ruth’s “rest” from the rattling spirit. The widow then is equipped with a porous body, capable of allowing her husband’s soul in, to protect it from evil spirits, and to sustain this physically unpleasant process.

As several scholars show, the sixteenth century saw an influx of spirit-possession cases among Sephardic Jews, especially those located in Safed, where approximately two-thirds of the possessed were women. Scholars offer a variety of explanations for this fact, and indicate one that is especially relevant to the current discourse. Women, so the argument goes, are more susceptible for an invasion of an external spirit because their bodies are more open or porous. Perceiving menstruation as a state of possession by evil spirits is a related belief among medieval Sephardic kabbalists that only recently was examined by Sharon Faye Koren.

Another condition of related import is the phenomenon of false pregnancy due to the entrance of wind into the woman’s body because of her natural porosity. A fourteenth century gynecological treatise entitled *The Book of Women’s Love (Sefer ahavat nashim)* mentions a variety of ailments that result in an inflated breast or womb. In the expulsion generation, the preacher Joseph Garson mentions “women who suffer labor pains yet finally give birth to winds, as we see happening to many women,

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because they are impregnated by winds.”394 The primary sources state a number of reasons for these symptoms, yet all revolve around the woman’s porosity.395 For example, one reason for these symptoms is an openness of the woman to receive “cold winds” from the outside, especially after giving birth.396 The woman’s body was considered porous and open to natural (wind) and supernatural (evil spirits or roaming human souls) agents.

Some scholars consider women’s porosity as a mark of their perceived inferiority.397 One phenomenon to support this interpretation is the nature of spirits thought to inhabit female and male bodies. As scholars have demonstrated, positive or beneficial possession types (saints or the divine in Christian sources or beneficial *ibbur* or *maggid* in the Jewish sources) usually inhabited male bodies, whereas negative possession types (the devil, an evil spirit, or the soul of a sinner) usually inhabited female bodies.398

These explanations are too elementary for two reasons. First, the evidence itself presents at times an empowered dominant woman, an agent responsible for the Jewish people and the world’s continuous existence. Consider, for example, Alshekh’s words: it is “the will of the wife” that enables an aware woman, who is in control of the situation, to actively bring into the safety of her body a helpless male soul and to protect it from evil spirits. This scenario is very different than an evil spirit possessing a weak, passive woman devoid of any agency whatsoever. Second, a gaze directed at the *othering* aspects

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397 See, e.g., Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 297.
alone overlooks not only the empowering ones but the concern with the demographic structure as a key for the Ottoman Sephardic communal identity.

An examination of the widow’s empowering traits show that they not only counter the othering thesis but also follow the general logic guiding the Ottoman Sephardic construction of levirate marriage, namely, a concern with the demographic structure and communal identity that revolved around a continuous embodied lineage. For example, the individual woman’s active and crucial contribution to the lineage was her ability to shape the levirate offspring’s facial features by a proper intention and imagination during sexual intercourse with the levir.

The gravity of the dangers from which the widow protects her husband’s soul further emphasizes the empowering nature of her role in the Ottoman Sephardic logic of 
halitsa. The widow’s reason for hurrying to inhale her husband’s soul immediately after his death was to protect it from evil spirits. STM argues that “when a [childless] man passes away . . . several ruhin, shedin, and mazzikin [an assortment of demons] go out to harm his soul.”\(^{399}\)

As in the case of the hybrid offspring phenomenon, early modern Sephardic thinkers were extremely concerned with the manipulation of the ejaculated human souls by disembodied evil spirits. This is evident in Hallawa’s idea of the ramifications of masturbation: “When a man exits this world, those devils who are his sons grab their father’s soul and do not let go unless the living pray for the [father’s] soul.”\(^{400}\) The Castilian Rabbi Abraham Saba writes in his Torah commentary Tseror ha-mor that

\(^{399}\) Meier, “Sefer Ta’amey ha-Mitzwoth,” 247, 249. See also Bavli, Sefer taamei ha-mitsvot, “Positive Commandments,” §241.

\(^{400}\) Hallawa, Tsafnat paneah, 28b–29a in Benayahu, Sefer zikaron, 110–11.
“when a man sees keri during the night, he produces mazzikim [evil doers] who hurt human beings . . . all cling to their father after he passed away so they can make him impure.” Not only his soul, but the dead man’s body as well, was at risk. Exposed hanging corpses, for example, were perceived to be unclean because they were believed to host evil spirits.

For Bavli, a corpse was a “[dwelling] place for mazzikim” because it was made out of “[a] drop of keri [semen].” However, “[as] long as the soul is in the body, its fire burns and rejects the impure [spirits]. This is the purpose of caring for the dead.” Later, in his Ta’amei ha-mitsvot, Bavli elaborates on the nature of the impure spirits who are “[coming] to inhabit the [dead] body to complete their creation since he [God] sanctified the day [the last day of the world’s creation] leaving them imperfect.

As I showed in the discussion of the hybrid offspring phenomenon, two ways to avoid this type of pollution were to rush the corpse to the grave or to circle it as a means to protect it from malevolent spirits. The fate of the soul who lost its purity to the evil spirits is described in the following quotation from the Zohar:

[When a man masturbates,] he is drawn toward that side [the left side, sitra ahra], made like one of them [demons], clinging to them …when he leaves this world they take him and drag him into hell to that region where the brood of defilement are punished... afterward he clings to them, becoming a mazik [demon type] like one of those universal mazzikim.

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401 The Hebrew for nocturnal emission here used to designate succubae.
402 Saba, Tseror ha-mor, [4a] and [99b].
403 Bavli, Sefer ta’amei ha-mitsvot, “Negative Commandments,” §310.
404 Ibid., “Positive Commandments,” §107. See also §157.
405 Ibid., §220.
The impure soul, tarnished by its demonic hybrid offspring, joins and empowers the other side, the sitra ahra, consequently weakening God and placing the Jewish people and the world in grave danger.

The widow plays a key role in the struggle to protect bodies and souls from the evil spirits. The widow’s body may be placed in a unique category of safe earthly spaces or containers for the post-mortem disconnected body and soul that once formed an individual together with her spittle, the grave, the circling praying men, the soul’s assigned body when alive, and the drop of semen in which it was delivered to the world. The outside world, abundant with an assortment of evil spirits, is to be avoided to preserve the individual soul, the Jewish people’s demographic integrity, and the world’s well-being. The widow’s contribution is important because she is able to receive and protect the husband’s soul, as well as ensure the world’s safety; however, she is not merely a passive receptacle but is actively responsible for drawing the soul into the safety of her body, for its well-being, and for its successful completion of the journey from the “folds of her womb” to the fold of the living.

One location of the widow’s agency was her womb, which in addition to protecting the husband’s soul from evil spirits, enabled a successful fusion of spirit and matter to produce a proper embodied heir. This process was not always as simple as introducing the dead husband’s soul to the body of the levirate offspring. In his commentary on the Book of Ruth, Moshe Alshekh discusses what he defines as a “pseudo yibbum,” an extraordinary form of levirate marriage involving three rather than two souls. The book tells the famous story of Ruth, a Moabite gentile woman who is married to Mahalon, a Jewish man from the famine-stricken tribe of Judah. Mahalon and
his brother Chilayon pass away while in Moab. After the death of her sons, their widowed mother Naomi wishes to go back to Judah, and she encourages her two daughters-in-law to remain in their homeland. But Ruth chooses to join Naomi, and in Judah she meets Boaz who marries her in a levirate marriage, a union that gave birth to the Davidic line.

The extraordinary quality of this specific case of yibbum is augmented by the fact that one of the three souls belonged to a gentile. This point is in fact the crux of Alshekh’s discussion of the affair, which is concerned with the miraculous way in which an impure gentile woman could produce such a glorified line of progenies rather than with levirate marriage per se. In fact, Alshekh’s amazement is even more fundamental: “How could the spirit of Mahalon the Israelite man stay in the bowels of the Moabite woman?” In his answer, Alshekh sketches a spiritual alchemy of sorts that took place in Ruth’s body:

Mahalon planted in her spirit (ruah) from his sacred soul (nefesh) as a deposit rattling in her bowels until another spirit joins her because she had intercourse with the redeemer [the levir]. Then Mahalon’s spirit will awaken inside of her and join the redeemer’s spirit with her own spirit [Ruth’s]. And from the three [spirits] the newborn will be sacred.

The first detail that is striking in this account is the absence of an active supernatural power that is responsible for the wonderful combination of spirits: neither God nor an angel enables this essentially physiological process that takes place within the widow’s body. This detail is especially important considering that in earlier narratives an

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407 One of Alshekh’s speculations is taken from the realm of metempsychosis: “as we wrote above . . . she [was] herself the soul of Lot’s older daughter and was reincarnated then to take the fruit of what she did for God in the first [time, i.e., the Sodom and Gomorrah affair] . . . therefore . . . there was sanctity in her soul and it is no wonder Mahalon’s spirit stuck to her.” Alshekh, Sefer ‘ene mosheh, 40a.

408 See Chajes, Between Worlds, 15–16 regarding the fragmentary notion of souls at this time.

409 Alshekh, Sefer ‘ene mosheh, 10b. For more sources about Mahalon leaving a spirit in Ruth’s bowels, see ibid., 24b.
angel is involved in the process. For example, *STM* tells us that to save the husband’s soul from its demonic tormentors, God “gives it [the soul] to one known angel to be saved and reincarnated in his wife.”\(^{410}\) The widow replaces the supernatural agent, the angel, as the soul’s protector. Another striking detail is the passivity of the males; the unfortunate Mahalon (whose name may be translated as sickly) is represented by a spirit that was “planted” in Ruth’s body and that, though rattling impatiently, must passively await the arrival of “another spirit” to be saved. The new spirit, another male’s contribution to the *yibbum*, makes it inside Ruth not with the help of some divine entity but “because she had intercourse with the redeemer [in this case her levir, Boaz].”

If Ruth chose not to have intercourse with Boaz, her husband’s soul would have remained in her, the *yibbum* would not have been completed successfully, and the Davidic line would never have come to be, as well as the hopes for the arrival of the Davidic Messiah. Even after the two male spirits are in Ruth’s body, they require her spiritual contribution to facilitate their exit and the newborn’s birth. The widow is of key importance in actively facilitating a successful *yibbum* by inhaling the husband’s soul, protecting it from evil spirits, enabling its union with the levir’s spirit, and finally making her own spiritual contribution to the mix.

**Yibbum of a Tsaddik’s Widow**

How should we understand the widow’s contribution to the Ottoman Sephardic levirate marriage? As a mark of an empowered Jewish woman? As a growing influence of popular Ottoman culture? As a result of the rising popularity of kabbala? Or as an

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\(^{410}\) Meier, “*Sefer Ta’amey ha-Mitzwot*,” 253–54.
effect of the traumatic experience of the expulsion from Spain? I argue that the widow’s active role in *halitsa* and the Ottoman Sephardic interpretation of the commandment in general were a result of a new sense of communal identity in which the survival of the Jewish people (as well as the survival of the world) depended on maintaining its demographic structure by ensuring the survival of its embodied lineages. This need increased the community’s interest in fathering a child and magnified the anxieties associated with wasteful emission, child mortality, and childless death. The main reason the soul rattled in the widow’s bowels was the couple’s inability to deliver an offspring and the grave ramifications of this inability.

I support the above argument by means of addressing a counterargument as follows: Some scholars argue that releasing a soul by spitting in a *halitsa* ritual was possible only when the particular soul belonged to the ranks of the very few righteous men. Regev, for example, makes this argument when discussing Saba’s interpretation of *halitsa*:

> [T]his [the soul’s release upon spitting] was an ideal yet mostly unrealistic situation. The condition for that spirit’s ability to rise up was dependent on the soul’s wholeness; this sort of perfection was dependent on studying the Torah and following the commandments. Mostly, people did not reach this perfection, so the option of a direct entrance to Eden was unrealistic . . . therefore *halitsa* is only for the righteous few.411

Indeed, by the sixteenth century there came to be two established traditions that combined support for Regev’s interpretation. The first imagined the death of a righteous man as an instantaneous separation of body and soul; the second was a kabbalistic tradition according to which a *tsaddik* was not required to father a child in order to safely enter into the afterworld. Combined, these traditions may support a thesis according to

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411 Regev, “Reasons for the Levirate Command,” 82.
which it is only the righteous man’s childless soul that is instantaneously released upon spitting to enter the afterworld, avoiding the painful protracted process of reincarnation into the levirate offspring. This argument is problematic for several reasons, described below in more detail.

The Spanish rabbi Isaac Arama (1420–94) provides examples for the concept of the righteous man’s instantaneous separation of body and soul at the time of death in his Torah commentary *Aqaydat Yitzchaq*, where he presents a typology of death that varies according to the facility or ease of the separation process. The first type is that of the wicked man not in the sense of a dangerous criminal or an immoral persistent transgressor of the commandments, but of a non-righteous believer, a status Arama identifies with most Jews. “Most people, since their life is materialistically oriented, experience at death such a powerful pull by their bodies on their spirits that a residue of the soul seems unable to release itself from the body, thus absorbing the impurity of the corpse.”

A second type of death is experienced by the “very few . . . [that] follow the opposite pattern inasmuch as their bodies become subservient to their spirituality. At death then the body finds it hard to separate from the soul . . . in such cases, traces of the body . . . try to escape toward heaven with the soul.” Arama mentions Elijah as an example for this type: “Elijah’s’ clothing, including his body would be burned off in the fiery elements he had to traverse.” It seems that under certain circumstances the body was seen as an active righteous agent; however, this sort of righteousness is misdirected,

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413 Ibid.  
414 Ibid.
as it breaks the protocol of separation, forgets its natural role in the economy of bodies and souls, and seeks passing to a world where it does not belong. The third type of separation involves a clean break between body and soul at the moment of death that is accomplished only by very few righteous men. In those cases “no impurity adheres to the corpse at all.” The righteous alone then \( (tsaddikim) \) are able to experience a quick separation of body and soul at the time of death.

The belief that a righteous man did not have to procreate to move on to the afterworld is the second tradition required to support the speculation that in Saba’s halitsa theory the released soul is limited to saintly men. This tradition appears as early as the thirteenth century, evident in Recanati’s argument that “The widow of such a \( tsaddik \) [i.e., childless one] levirates [yet] her husband does not need that \( yibbum \) [i.e., can proceed to the afterworld].”

The belief is consistently apparent in Sephardic sources up to and through the most recent sources presented in this thesis. For example, see the Ottoman Sephardic rabbi Moshe Alshekh who argues in a commentary on Proverbs that “the \( tsaddik \) does not require an offspring [fruit of the womb] to find rest for his soul.” However, although the sources state the childless \( tsaddik \) had a special status with regard to \( yibbum \) and did not require an offspring to proceed to the afterworld, it is difficult to apply the same logic to Saba’s interpretation of halitsa. First, there is no positive evidence to support this was Saba’s intention. Second, even if we accept this speculation and consider Saba’s case to be that of a \( tsaddik \), such speculation does not move the commandment’s focus away

\[\text{415} \text{ Ibid.}\]
\[\text{416} \text{ Recanati, Perush al ha-torah, Genesis 38.}\]
\[\text{417} \text{ Moses Alshekh, Sefer rav peninim: Be’ur mishle Shelomoh (Warsaw: Goldman, 1876), 54.}\]
from a concern with embodied lineage to the post-mortem well-being of the tsaddik. This is so because the special levirate status of a tsaddik does not extend to his widow, as she remains in the procreative cycle and is expected to give birth to a levirate offspring through *yibbum* regardless of her dead husband’s righteousness.

This notion is apparent as early as the late twelfth century in the work of Moses de Leon (1250–1305). De Leon argues in his *Book of the Pomegranate* that the widow of a childless tsaddik should be levirated for two reasons: first, because a person may seem to be righteous when in reality he has been secretly evil and, second, because “the righteous men [tsaddikim] give birth after their death.” This post-mortem procreation benefits “many people in the world that are far from their places [live far away], fathers, and households, or do not have a brother or a known relative to raise their name in Israel.”

Those unlucky souls are reintegrated into the embodied Jewish people through an act of divine intervention: “God fixes [for] them a vacant place in a tsaddik’s widow [that is] levirated and because of her, his name [the dead man’s] will not be erased.”418 In addition to presenting other evidence for the kabbalistic idea of “raising a name” to mean recreating an embodied lineage, de Leon argues that the widow of a tsaddik serves as a surrogate to the unlucky childless dead who were unable to reincarnate into the body of a levirate offspring of their own.

Recanati employs a similar logic when discussing the issue of the childless tsaddik’s widow, which is “not in vain because there [in the widow] will rest those

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418 Elliot R. Wolfson, *The Book of the Pomegranate* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), 252. And notice that, though the theory may differ, the tsaddik serves here a similar purpose to that served when his soul multiplies in an *ibbur*-levirate process to recreate a lost lineage.
without a redeemer [levir] or that never married a wife.” Recanati, much like de Leon, considers a reincarnation of the childless man’s soul into the levirate offspring as essential for a successful completion of the levirate process. Furthermore, he shares with de Leon the idea that although the tsaddik’s soul is exempted from this ordeal, his widow is required to levirate in order to assist souls incapable of reincarnating into their nonexistent widows’ levirate offspring. Recanati teaches more on the childless tsaddik in his commentary on Isaiah where he tells of Rabbi Yohanan who:

had sons who died and he feared this punishment [denial of entrance to the afterlife]. . . . God enlightened one old man who told him “on you, rabbi Yohanan, since you are old, and on rabbi Hezekiah, since he was barren, ‘for thus said the LORD: As for the eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths . . . And hold fast to My covenant— . . . I will give them . . . a name [B]etter than sons or daughters . . . an everlasting name’” [Isaiah 56:4–5], that is to say their soul, whose name is Name will never be cut.420

Here, Recanati makes a number of important observations: first, Rabbi Yohanan’s concern is with leaving heirs behind rather than with performing the commandment of “be fruitful and multiply” per se, a task he had already achieved by fathering his first sons. The goal is to ensure the continuation of the lineage by leaving behind living offspring rather than following the commandments for this sake alone. Second, Recanati’s commentary on Isaiah expands de Leon’s list of those enjoying the services of the tsaddik’s widow; the revised list includes those who died far from their home, never married, are barren, or are eunuchs—in essence, all childless dead without a potential redeemer. Third, only in the special case of the few righteous tsaddikim, a “name” stands for one’s soul and “raising a name” was perceived as caring for and maintaining one’s soul rather than a continuous embodied lineage. This implies that for the majority of

419 Recanati, Perush al ha-torah, Gen. 38.
420 Ibid.
average non-righteous believers, raising a name involved leaving an offspring behind, rendering the tsaddik’s case an exception that proves the rule.

STM is another source examining the case of the childless tsaddik:

[T]his is the secret of the righteous [tsaddikim who] give birth even when they are dead. . . . God, so that no blemish will be placed on the tsaddik through incarnation [so that the tsaddik will not have to withstand another cycle of temptations on earth], sends the soul of an evil man instead.\(^{421}\) And therefore it is written that tsaddikim give birth in their death.\(^{422}\)

It seems the main concern of STM is with the righteous man himself; his exemption from reincarnation through levirate marriage is meant to prevent putting a “blemish” on his otherwise exemplary record. However, STM does not end here and presents another means to sustain the tsaddik’s prestige; in addition to avoiding potential blemishes that may occur during an additional round in the world of the living, levirating a tsaddik’s widow enables the tsaddik to save yet another soul in Israel belonging to an evil man otherwise barred from the afterworld. Leaving behind an heir through levirate marriage is a major concern even in a text focused on the righteous man’s well-being.

In the expulsion generation, there is a similar logic regarding the case of a childless tsaddik’s widow. Consider, for example, the letter sent from Alcastiel to Hayat. Hayat’s second question dealt with different open-ended questions regarding the process of creation in the book of Genesis. Especially relevant to the current discussion is the following question: “and inform me [i.e., explain] in your grace the matter of the souls left disembodied after the six days of creation, when did they sin [to merit] never [being] materialized in a body so that [as an alternative] they have to transmigrate to [the body

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\(^{421}\) I.e., so that the righteous man, sentenced for a reincarnation due to his childlessness, will not sin during his new lifetime.

\(^{422}\) Meier, “Sefer Ta’amey ha-Mitzwot,” 252.
of] a levirate son of Torah scholars? Alcastiel adds those disembodied souls whose embodiment process was cut short by the entrance of the very first Shabbat to the list of those embodied through a yibbum of a Torah scholar’s widow.

In Alcastiel’s answer to Hayat’s second question, more details are revealed about the yibbum of a childless tsaddik. From the Zoharic tradition we learn that the Edenic serpent had intercourse with Eve and so “mixed [his demonic semen] with the holy [one] and gave birth to Cain.” The souls born after this union carry the “filth” with them and are in need of purification. Those who failed to purify themselves by performing the commandments during their lifetime are aided by the childless tsaddik’s widow: “The souls of tsaddikim would ask mercy for those forms [the serpent’s offspring] and those who reincarnated and did not manage to enter under the Shekhinah’s wings [i.e., purify themselves] . . . so they [the souls] enter in holiness in[to] the widow of a Torah scholar that is in need of a levir or [into] another [i.e., another widow in need of a levir].”

The childless tsaddik’s vacant place in his widow is not left unused; the souls tarnished by the serpent’s “filth” who did not manage to purify themselves in past reincarnations are now reincarnated “in holiness” into a holy man’s levirate offspring. Alcastiel emphasizes the ordinary status of the tsaddik’s widow in her reincorporation into the procreation cycle by stressing that the disembodied soul may reincarnate into her offspring, but also to “another[‘s],” potentially to the offspring of the widow of an ordinary man.

423 Scholem, “Li-idi’at ha-kabbalah bi-sefarad,” 175.
424 Moses ben Jacob Cordovero, Pardes rimonim (Korets: Bi-defus ha-meshutafim Tsevi Hirsh ben Aryeh Leb va-hatano Shemu’el ben Yisakhar Ber Segal, 1780), 34.
In addition to educating Hayat on the characteristics of a childless tsaddik’s levirate, Alcastiel warns about the potential hazards if one fails to successfully execute this process: the impure souls that cannot return to the ranks of the Jewish people do not roam aimlessly but instead join “the destroyed forms . . . held by the serpent . . . they clothe themselves with corpses and human bodies . . . they are the insolent men of their generation.”\footnote{Ibid.} The disembodied souls join those already recruited by the serpent (“the destroyed forms”); they embody themselves with abandoned, unattended dead bodies and thus are able to infiltrate the ranks of the living. This, Alcastiel argues, is the origin of the “insolent men,” literally “those of strong face,” meaning evil men lacking compassion whose faces do not twitch when encountering the most horrific crimes.

Through nuanced examples, Alcastiel paints a picture of a turn-of-the-century Sephardic economy of bodies and souls in which there is no vacuum: unsaved, disembodied souls will not simply disappear but turn into impure spirits in service of cosmic evil. These evil-doers seek to harm the living from within, as immoral members of society that are in fact evil spirits clothed with “[human] corpses” or from without as evil spirits that seek to torment disembodied souls and occupy unattended corpses.

Alcastiel continues to reflect on the cosmic ramifications of a poorly managed balance of bodies and souls: “and for those forms [i.e., the different disembodied souls], he [God] gave a place for reincarnation so that they can be fixed time after time until they are allowed into the holy palace [heaven], and when they are clothed in the holy drop [reincarnated in a righteous family] as in [the case of] the vessel left behind by a Torah
scholar [i.e., his widow], the staff points towards grace.” The impure souls’ Sisyphian purifying process, when successful, leads the divine staff to “point toward grace,” thus allowing for a continuous flow of the divine grace to the Jewish people and the world. This interpretation, as well as the others shown above, demonstrates that sustaining a continual embodied lineage was not individual but communal and cosmic in nature and that the tsaddik and his widow were essential to this effort.

Joseph Caro’s Maggid mesharim is a mystical diary in which Caro recounted messages from the Maggid, a supernatural source whose exact identity is undecided in modern scholarship. In his diary, Caro sheds additional light on the function of the tsaddik in the salvation of disembodied souls. On the 24th of Nisan, the Maggid, while discussing the proper way to mourn a righteous man, explains the saying according to which “the righteous bring about more births at their deaths than during their lifetimes.”

[When] he [the righteous person] leaves the world and is mourned, he is accompanied to the Garden of Eden by souls that did not merit entering [Eden] beforehand. They attach themselves to him during that mourning eulogy, and thus they merit developing in bodies in this world. When he rises upwards, they descend for development in bodies.

The tsaddik then performs a miraculous act of reintegrating a rejected soul back into the natural cycle of transmigrations; reintroducing a lost soul to a body and a lost Jewish person to its people. First, the tsaddik releases the unmerited souls from their

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427 Ibid., 183.
428 Alshekh’s commentary on the Book of Proverbs presents a similar logic of the tsaddik’s widow levirate: “[The tsaddik is not required to procreate] because the fruit of the tsaddik is the tree of life he has in the afterlife due to his Torah [studies] and his [following of the] commandments. This is the opinion of the Zohar that wondered about the need to levirate a Torah scholar’s widow. And they answered that it [yibbum of a righteous man’s widow] is necessary to bring the soul of [a man who] died childless and did not have a brother to levirate.” Alshekh, Sefer rav peninim, 54.
429 See Chajes, Between Worlds, 28–29. The entity is speaking through Caro and identifies itself alternatively as male and female, as an angel or the Shekhinah. Some scholars see the Maggid as an angel, yet the issue is highly disputed.
430 The first month of the liturgical year, c. March–April.
431 Joseph Caro, Sefer maggid mesharim, 61a.
detention in the world of the living and enables their return to the Garden of Eden. Once there, they join a pool of souls awaiting their reentry to the world of the living through reincarnation. For this to happen, however, the tsaddik must be assisted by the mourning community, rendering mourning itself an extremely important communal act with direct effects for the world and the Jewish people: “if they [the mourners] do not cry, He [God] will become angry with the entire assembly,”432 thus we may assume that improper mourning will bring the end of, or at least critically damage, the flow of souls from the supernatural world.

The Maggid’s discussion of parashat shemot (the thirteenth weekly Torah portion, Exod. 1:1 to 6:1) conveys a similar idea of the tsaddik’s death and mourning as a process of a rehabilitation, a natural cyclical process of metempsychosis dependent on the flow of souls to and from the Edenic and earthly worlds. The Maggid raises the issue of metempsychosis by examining the case of a unique righteous man, Joseph, and the reason for the textual proximity between the report of his death and that of the increased fertility of the children of Israel, as recounted in Exod. 1:6–7: “Joseph died, and all his brothers . . . but the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied . . . so that the land was filled with them.” Caro’s interpretation of this verse perceives the textual proximity to imply a causal relationship and follows a similar logic guiding his ideas regarding the proper mourning of a tsaddik:

[W]hen a righteous person is leaving the world, other living souls who are wandering about the world naked and without peace go over to him. When a eulogy that includes Torah matters is delivered, then the living soul of the righteous wraps itself in those words, and so rises to upper levels. The other souls as well wrap themselves in those same holy words, and thus their transmigration is decreed. The placement of every single one of them is decreed at the same

432 Lev. 10:6.
time, and place is arranged for the transmigrating soul. However you look at it, the righteous thus produce more progeny upon their deaths than during their lifetimes.\textsuperscript{433}

The Garden of Eden is not the last stop of the naked souls joining the \textit{tsaddik}.

Their miraculous embodiment in the words of the Torah was necessary for a reintroduction to the cycle of reincarnations rather than a one-way ticket to the afterworld such as the \textit{tsaddik} enjoyed. Second, the Maggid reiterates the need for some kind of a replacement body as a vehicle enabling a proper transition from one world to the other, emphasizing the centrality of the embodied existence for personal and communal identity.

The “words” of the Torah that were uttered during the eulogy in turn join a list of symbolic bodies containing and protecting the disembodied “naked” soul; the grave, the circling mourners, the widow’s body, her spittle, and a drop of semen all form different kinds of essential embodiment for the soul’s journey to and from the Garden of Eden.

Third, it is worth noting that the community of the living took care of the disembodiment of the naked souls and of the \textit{tsaddik}; the mourning community, through a proper eulogy introducing Torah exegesis, enables the \textit{tsaddik} to “wrap itself in those words” and consequently to rise to the afterworld’s “upper levels.” At the same time, by aiding the \textit{tsaddik}, the community enables the embodiment of the other naked souls, thus emphasizing its communal responsibility to the living and the dead. In addition this fact emphasizes the notion that the communal identity I highlight in this dissertation is not absolutely ethnic but relies heavily on the fulfillment of the Jewish religious commandments. The ideal community was seen as one organized in a particular

\textsuperscript{433} Joseph Caro, \textit{Sefer maggid mesharim}, 21a.
demographic structure and as one that followed the commandments. Demography alone nor religious devotion in itself was perceived as sufficient; a satisfactory relationship between God and his people could only exist once both were achieved.

The tsaddik assists those souls awaiting their re-embodiment in the Garden of Eden in addition to those disembodied souls seeking to leave the world of the living. This function of the tsaddik is recounted in the Maggid’s following statement: “[when] a righteous person comes to this world, he brings along a few souls to accompany himself and to honor him as we have said [emphasis mine], and he favors them [grants them the opportunity] in developing in bodies.”\footnote{Ibid.} The tsaddik assists some souls on their way down from the supernatural to the earthly world, in addition to those stranded in the world of the living unable to proceed up to the Garden of Eden.

Of special importance in the quotation above is the note “as we have said,” referring to the Maggid’s interpretation of Isaiah 49:8 that appears only a few pages before: “on a day of salvation I help you—I created you and appointed you a covenant people—[r]estoring the land, [a]llotting anew [to cause to inherit] the desolate heritages.” Caro was perplexed by the verse in general yet with one section in particular: “[W]hat is the meaning of ‘I . . . appointed you a covenant people?’ What does ‘to cause to inherit’ mean? Would it not have been preferable to say ‘to inherit’? Furthermore, what are ‘desolate heritages’? Would it not have been preferable to say ‘settled heritages?’”\footnote{Ibid., 61a. Here I translate nahalot as “heritages” rather than “holdings” as the JPS translation suggests because “heritages” better represents the interpretation of the kabbalistic commentators.} The key for answering these questions, Caro argues, is in realizing that “desolate heritages” refers to disembodied souls that wander naked . . . because they have not completed their
deeds in this world, or because they sinned and were punished . . . and they wander before the curtain trying to enter the Garden of Eden, but are not permitted to do so.\textsuperscript{436}

In kabbalistic theories of the divine emanations, the \textit{sefirot}, which imagine them to form a divine body of sorts, the \textit{tsaddik sefirah} assumes the role of the male member by channeling vital sexual energy and thus affecting procreation on earth. The soul, in fact, is on its way down from one of God’s emanations, the \textit{sefirah of yesod}, also referred to as \textit{tsaddik or yosef ha-tsaddik}, and carries with it a variety of sexual symbolism. The \textit{yesod} is associated with \textit{brit milah} (the covenant of circumcision) as a symbolic representation of its responsibility for a proper process of procreation conducted within the sacred parameters. “When a soul leaves the upper covenant, which is the \textit{yesod}, from where the souls sprout forth to descend to the \textit{yesod} below, and when they sprout forth in the \textit{yesod} below to descend to the world . . . then wandering souls come before a particular eternal soul to honor it and accompany it.”\textsuperscript{437} And “when it [the \textit{tsaddik’s soul}] descends to this world for development within a body,” the other souls accompanying it, descend with it and merit being appropriated for development within [human] bodies. Accordingly “to cause to inherit the desolate heritages” means that when an eternal soul reaches this world to develop within a human body, then naked eternal souls called “desolate heritages” through the merit of the eternal soul enter bodies for development.\textsuperscript{438}

The \textit{tsaddik} is to carry with him those “naked eternal souls” that are associated with the passive “desolate heritages,” helpless souls unable to “settle” themselves and require the assistance of a righteous man who will “cause” their “inheritance.” The function of the lower \textit{yesod} or the \textit{yesod} below and the direct link between the \textit{tsaddik’s}

\textsuperscript{436} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{437} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{438} Ibid.
deeds and proper flow of souls and regenerative energy is further exemplified in the work of the expulsion generation rabbi Meir ibn-Gabbai. In his commentary *Avodath ha-kodesh*, Gabbai (c.1480–1540), a Sephardic expellee who settled in the Ottoman Empire, makes the following argument: “the seed is drawn from the brain and reaches the tip of the phallus, and is emptied into his mate . . . and the cause of all this lies in the deeds of the righteous who ascend upwards [i.e., their deeds ascend to the heavens].  

The *tsaddik* in Caro’s *Maggid mesharim* is an agent of metempsychosis, itself the key for a proper functioning of the natural and supernatural worlds whose ailment, it seems, is caused by “naked souls” unable to facilitate the natural process of metempsychosis on their own.

Though the details may vary, the main idea emanating from the Ottoman Sephardic discourse about the levirate marriage of a *tsaddik*’s widow remains essentially the same. The *tsaddik*, upon his death, enables the continuous existence of an embodied lineage. Some sources present the *tsaddik*’s death as an event meant to restart a stagnated embodiment process through metempsychosis. Others present his death as one that is as intolerable as any other childless death and, consequently, suggest that every widow of a childless man must be levirated. In this context, it does not matter if the childless man is righteous or not; whether the levirate marriage is to save him from possible future sins or to allow him to attain one more mitsvah (good deed); or whether the saved soul belongs to an evil man, a eunuch, a disembodied soul that was created on the first Shabbat eve, or a devout man who is living abroad. No marriage should end without a living heir, no lineage should end abruptly. In fact, as the following discussion of Avraham Saba’s commentary on the Book of Ruth titled *Eshkol ha-kofer* shows, when an exemption from

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levirate marriage is given, it is to those who already had procreated, to the parents of the lesser masses rather than to the few childless saintly tsaddikim.

Mothers who lost their husbands and widows who had already given birth were part of the levirate marriage discourse although they had no obligation to levirate. One source that demonstrates the relationship between the childless widow, the mother-widow, and the logic of levirate marriage is the aforementioned Eshkol ha-kofer by Saba. In this work, it becomes evident that Saba’s interpretation of halitsa revolves around and is concerned with procreation rather than the elevation of righteous men’s souls. Eshkol ha-kofer presents a purpose of spitting and halitsa that is identical to that found in Saba’s Tseror ha-mor: “the Torah commanded [the widow] to spit in his face to extract from her that spirit that was left in her in this world and it will rise up where it belongs.”

The following quotation, however, reveals something new about Saba’s logic of levirate marriage, something that makes it very difficult to think of this process as one experienced by the righteous few alone: “as I wrote there [emphasis mine], this way [i.e., spitting during halitsa] the woman whose husband died and did not take another husband does a great favor to the dead man so he can be calm and does not have to fight.” The quotation raises two problems: Saba’s statement seems somewhat confusing because unlike other sources mentioned above that presented yibbum as essential in many ways and necessary for the husband’s well-being, here he suggests taking a husband is optional by qualifying the widow as one who “does not take another husband.”

\[440\] Saba, Eshkol ha-kofer, 15b.
\[441\] Ibid.
\[442\] Ibid.
As I show below, however, the husband of the widow in the quotation from *Eshkol ha-kofer* already fathered offspring, thus significantly diminishing the need for *yibbum*. The second problem is that in *Eshkol ha-kofer*, Saba argues that the goal of spitting and the soul’s release through *halitsa* is to save the soul from some sort of a “fight” whereas in his *Tseror ha-mor*, the goal is to enable the soul’s elevation to the afterworld. So what is the nature of this “fighting”? Who fights whom and why? What is its connection to the soul’s elevation? To learn more about the “fighting,” one must look no further than a few lines above at the location Saba refers to as “there”:

The woman does favor to her dead husband when she [is] not marrying another since she is not required to procreate. By [doing] this she does great pleasure to the dead and to herself; to the dead since . . . [his] spirit is left in her . . . and if she marries another husband she will always remember the first . . . and this is why it was written in Sitre Torah: “he who marries a widow is like one who enters the great sea [in a boat] without oars” since inside of her still [exists] his [the first husband’s] soul and when she is connected to the second husband [by sexual intercourse] another spirit enters into her and they [the husbands’ spirits] grasp each other tightly. Sometimes the first [wins] and expels the second so he [the second] dies; sometime the second wins and expels the first.443

This quotation is telling in several ways. For now, I would like to focus on the way in which it clarifies the logic governing Saba’s theory of *halitsa*. The “fighting” then is conducted between the spirits of the dead husband that remained in the widow’s body and a new one introduced by the living husband. Therefore, it is the widow’s responsibility to prevent such conflict that is unpleasant to all and potentially deadly for one of the husbands either by spitting, if *halitsa* follows a childless husband’s death, or avoiding remarriage if the husband fathered an offspring and *halitsa* is unnecessary. In the case of the widow presented in *Eshkol ha-kofer*, the reason for not choosing *halitsa* is

443 Ibid.
the very same reason she “do[es] not take another husband”;\textsuperscript{444} that is because “she is not required to procreate” rather than because she was exempted from \textit{yibbum} due to her dead husband’s saintly status.\textsuperscript{445}

In other words, Saba’s focus in both \textit{Eshkol ha-kofer} and \textit{Tseror ha-mor} is on procreation rather than on the husband’s righteousness, the widow’s well-being, the lineage’s commemoration, or the commandment’s fulfillment for the sake of its fulfillment. The basic question Saba poses when discussing a widow’s marital future is whether she, or her dead husband, managed to leave an offspring behind. The act of spitting the husband’s soul was meant to give the childless dead (either the widow’s husband or a foreign childless man in the case of a \textit{tsaddik}’s widow) another chance to redeem themselves through fathering an offspring and consequently remaking a broken lineage. What the childless \textit{tsaddik}’s levirate discourse shows, much like this part’s other chapters, is that the purpose guiding the Ottoman Sephardic interpretation of levirate marriage was to sustain a communal identity revolving around a demographic structure whose smallest building block is the embodied lineage.

\textsuperscript{444} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{445} Ibid.
Chapter 7

The Logic of Levirate Marriage: Alternate Explanations

Thus far I have explained the Ottoman Sephardic preference of *yibbum* over *halitsa* and the Ashkenazic and Sephardic interpretations of the purpose and mechanics of the commandment. Ottoman Sephardic Jews preferred *yibbum* and saw it as a means to recreate or maintain lineage integrity and consequently their communal identity, whereas the Ashkenazic attitude differed not only in preferring *halitsa* over *yibbum* but also in considering it an essentially nominal process that served to commemorate rather than recreate a lineage. The primary reason for the variance in the Ottoman Sephardic interpretation of levirate marriage, as I have argued above, stems from the Ottoman Sephardim’s concern with their embodied lineages. The Ottoman Sephardic imagination perceived the lineages as the basic building blocks of the Jewish people’s demographic structure and consequently their communal identity; this was a uniquely Ottoman Sephardic response to a crisis of communal identity in the aftermath of the expulsion from Spain.446

There are, however, alternative explanations associated with the levirate marriage discourse alone, and which require further examination. Some scholars point to a concern with retaining the widow’s inheritance in the husband’s family line as the logic governing contemporary interpretations of levirate marriage. I suggested above that the phenomenon’s unique characteristics may be explained by the manifestation of a post-exilic empowered woman who had emerged from the Ottoman Sephardic diasporic

446 For alternative approaches, see, for example, the different interpretations of lineages and their role in reconstructing Sephardic identity between 1391 and 1492 as presented in the work of David Nirenberg. See discussion, comments, and references in the section “Yibbum as a Commemorative Act” below.
experience. Some primary sources, however, suggest that interest in the dead husband’s commemoration and post-mortem well being shaped contemporary ideas of yibbum. Although these explanations offer some convincing elements, they fail to adequately address the fact that the demographic structure of the Jewish people is the axis around which all other interpretations revolve.

Ensuring Patrilineal Inheritance

Some scholars argue that the Ottoman Sephardic idea of yibbum was shaped by a desire to keep the family’s property within the paternal family line. Consider, for example, Ruth Lamdan who argues that the concern with maintaining the inheritance in the father’s family line constitutes the “true secret behind the ‘secret of yibbum,’” which refers to the kabbalistic usage of “secret” to denote the hidden or kabbalistic meaning rather than the revealed, literal purpose stipulated in biblical or rabbinic texts. Lamdan points to ibn Zimra’s response to the question of why it is that levirate duty concerns only paternal brothers. Ibn Zimra answers: “The souls descend from heaven in families. The mother’s family, however, is not considered family in respect of inheritance. For this reason the soul forms a bond with the father’s family alone. This explains why yibbum is not incumbent on brothers on the mother’s side.” Based on ibn Zimra’s quotation, Lamdan asserts that “[i]t is clear the original reason for yibbum was to preserve property within the family and prevent its passing into alien hands.”

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447 Lamdan, Separate People, 217.
448 Ibn Zimra, Sefer metsudat david, 209.
449 Lamdan, Separate People, 217. For a similar argument, see Bavli, Sefer taamei ha-mitsvot, “Negative Commandments,” §331: “The yavama [widow] should not marry a stranger . . . the purpose of this commandment is that [a] dead man does not want his wife and inheritance to be governed by a stranger.”
Isaac Caro makes a similar argument in one of his sermons: “God ordered that the son shall inherit his father because he credits him [i.e., betters his father’s post-mortem condition] by studying the Torah. The woman [a daughter] does not inherit because she cannot study the Torah and therefore does not credit her father . . . for this he [the son] inherits his father and has wealth, assets, honor, and control over the father’s assets.”

Maintaining the family’s material possessions within the father’s family line is indeed an important and influential concern shared by Caro and ibn Zimra. But we must be wary in ascribing this argument primacy when it comes to the logic of Ottoman Sephardic levirate marriage. Although it certainly was a major concern of Ottoman Sephardic Jews, maintaining the family’s possessions within the paternal line was not the main motivation, the “true secret” behind contemporary interpretations of yibbum, and it did not cancel the importance and influence of the kabbalistic interpretations of the Ottoman Sephardic idea of levirate marriage. First, assuming that the purpose of the Ottoman Sephardic interpretation was to legitimize maintaining property in the father’s household, why posit metempsychosis, roaming souls, spiritual alchemy in the widow’s “bowels,” and a number of other novelties—from the colorful to the bizarre—when the same purpose could have been achieved by a variety of other tools?

Pointing toward their attempt to keep material possessions in the paternal line does not explain what made this particular tool popular among Ottoman Sephardic thinkers. Should we simply tag this culture as misogynistic or paternal and put it in one basket with other such cultures that reached this destination by other paths and for

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450 Joseph Caro, Hesde daniel, 124b.
different reasons? This approach is counterproductive because it lacks any explanatory capacity. To make sense of this phenomena and the historical moment that produced it, we must look for a pattern in the different ways in which those paternal or misogynistic trends manifest. From the sources quoted above, it is clear that this shared quality is a concern with a continuous lineage manifested in a kabbalistic discourse directly tying it to the Jewish people’s survival. Therefore, even if we accept that a desire to keep the family’s property within the paternal family line was a major Sephardic concern, it is not in contradiction but in support of a thesis that asserts a communal identity revolving around the continuous embodied lineage as a dominant influence on the Ottoman Sephardim in general and their idea of *yibbum* in particular.

A second issue with the inheritance argument lies in the perspectives within the primary sources, which perceive of inheritance in both earthly-material and kabbalistic-spiritual terms; they imagine inheritance both as the dead man’s earthly material possessions yet also as his body or his soul’s state of embodiment, its physical manifestation. Countering such clear and powerful evidence such as ibn Zimra and Caro’s assertions regarding inheritance in material terms seems a difficult task indeed. However, another look at ibn Zimra’s *Metsudat David* contextualizes his and Caro’s statements and makes it more difficult to accept them at face value:

I saw the Ishma’elim [Muslims] following the same commandment [*yibbum*] yet they do not differentiate whether he [the dead man] has sons or not. And I asked them why it is [this way]? And they said it is due to a law of inheritance. . . . Bless him who gave us his Torah and differentiated us from them, because this commandment has a great kabbalah secret from the sages.\(^{451}\)

\(^{451}\) Ibn Zimra, *Sefer metsudat david*, 209.
This quotation problematizes the interpretation that inheritance of material goods constituted the “main secret” behind yibbum because the “great kabbalah secret” or secrets that ibn Zimra references here concern the phenomena of ibbur (impregnation) and gilgul (metempsychosis), both associated with the kabbalistic logic of levirate marriage. Second, ibn Zimra criticizes the Muslims for the exact logic with which Lamdan associated him, namely, that the purpose of the commandment is to ensure that a man’s material possessions remain in the paternal line. Muslims are scolded not only for doing the wrong thing (i.e., using yibbum for material purposes) but also for failing to do the right thing, namely, failing to enable the childless man’s transmigration through gilgul or ibbur.

The same concern, in fact, immediately follows ibn Zimra’s answer regarding yibbum by a maternal brother: “if [they] are maternal brothers [the husband’s soul] will not return in actuality [in truth] . . . and the dead will know him [his maternal brother] and run away from there.”452 Third, the word translated as “inheritance” [nahalah] literally means “an estate,” that is, privately owned land. Therefore, taken literally, nahalah seems to support an argument regarding the centrality of maintaining material possessions in the paternal line for shaping the Ottoman Sephardic idea of levirate marriage. However, the same word receives an additional interpretation in the kabbalistic tradition considering it as a body without a soul, the potential solution to the disembodied soul’s predicament.

In fact, as I showed above, Joseph Caro who was ibn Zimra’s contemporary and the author of Maggid mesharim understood nahalah exactly in this way as is evident in

452 Ibid.
his interpretation of Isaiah 49:8. Caro’s main interest here concerns the meaning of “desolate heritages” [nahalot] which, according to him “refer to disembodied souls.” This is a relevant observation because the Hebrew for “heritages” is a plural form of the singular nahalah, the same word Lamdan translated as “inheritance” in ibn Zimra’s quotation from Metsudat david. This interpretation is compatible with the mental habits of Ottoman Sephardim in general and their kabbala sages in particular who, as I show below, described the body’s relationship to the soul with idioms suggesting containment and flow, such as “treasury, branch, tree,” and the intergenerational connections between family members in idioms suggesting vertical relationship such as “link” and “chain”, “tree” and “branch.”

This layered translation of nahalah suggests that in ibn Zimra’s time, geographical area, cultural milieu, and intellectual sphere, the word “inheritance” assumed symbolic-kabbalistic significance and came to signify the disembodied soul’s potential state of embodiment. Seen in this way, an allegorical kabbalistic reading of ibn Zimra’s opinion that a widow cannot be “considered family in respect of inheritance [nahalah]” seems plausible. This reading of ibn Zimra’s lines alters their significance dramatically, shifting the focus from the worldly economy of material possessions to a spiritual economy of bodies and souls. What concerned ibn Zimra was not only the dead husband’s property but the widow’s inability to inherit his place as the lineage’s

453 “Thus said the LORD . . . on a day of salvation I help you . . . and appointed you a covenant people, restoring the land, allotting anew the desolate holdings.”
454 See p. 177–79.
455 See the section titled “Regulating the Earthly and Supernal Demographic Structure” below.
representative in the Jewish people’s demographic structure. As this more nuanced interpretation of Ibn Zimra illustrates, levirate offspring was crucial not just for material inheritance but for a whole constellation of meanings: for maintaining the lineage’s continual existence, the Jewish people’s demographic structure, and consequently their communal identity.

A Manifestation of an Empowered Woman?

Another possible explanation for the Ottoman Sephardic interpretation of levirate marriage centralizes on the restructuring of traditional gender roles and the emergence of an empowered Ottoman Sephardic woman. This thesis has the potential to lead away from a fixed focus on communal identity to one that takes into account gender relations as central to the Ottoman Sephardic logic of yibbum. And the evidence presented above may support such a thesis; the Sephardic logic of levirate marriage indeed displays an active woman as a major player in an economy of bodies and souls—an interplay that is essential for the continual existence of embodied lineages, communal identity, and consequently, for the existence of the world and the arrival of the messiah.

As shown above, women functioned as key actors in the theory of levirate marriage but also as powerful liminal figures whose bodies were able to accommodate disembodied souls and protect them from evil spirits—a role previously allocated to supernatural “known angels” in earlier texts. Furthermore, a widow’s empowered status could possibly be found in brazen displays of agency, such as the crossing of gender lines.

456 As I show in the section called “Regulating the Earthly and Supernal Demographic Structure” below, a father was not allowed to levirate his daughter-in-law, hence it was impossible for a father, as well as a widow, to “inherit” the dead man’s place in the family line.
during the unofficial halitsa practice where a widow spat in the levir’s face while he prayed in the synagogue.

However, despite the evidence above, there are several reasons to suggest that the sixteenth century was not a golden age for Sephardic women. First, the levirate marriage discourse that gave birth to supposedly empowering attributes carries with it several disempowering qualities as well. Second, as I show below, the empowering and disempowering elements shared a concern with continuous embodied lineages as a common denominator.

Regarding the ambivalent transformation and the role of women in the Ottoman Sephardic interpretation of yibbum, it must be noted that whatever gains were achieved were made within the context of a discourse that limited the widow’s free choice of a spouse, the future father of her children, and control over her inherited material possessions. At the same time, it placed in the levir’s male hands the responsibility for material possessions and, more broadly, responsibility for the proper functioning of the relationship between God and his people.

Male preferential treatment emerges quite clearly in resolutions of legal disputes concerning levirate marriage, a fact that Minna Rozen notes in her research on early modern Ottoman Sephardim:

Levirate marriage itself is an issue of marginal importance . . . when there was a clash of wills between a man and a woman, all of the legal authorities ruled in favor of the male. They looked for constructive solutions only when the man was interested in divorce . . . they did not hesitate to rule in favor of the man even when it was obvious that his motive was far from a desire to commemorate his dead brother’s name.457

457 Rozen, Jewish Community in Istanbul, 161.
The young betrothal age and the Ottoman Sephardic positive attitude toward polygamy are additional realities that counter an empowerment thesis. If in the halakhic and in the majority of medieval sources the age of betrothal was eighteen, for the Ottoman Sephardim the age was closer to fifteen.\(^\text{458}\) Although the European model of marriage presented a considerable age gap between husband and wife (eight years on average), suggesting an unequal relationship, the European bride held a higher social status as a young woman compared to her Ottoman counterpart who was considered a child.\(^\text{459}\)

As for polygamy, the Torah presents no clear opposition on the issue although later sources from the Babylonian exile through late antiquity (and even from medieval Europe) present a reality of mixed approaches to the matter.\(^\text{460}\) The late medieval European discourse is characterized by three approaches: the first two are distinct and contradictory, whereas the third is a hybrid; in Ashkenaz we find a preference for monogamous marriage, whereas in Muslim Spain we find polygamy normative.\(^\text{461}\) In Christian Spain, however, we find an ethnically mixed community and an assortment of varied opinions.\(^\text{462}\) If before 1492 the different ethnic groups occupied varied geographical locations, afterward they inhabited the same geographical space, which consequently led to considerable friction and heated debates regarding the proper interpretation of the custom. The scholarly consensus, however, suggests that for

\(^\text{460}\) Ruth Lamdan, “Jewish Polygamy in Palestine and Egypt in the Generations following the Expulsion from Spain” [in Hebrew], in Daniel Carpi Jubilee Volume.
\(^\text{461}\) Lamdan, “Jewish Polygamy in Palestine and Egypt,” 74–75.
\(^\text{462}\) Ibid.
Ottoman Sephardim, polygamy remained legitimate regardless of these frictions.\textsuperscript{463} If the young betrothal age placed the Ottoman Sephardic wife in a weaker position compared with her western counterpart, her role as one of several wives surely must have distanced her in terms of influence over her husband and even distanced her further from her Western counterpart in status.

How should we understand this mixture of empowering and liberating phenomena together with their concomitant weakening or limiting ones? The Ottoman Sephardic interest in \textit{yibbum}, as I showed above, was shaped by a specific logic primarily motivated by the concern with a communal identity revolving around embodied lineages. It follows then that this logic was also at work in shaping their preference for young betrothal age and polygamy. Regarding the young betrothal age, Minna Rozen identified several reasons for the phenomenon, all governed by a sense of “uncertainty about the future, a desire to ensure continuation of the family line, and the parents’ wish to provide for their children’s future before the parents died.”\textsuperscript{464}

Another incentive to have one’s children marry at a young age applies to males and was meant to prevent young men from masturbating, an act culminating with hybrid offspring empowering the “other side” and putting God, the world, and the Jewish people at risk.\textsuperscript{465} In short, concern with disrupted lineage (untimely death either before fathering sons or because sons predeceased the father) or with wasted potential human life (masturbation) governed the logic of arranged marriages. And as I also showed above, both broken embodied lineage and wasteful emission were believed to threaten the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[Ibid.]
\item[465] Ibid., 113.
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Jewish people and the world by empowering the *sitra ahra*, the “other side,” the cosmic evil.

The logic that governed polygamy is made clear in a responsum by Mabit (Rabbi Moshe ben Joseph Trani, 1505–85) who essentially opposed polygamy yet made an exception in case a man “lost his sons . . . and he is nearing old age . . . and his wife is barren for a few years . . . [if he] marries a wife for procreation the blessed God will complete his good intention.” Polygamy’s purpose then was to ensure the survival of the lineage by the production of offspring, which took precedence over the husband’s other marital obligations. The interpretations of the Ottoman Sephardim of the proper betrothal age and polygamy harmonized with their beliefs in the hybrid offspring and their interpretation of levirate marriage: the common denominator, the shared quality, emerged from a new and distinctly Ottoman Sephardic-imagined communal identity that centralized concerns for the community’s lineages and for a viable demographic continuity.

**Concern for the Well-Being of the Deceased**

According to some of the primary sources, it seems that the goal of levirate marriage is to care for the childless man’s post-mortem well-being. Consider, for example, Isaac Caro’s language in *Toledot yitshak*: “there is no greater pleasure for the

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466 Lamdan, “Jewish Polygamy in Palestine and Egypt,” 74–75. Joseph ben Moses di Trani (Mabit) was born in 1505 to a Sephardic family in Salonica. At a young age, Mabit was sent to Adrianople to study Talmud and at the age of sixteen, he relocated to Safed. In 1535 he moved to Jerusalem where he resided until his death in 1585.
dead man’s soul [than that derived from yibbum], therefore it is proper for the widow to please her husband [and levirate].

Similar language places the dead man’s pleasure in the center of the commandment’s logic, as in Saba’s Eshkol ha-kofer: “the wife is beneficent with her dead husband . . . she does great pleasure to the dead . . . [she does] great favor and benefit to the dead man.” STM presents a similar concern with the dead man when justifying a tsaddik’s exemption from levirate marriage; it prevents his pure soul from accumulating sins and enables him to maintain an unblemished record. Although the process may result in “[great] pleasure,” to the dead, it may also result in great sorrow due to the soul’s separation from its family or the loss of its immaculate saintly record. The soul may experience different post-mortem conditions of varying degrees of pleasure or displeasure; it may be reincarnated into the levirate offspring, wait in the “place of life” for its reincarnation into a new body, return as a member of “another [Jewish] family,” join “the other side” or wander disembodied in the world of the living. The concern with securing one’s well-being applies to the body and soul, the two parts that once made the whole individual; a process extending into the afterlife. As shown above, evil spirits seek to harm or possess the corpse immediately after death, a danger that is combated by a variety of contemporary rituals and customs, mentioned in Chapter 2 above.

468 Saba, Eshkol ha-kofer, 15b.
469 Meier, Sefer Ta’amey ha-Mitzwot, 251.
470 An Edenic soul-bank.
471 For a discussion of these quotations from STM, see “Regulating the Earthly and Supernal Demographic Structure” below.
The care for the individual body and soul was a concern shared by both Sephardic and Ashkenazic sources. Consider, for example, Ashkenazi’s interpretation of a levirate marriage that does not result in a levirate offspring (i.e., a couple that fails to produce a male child). Ashkenazi understands this condition as a sign of the dead man’s sanctity; he was never given sons simply because his saintly character sufficed. Therefore, Ashkenazi places the dead man’s saintly status before the lineage’s integrity and thus interprets levirate offspring as a means to achieve saintly status rather than a means to recreate broken embodied links as the Ottoman Sephardim did.

However, the concern with the dead man’s post-mortem well-being, though dominant in constructing the Ottoman Sephardic logic of levirate marriage, did not constitute a new or defining marker. This concern was shared by previous generations, surrounding host cultures, as well as other early modern Jewish communities. In fact, a concern with the childless husband’s fate may seem to be a defining marker of the Ottoman Sephardic identity only when seen outside of the phenomenon’s proper context, namely an increased care for the integrity of the demographic structure comprised of continuous embodied lineages. In other words, the Ottoman Sephardic concern with an individual’s well-being was a derivative of his contribution (or lack thereof) to a continuous embodied lineage for the community rather than an isolated individual phenomenon. This is apparent in interpretation of STM of Deuteronomy 25:6, where it says that the first levirate offspring “shall be accounted to the dead brother that his name may not be blotted out in Israel.”

First, STM clarifies how not to interpret the text, arguing that commemoration alone is not yibbum’s desired goal: “this [Deut. 25:6] is not to suggest that the name of
the firstborn was as the name of the dead man as we already found in Boaz the righteous who levirated Ruth . . . [he] did not name him [his offspring] [after] Mahalon [Ruth’s dead husband].” The correct interpretation according to STM is that “the same spirit of the dead man will rise in the same family itself . . . and the meaning of ‘that his name may not be blotted out of Israel [Deut. 25:6]’ is that this spirit will not be cut off from that family.” With similar logic, STM argues that the alternative ritual of halitsa separates the childless man’s soul from his old family: “it [the levir’s household] is called [the house of the un-shoed] because they have removed their dead brother from their seed.”

The reason for the soul’s sorrow then lies in its detachment from its original family; even the soul of a man whose widow chose levirate divorce over abandoning him disembodied (and at the mercy of evil spirits) remains unhappy. Isaac Caro’s concern with the dead man’s well-being should be seen in a similar light; according to Caro, “it gives a greater pleasure to the [childless man’s] soul when it reincarnates into a relative [rather than another family’s member].” We also learn that halitsa “is considered great evil . . . and he [the levir] is called the un-shoed because he took off his shoe and [consequently the dead brother] left him and the entire family.” The texts overwhelmingly emphasize this concern with maintaining the soul within its original lineage rather than an atomized concern with the survival of particular individuals.

473 Ibid.
474 Ibid., 261.
475 In Joseph Caro, She’elot u-Teshuvot bet Yosef, #385.
476 Joseph Caro, Hesde David, 130b.
While the childless husband’s post-mortem experience was a concern shared by Ashkenazic and Sephardic interpretations of *yibbum*, it received a unique form in its Ottoman Sephardic variation, which relied on his parental record and was dependent upon its continuous association with the family into which he was born. This instinct is also apparent in the treatment of the childless *tsaddik*’s wife who is required to be levirated and bear a child, although her husband is not required to procreate. The textual sources provide very clear guidelines regarding the practice of *yibbum*. What remains unclear is the purpose for this fixation on embodied lineage; in short, why the obsession with keeping the dead man’s soul within his family ranks? One possible answer, which I examine below, suggests that unique family lines constituted the key to a proper relationship between God and his people and the divine and the earthly realms.

### Yibbum as a Commemorative Act

Another motive for *yibbum* mentioned in the primary sources concerns the dead husband’s commemoration. In his commentary on Deuteronomy, the expulsion-generation rabbi and aristocrat Isaac Abravanel argues the following regarding the logic of *halitsa*:

[S]he [the widow] should spit in front of him and say with a loud voice “this will be the fate of the one who refuses to build his brother’s house.” The “building of the house” is spreading his [the levir’s] wings over the widow and protecting her. And the [purpose of] naming the first born after his name [the dead husband’s] [is] to commemorate him.\(^{477}\)

\(^{477}\) In his commentary on the Torah, Abravanel makes the same argument when discussing the reason for naming only the firstborn after the dead man: “it is sufficient for the eternity of the dead man [i.e., its commemoration] that his son [i.e., the levirate offspring] will be named after him.” Isaac Abravanel, *Perush al ha-torah* (Jerusalem: Bene Arbel, 1963), 234.
For Abravanel spitting is meant to shame the levir to submission and yibbum is to commemorate the childless dead through naming the newborn after him. This intention is reaffirmed in Abravanel’s Torah commentary: “the Torah commanded the name and the household in the first son and not the others. [This is so] according to the kabbalah sages, because in him the Israeli soul [the husband’s] reincarnates . . . [this is so] because for [the purpose of achieving] immortality it is enough to have one son named after him.” So For Abravanel the commandment’s purpose is to give birth to a dead man’s heir as a means to commemorate him rather than sustain his embodied lineage.

Procreation as a means of commemoration is shared by several other contemporary sources. Isaac Caro tells of the motivation to write Toledot yitshak in the work’s introduction: “All my sons, young and old, passed away . . . and I realized that men’s good deeds are their major progenies [i.e., contributions] and there is no better deed than teaching Torah and commandments . . . [therefore] I decided to print this Torah commentary . . . for the benefit of the many.” Caro presents the book as a replacement for a lost offspring, in fact as a better rather than equal contribution. The son replacement is a good deed, but good deeds also entail benefit. Caro ends the introduction with the following poem clarifying this point:

My book I write for the good of all
As God in heaven to witness I call

My sons, I have learned,
Were but a passing delight

My sons are all dead; their time having passed
How will my good name be preserved?

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478 Ibid.
479 Isaac Caro, Sefer toledot yitshak, “Author’s Introduction” in Regev, Derashot r. yitshak karo, 11.
A name I shall make for myself after death
Better than sons, it cannot be erased

_Peshat_\(^{480}\) and _derash_\(^{481}\) on the Torah I write
By which I will be known for far and wide

Indeed my progenies are only this book
And so I have called it _Toledot Yizha_\(^{482}\).

In this poem Caro presents the loss that is childlessness in terms of commemoration rather than an interrupted blood line; what is at stake is the preservation of his name rather than his lineage. Hallawa, another member of the Sephardic expulsion generation, tells of a similar reason for writing his _Zafnat paaneah_: “I . . . wrote this book . . . so by reading it their [the readers’] heated [boiling] urges [the readers’] will cool down . . . and maybe this will be [considered as a] good deed to my soul for I am childless, [my sons] are all dead.\(^{483}\)

The sixteenth-century Ottoman Sephardi Solomon Almoli tells of a common phenomenon regarding turn-of-the-century Ottoman Sephardic culture when introducing a prospectus for a Jewish encyclopedia titled _Me’asef le-khol ha-mahanot_: “indeed I know that this compilation will be a blessing after I pass away, and that it will ensure my immortality more than having sons and daughters. Since they will surely die and perish, they cannot secure my personal survival. Yet the words of this book will remain for future generations so that I will be known forever after.”\(^{484}\) Another Sephardic writer

\(^{480}\) The literal meaning.

\(^{481}\) A homiletic interpretation.

\(^{482}\) Regev, _Derashot r. yitshak karo_, 11.


\(^{484}\) Solomon ben Jacob Almoli, _Sefer me’asef le-khol ha-mahanot: Prospectus for a Proposed Encyclopedia_ (Kushta: Ashtruk deTulon, 1530), 8a.
Gedaliah Ibn Yahyah (1522–78) dedicated his chronicle *Shalshelet ha-kabbalah* to his son and informs him of the logic governing this act:

[I named these books] . . . after your brothers . . . so [that their] names will be always after you . . . the first is named Avot [Fathers] and it contains a few *peshatim* [simple or literal interpretations of the Torah] I received from my father . . . the second is named the book of Yahyah [i.e., the author’s] . . . the third is named after rabbi Moshe, my son.

The commemoration of the lineage members, then, is achieved by fusing together the intellectual and the biological lineages in a commemoration of the family’s men.485

The evidence above, though solid, does not show that the childless man’s commemoration was the primary force that shaped the Ottoman Sephardic logic of levirate marriage because first, it does not quite explain the unique characteristics of this particular commemoration trend, namely, its emphasis on the embodied lineage. Second, commemoration was not a major concern of Ottoman Sephardic communities but rather of other geographical and social groups such as Ashkenazim, Italian Sephardim, and Christians or members of the upper class. And perhaps most tellingly, it is evident in the pre-expulsion Sephardic discourse of lineage.

The majority of the evidence for the commemoration thesis relies on non-Sephardic (Ashkenazic or Christian), pre-expulsion Sephardic, and elite or Italian Sephardic texts and is not predominantly found in Ottoman Sephardic sources. The interconnection and overlapping nature of geographical and social determinants are developed in the next chapters where I examine the social stratification of the post-expulsion Ottoman Jewish community. I argue that the commemorative logic guided

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members of upper social classes, whereas members of the lower classes preferred the recreationist interpretation.

The location of the Ottoman Sephardic logic of lineage within the greater Jewish lineage discourse highlights its unique nature. As David Nirenberg shows, the commemorative interpretation of the lineage’s purpose dominated the pre-exilic Sephardic lineage discourse, but as my sources demonstrate, it did not maintain this dominance in its Ottoman reincarnation. The reason for this change in the Sephardic interpretation becomes clearer when seen in the context of the pre-exilic Sephardic lineage discourse. Nirenberg shows that Sephardic interest in the lineage gained momentum in the fifteenth century as a reaction to a “destabilization of traditional categories of religious identity” brought about as a result of mass conversions to Christianity on Iberian land between 1391 and 1492. The genealogical discourse served as “a primary form of communal memory,” a form of “collective memory” that “gave rise to new forms of historical consciousness” among the Christian majority, the conversos, and the remaining Jewish community.

Nirenberg identifies several purposes of the preexilic Sephardic discourse of lineage; one goal was to allow a reintegration of conversos into the Jewish community by emphasizing that they took great care to marry within their community, still forming “Israel kasher” despite of their Christianity. A second purpose lay in asserting the

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487 Ibid., 7.
488 Ibid., 18: “Jews, Christians, and conversos turned more or less simultaneously to lineage as one means of reestablishing the integrity of religious categories of identity.”
superiority of individual elite Sephardic lineages. A third purpose was to reaffirm the superiority of the Jewish people compared to Edom (Christianity). It is clear that at the turn of the sixteenth century, the lineage discourse was a popular and common identity mechanism established for more than a century.

This discourse’s Ottoman Sephardic spin differed from its predecessors and contemporaries in emphasizing the importance of a continuous embodied lineage rather than commemoration of the generic childless dead, an aristocratic founder of a great lineage, or the Jewish people’s elevated status. The Ottoman Sephardic discourse answered a fundamental question: Who are the Jewish people? It explained what constituted the people rather than how or in what way Jews were more prestigious than the neighboring gentiles. It clarified who was a generic Jewish man rather than what qualifies a great Jewish people or an aristocratic lineage.

In the next chapter I explain why this kind of communal identity emerged, when and where it did, and how the discourse of levirate marriage functioned as a response to the post-expulsion identity crisis. I will show that this identity resulted from the Sephardic expellees’ unique position within the Ottoman cultural context, which included the absence of a dominant local congregation, as well as limited Ottoman intervention in day-to-day affairs, Jewish communal governance, and religious expression. These factors encouraged the newly and often impoverished Sephardim to rebuild their sense of communal identity with the only assets available to them, their sons, and to repair broken

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489 Ibid.
490 Ibid., 28.
491 In fact, as I show in the next section (“Regulating the Earthly and Supernal Demographic Structure”), a generic man’s contribution to the lineage, one’s branch in the family tree, is indeed unique. This is a key element in the argument I present in the next chapter, namely, that this communal identity served a community of otherwise unremarkable ordinary Sephardic expellees.
families and lost lineages through a new discourse that emphasized the tremendous importance of reproduction.

**Regulating the Earthly and Supernal Demographic Structure**

In the Ottoman Sephardic imagination, families and lineages were arranged vertically; a man inherited his father’s place as the lineage’s representative in the Jewish people’s demographic structure and, in turn, was replaced by his son after him. The lineage’s verticality did not only link past, present, and future, but the natural and the supernatural as well. The living man was perceived as a link in a vertical chain stretching between worlds, connecting the family’s natural and supernatural branches, as well as the earthly and the divine. The family’s earthly extension borrowed its newborns’ souls from their Edenic relatives and returned them to their heavenly family once they had passed away. Furthermore, the family’s proper existence (uninterrupted embodied lineage) functioned as a conduit of divine energy that sustained the world and, in symbiotic fashion, sustained the divine by weakening evil and reinforcing God.

The importance of this symbiotic relationship thus reverberated through the personal (i.e., for the individual man), to the communal (through the lineage), and finally to the cosmic (ensuring the world’s existence). Given this all-encompassing relationship, the Ottoman Sephardic interpretation of levirate marriage is best understood in the context of the family’s earthly and supernal branches. But the emphasis on levirate also must be understood as a key element in the post-expulsion reconstitution of the Ottoman Sephardic communal identity. For the Ottoman Sephardim, levirate was perceived as a way to cope with the challenges posed to their community’s material, physical, and social integrity by massive, forced conversions; persecutions and expulsions; and a large-scale
loss of livelihood and property, children, personal libraries, and intellectual and social leadership.

The vertical connection between the family’s earthly and Edenic branches is exemplified in treatment of the events preceding one’s birth in STM:

[A]ll families are like one tree . . . [and] there is for each family its own home and they [family members] know each other. . . thirty days before [a soul is born] they declare in heaven “so and so” is ordered to come to life in the next world . . . and every night the soul comes and they sit it down in the honor seat. And all its family members come and, if it is righteous, sing to it, and if, God forbid, it is evil, they come and mourn for it with a bitter soul and prepare a black seat for it.492

Even at this incipient stage, the family forms the basic member of the Jewish people’s body, equipped with its own “home” and a sense of familiarity and belonging. Although the birth of a levirate offspring breaks the barriers between the natural and the supernatural, it remains in the realm of the family. Furthermore, the souls residing in the afterworld refer to the world of the living as “the next world [or world to come olam ha-ba].” Because olam ha-ba is also the Hebrew for “afterworld,” it is puzzling that the souls in the afterworld refer to the world of the living itself as an afterworld. This word-choice suggests the idea of transmigration of souls as it appears in STM is a circular one, a seasonal transmigration, a recurring process a soul experiences until the end of time rather than a limited number of times. And significantly, this process is presented as natural rather than a punishment or atonement.

This perception of transmigration, as scholars have demonstrated, was characteristic of the Byzantine kabbalists who influenced several Sephardic thinkers.

arriving in the Ottoman Empire after the expulsion from Spain. This notion of a natural, circular, and healthy reincarnation of souls is evident in the description of the STM of the heavenly family’s preparation for receiving a dying member:

When a person is dying . . . they declare in the heavens that “so and so” is summoned here . . . and all of his family that is like one tree, hear, and if he is good then they are happy with him . . . and if he is not [good] they are sad and mourn for him.

The heavenly family then serves as a soul-hub rather than a soul-bank, dispatching and collecting its souls, and is thus directly affected by their behavior while among the living.

However, STM also offers several concepts of yibbum that at first glance seem to contradict my argument regarding the key importance of lineage for the commandment’s Ottoman Sephardic interpretation. For example, according to STM, yibbum is intended: “[to father] sons to be named after him [the dead husband], to soften the soul [‘s pain], and to strengthen the dead man’s soul.” From here, it seems that the commandment functions primarily as commemorative or to placate the dead man’s unhappy position. STM continues to tell of the dangers facing the childless man’s soul, especially attacks by an assortment of evil spirits, suggesting this is the source for the soul’s distress. Seen in this way the commandment’s goal may indeed be to secure the soul’s happiness rather than the lineage’s continuous existence.

However, lineage integrity remains primary when considered in relation to the STM explanation for the reasons of the soul’s unfortunate state, namely, that the dead man “did not actualize the image or the chain of the image that is the holy and pure

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495 Ibid., 251.
496 Ibid.
chain.”497 This statement makes as little sense in English as it does in Hebrew. Yet in the symbolic language of early modern kabbala, it is crystal clear: the chain is a symbol for the family, the vertical connection between the natural and the supernatural, between the Jewish people and God.

Other assertions in STM support this interpretation; for example, STM argues that “a man who has no sons is as if he has diminished the image of the chain”498 and that “a man who fathered a son and a daughter is as if he sustains the upper form, a form sustains a form.”499 The kabbalistic chain imagery references procreation and the commandments as a means to regulate the connection between God and his people. This relationship was imagined as a flow of divine emanation through the Jewish people’s lineages, enabled and sustained by fulfilling the commandments. However, Ottoman Sephardim did not imagine their ideal demography, the optimal conduit of God’s emanation, as a collection of uninterrupted atomistic family lines but as a particular arrangement of lineages forming a distinctive, continuous, and evolving demography. The integrity of the chain comprised of earthly, embodied lineages directly reflects on its supernatural equivalent, the divine “upper form”; a proper chain spells a strong God, a safe world, and prosperity for the Jewish people, whereas a weak chain spells a strong evil side and an existential and material threat to the world and the Jewish people.

The individual therefore belongs to both an earthly, material family and to a celestial, spiritual one; the family transcends the boundaries of the earthly world and inhabits both the natural and supernatural realms. The relationship between the family’s

497 Ibid., 250; see also 251: “where it is told that: [a childless man is] as if he did not actualize the image of the chain and he is in great pain for the afterlife since he did not actualized in species.”
498 Ibid., 252.
499 Ibid.
earthly and Edenic branches is symbiotic; a man guarantees his earthly and Edenic families’ well-being or continuous existence by performing the commandments and “maintaining his branch” by procreation.

However, if a man dies childless, the implications for the family tree are clear: “The family is as one tree with many branches. Anyone who dies childless is as a dry branch that did not bear fruit . . . the branch next to it will give it moisture . . . that is why God commanded us to levirate the wife.”

Levirate marriage functions not only as an act meant to commemorate the dead man, save his disembodied roaming soul from evil spirits, or save the earthly family line from extinction, but also to maintain a proper connection with the Edenic family, maintain an unbroken connection with the earthly branch, sustain the continuous existence of the family tree, and establish a proper relationship with the divine.

As important as the tree (i.e., a particular lineage) may have been, the main concern remained with the integrity of the forest. That is, with a particular arrangement of lineages rather than a collection of generic individual families. However, we should not imagine this arrangement as rigid and constant but as a growing, evolving, living organism. To borrow imagery from the realm of garden design, the coveted Sephardic demography may be imagined as a cultivated English garden that is shaped and controlled by man yet not in a highly structured, symmetrical, and formal way as its French equivalent was. This is evident even when halitsa is preferred over levirate marriage. Halitsa redeems the soul from a miserable disembodied existence and guards against evil spirits by relocating it to a new family, a process that was neither easy nor

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desirable: “God felt pity for him [the dead childless man] so [he arranged through yibbum] that he could imbibe from his family’s tree [through yibbum] and not from another [through halitsa].”  

The same notion is apparent in Joseph Caro’s discussion of halitsa, a commandment he considered to be “a great cruelty to the brother . . . [because the childless man’s soul] leaves [the family, the lineage] and joins another family.”  

Yibbum, however, is seen as an act of grace, of divine mercy, a gift allowing the soul to remain as a branch of its original tree rather than remaining in the forest through an undesired, painful transplantation to another tree, to a Jewish yet foreign family.

Another question concerns why membership in another Jewish family was considered an unfortunate outcome? What makes “imbibing” from a “different tree” a source of distress? What is the great benefit in remaining a member of one’s original family? One question begets another, and the answer lies in what exactly is imbibed in this process. The ending of the STM paragraph quoted above sheds light on this issue when stating that eventually a successful yibbum “bring[s] about the world’s salvation.”

The relationship between salvation and imbibing is directly addressed by commandment sixty-two (sameh-bet), which designates the family as a conduit of divine emanation; after halitsa a soul is incapable of imbibing from “the same tree [its old

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501 Ibid., 253. See also p. 218.
502 Joseph Caro, She’elot u-teshuvot bet yosef, #385.
503 In other places STM makes it clear that yibbum is preferred over halitsa. E.g., on 260–61: “if he does not want to levirate his sister-in-law he is cruel because he does not look at his dead brother with compassion”; and 262: “if the levir wanted to levirate it is better because it redeemed his brother”; and when the untying and removal of the shoe is mentioned, it is presented as a punishment to the levir “as he did so will be done to him,” a punishment, I assume, for an act the community saw as essentially positive and desirable.
family tree] . . . nevertheless, God plants it in a different place, in a better tree . . . and God gives him emanation to imbibe and an excellent family, better [than the one he had] . . . and therefore the sages said *halitsa* is better than *yibbum* so God plants him in a better family. 506 We learn that “God gives him emanation to imbibe” and although modern scholars and primary sources disagree about the nature of this emanation, it is safe to say it reflects a kabbalistic representation of the relationship between God and his people: a proper flow of emanation ensures a proper relationship between the natural and the supernatural and, consequently, the world’s and the Jewish people’s well-being. The content emanated, be it an extension of God himself, his attributes, some divine energy, light, thought, will, knowledge, or any other number of elements suggested by primary and secondary sources, is absolutely essential for a proper relationship between God and his creation, for a proper functioning of the world. 507

An interpretation of levirate marriage as a key for successful divine emanation is apparent in Alcastiel’s letter to Hayat as well.

As you know . . . he created those worlds [the *sefirot*] that serve as a pouch [nartik] for the emanation, so he created matter for the forms to clothe themselves with . . . and when a *ploni* form [generic, unidentified form] is clothed in a drop of *ploni* matter, the angel in charge of impregnation takes the form, puts it in a spiritual corpse taken from Eden, and puts it in that drop. 508

The Jewish man functions as a receptacle and a conduit of divine emanation channeling it to the world of the living, an earthly equivalent and extension of the divine emanations, the *sefirot*. However, as the rest of the quotation shows, there is a significant difference

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505 The view that considered the new family as superior to the original family counters my argument regarding the centrality of a continuous and specific combination of lineages for the Ottoman Sephardic logic of levirate marriage. I attend to this counterargument in Chapter 6 in the section titled “Concern for the Well-Being of the Deceased.”


507 For more on the emanation and the concept of the *sefirot*, see Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 88ff.

508 Scholem, “Li-idi’at ha-kabbalah bi-sefarad,” 188–89.
between the Jewish man and the sefirot, namely, man’s ability to affect the flow of emanation through the latter, a feat achieved by performing the commandments: “in front of him [the newborn] are two roads . . . if he chose the good road, the good multiplies because of him . . . and the branch [the newborn] adheres to its root and always imbibes from its brilliance . . . if God forbid he turned to the bad [path] he draws an evil spirit.”

An improper emanation does not spell a vacuum, an absence of good entering the world, but instead a flow of evil spirits emanating from an “evil and bitter tree,” thus weakening the divine influence on earth.

As noted above, STM suggests that as a result of halitza, the soul attaches to a foreign yet “better” Jewish family. The new family’s superiority manifests in its service as a conduit of said emanation. This suggestion presents two counterarguments to this chapter’s thesis. First, it weakens the assertion regarding the Ottoman preference of

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509 Ibid., 189.
510 Ibid.
511 Another interesting historiographical context that is not explored in this dissertation is a comparison of the responses to the trauma of 1492 and the destruction of the second temple. Moshe Idel identified the similarities and noted that in both cases it is quite hard to prove a clear connection between trauma and messianism. However, Idel’s comparative effort is influenced by his greater project, namely, to disprove Scholem’s thesis (hence the criticism of the relationship between trauma and messianism): Idel, “Religion, Thought, and Attitudes,” 231n2. I argue that a comparison of both historical crises would benefit from an examination through a social lens. The most recent and relevant work in this context is Yair Lorberbaum’s *Image of God: Halakhah and Aggadah* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2004). Lorberbaum argues that in the aftermath of the destruction of the temple, the human body replaced the temple as the earthly abode of the divine. Lorberbaum shows that the Rabbis argued that the meaning of imago dei (tselam elohim or image of God) is that there is a tangible, divine presence within every human being. Since humans are physical representations of God, execution is equivalent in some ways to deicide. Procreation, however, increases God’s physical manifestation in the world by creating more vehicles in which to embody God’s presence. In addition, Lorberbaum shows how as “images” of the divine, human beings function as icons in a manner similar to the way idols function in the pagan world; they draw God’s presence into themselves and thus the world. Equipped with theurgic powers, the Jewish people thus blur the borders between representation and form, the earthly and the divine. Lorberbaum suggests that the location of the divine in the (Jewish) human body was a result of its removal from the temple in 70 CE. Until then, argues Lorberbaum, the temple was the place of God on earth, the center through which life-giving energy poured into the world of the living. The social imagination uncovered by Lorberbaum’s research is similar to the postexilic Ottoman Sephardic one, both in its horizontal and egalitarian nature and in the way it differed from the preceding hierarchical structure.
yibbum over halitsa. Second, if relocation of Jewish souls to “better” families through halitsa improved God’s emanation, it may deem a rearrangement of the demographic structure more desirable than desperately seeking to conserve the imperfect conduit. In this context STM seems to suggest that sustaining a continuous existence of a particular demographic structure is unnecessary and possibly even damaging.

If this is indeed the case, why then should Ottoman Sephardim care how this conduit, be it a tree or a chain, has its links or branches arranged as long as the emanation flows in sufficient volume? In other words, if the merit in halitsa emanates from its improvement of the Jewish people’s function as a conduit and if maximizing the flow of divine emanation is achieved through a rearrangement of the demographic structure, why did the Ottoman Sephardim care about maintaining a continual existence of the lineages in any particular demographic structure, as that demanded by yibbum?

The seemingly contradictory injunctions seem to be invoked haphazardly and without consistency, but both counterarguments can be addressed simultaneously by examining the first discussion of yibbum in STM: “our sages of blessed memory said that [in case people] mean it then yibbum [is preferable] . . . but now when [people] do not mean any commandment, halitsa precedes yibbum.”512 Therefore, what the sages argue is that it is better for the Jewish people to avoid yibbum rather than prefer halitsa because there is no chance they will do the right thing with the proper intention.

Thus the Jewish people’s behavior is at fault and this behavior explains why the lesser halitsa is preferred over the ideal yibbum, a superior but unrealistic option. Seen in this way STM does not contradict itself or this chapter’s thesis. It does shed pessimistic

512 Meier, “Sefer Ta’amey ha-Mitzwoth,” 258.
light on the author’s idea of his people’s moral status and ability to change, but this pessimism is not a marker of the Ottoman discourse, which emphasizes man’s abilities and especially the power to affect the cosmic, the divine, and the world by his actions, namely through fulfillment of the commandments.

The optimal flow of divine emanation is further elaborated on by Menahem Bavli in *Ta’amei ha-mitsvot*, which also offers significant insight into the preference for *yibbum* over *halitsa* and the centrality of the Ottoman Sephardic interpretation of *yibbum*. Bavli addresses the issue when discussing whether a father is allowed to levirate his daughter-in-law:

The purpose of this commandment is [a derivative of the fact] that each family is a branch up there and [one’s] daughter-in-law is his son’s branch . . . and if another impregnate her, God forbid, he will tear the branch from the tree . . . and causes the branch, that is the body, to dry up, and it is necessary that all of the souls in the treasury, that is named the body, will parish [i.e., incarnated, born, and live as a Jewish person].

Bavli’s fascinating commentary is telling in several ways. First, it elaborates on the theory of the divine emanation flowing through the family’s earthly and heavenly branches. Much like *STM*, it identifies the body and the branch as containers or conduits of souls transmitted from heaven, where they were stored in a space referred to as the “treasury,” an Edenic soul-bank that is also referred to as “the body,” clarifying that containing and channeling the soul is the body’s essential quality, a function of the family and the treasury. Second, Bavli claims the world’s salvation is facilitated by rescuing souls from their Edenic “treasury,” a statement that touches upon several traditions that early modern Jewry was well acquainted with. For example, Bavli’s quotation alludes to

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the perception, presented in STM, that lineage is a conduit of divine sustenance to the world of the living.

Another sensitive issue concerns the famous Talmudic notion that the last soul to descend from the Garden of Eden belongs to the Messiah. Bavli sees procreation as a crucial step toward communal and universal salvation, an idea compatible with a preference of halitsa over yibbum because the former enables a rearrangement of the Jewish people’s lineages to produce a more efficient conduit for the divine. However, further reading shows this was not his intention; Bavli advises the father against levirating his daughter-in-law, impregnating her, and taking the place of his childless son, whose only chance to reconstitute his “branch” is through levirate reincarnation. Rather, it is for the son to take his father’s place in the “Holy and pure chain” and if the father insists on levirating his daughter-in-law, he effectively “tear[s] the branch,” causes it to “dry up,” and effectively inhibits the flow of God’s emanation. From this perspective, the Ottoman Sephardic levirate marriage discourse deems it crucial to sustain a particular demographic structure based on a specific make-up of continuous embodied lineages.

Isaac Caro, much like Bavli, emphasizes the particular identity, continuity, and specific arrangement as keys of the individual embodied lineages for a proper transmission of divine emanation. In one of his sermons Caro suggests that to achieve an optimal emanation flow, it is not enough to simply increase the number of lineages or to form especially righteous lineages through transplanting a childless soul in an “excellent” righteous family. Instead, Caro asserts that optimal flow can only be achieved by maintaining a particular demographic order that synchronizes with the celestial plane. This is evidenced when he discusses the purpose of procreation, an act he perceives as a
trigger for channeling divine emanation to the biological father: “a father [who] has brought a soul from above . . . made a path and a road for the prophetic spirit to rest upon him as the soul came upon his seed and his flesh.”

The man’s act of fathering a child has two consequences: first, instilling a soul in “his seed” and his “flesh,” and second, allowing the divine emanation, the “prophetic spirit,” to flow from the divine to the earthly realm. However, much like Bavli, Caro complicates this dynamic by further suggesting that not just any soul “came upon” one’s seed but that a particular one is predestined to do so. Much like Bavli’s insistence that only the husband (and not his father) should impregnate his wife, Caro sees the souls in Eden as waiting for their incarnation in a specific body, to be a specific man’s child, a unique Jewish man, and finally a particular offspring’s father. This line of argumentation also appears in Caro’s interpretation of a midrashic saying according to which Joseph rightfully deserved his birthright even though he made an unlikely candidate, being the eleventh out of twelve sons:

Jacob thought he was laying down with Rachel and [imagined] Joseph his firstborn son from her; and Jacob’s soul, by his imagination, lowered Joseph’s soul and [because] it was Leah [that Jacob was in fact having sex with] therefore [Joseph’s] soul did not enter Reuben and waited for Joseph to be created [and then] entered him.

Jacob’s act, though unknowingly, interfered with the proper order of things and delayed Joseph’s descent until the imagined soul and its host body both were created. This story emphasizes two characteristic motives of the Ottoman Sephardic hybrid offspring and levirate marriage discourses. First, it emphasizes the Jewish man’s agency (albeit in this case an exemplary man) over the economy of bodies and souls that

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514 Joseph Caro, Hesde david, 125a.
515 Ibid., 209.
sustained his people’s relationship with God. Second, the quotation shows that a functioning economy of bodies and souls necessitated that a very specific soul rather than a faceless generic one will be drawn from the soul bank to occupy a particular body. This obsession with the lineage’s fine details, and consequently the Jewish people’s demography, can also be found expressed in another theme dominant in the works of writers from the Sephardic expulsion generation: the lament for their lost sons.

The lament for sons lost during or as a result of the expulsion is one of the most salient themes in the works of exiled Sephardic writers and is especially relevant to a discussion of levirate marriage. In poems, Torah commentaries, diaries, and mystical works, fathers mourned their sons’ forced conversion to Christianity or their premature death during the perilous journey east. Sephardic fathers presented sentiments far more complex than parents’ personal anguish over their lost children.

Rather, the stories of the lost children must be contextualized as fears of compromising their patrilineal lineage and for the continuous existence of the Jewish people. When discussing the issue, the expulsion generation rabbi Yosef Garson claims that “the sons are left instead of their fathers.” For the Safedian rabbi Moshe Galanti, the tragedy of childless men is that they “did not leave sons, or sons’ sons to inherit their place.” The idea that the son embodies not merely a generic building block in the Jewish social structure but a unique replacement for his father is best illustrated in a story

518 Ibid., 235a; in “Pride and Despair,” 582.
by Joseph Caro who recounts a conversation with his Maggid during which the Maggid divulged the reason for Caro’s wife’s recent miscarriage. “[T]he pregnancy was real and God would not have taken back the gift he gave you . . . but since you were destined to die, God in his infinite mercy wanted to redeem you and gave this pregnancy in your stead.” Caro’s place could only be taken once he had died or was dying.

What the sources above show is that each man’s line is a unique link in the family’s generational chain; the son’s lineage branches out of his father’s and, while effectively continuing the family line, is the son’s unique creation and his exclusive responsibility. The kabbalistic arboreal terminology aptly conveys the notion that the son’s lineage is not a simple recreation or an identical replacement of the father’s line; the branch grows out of the trunk yet is not identical to it. The lineage forms a continuous and evolving organism that, though in constant change, is nevertheless based on a particular demographic basis. In other words, although by branching the next generation produces new and additional family lines—and consequently different arrangement of lineages—it remains a direct, continuous, and uninterrupted extension of the preceding generation’s particular demography. The Jewish people is seen as a collection of such lineages whose interruption directly affects their relationship with God and is a predicament fixable through levirate marriage.

Caro’s Maggid mesharim supplies another source emphasizing the family’s centrality to the Ottoman Sephardic imagined relationship between God and his people. Above I argued that according to the kabbalistic idea of yibbum, fathering a son is a

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519 Joseph Caro, Sefer maggid mesharim, 22a.
520 We may assume the childless son could have reincarnated to his widow’s levirate offspring or relocated to another family line.
Jewish man’s obligation and that a childless man is reincarnated into the levirate offspring to allow him to fulfill his obligation of fathering a child. *Maggid mesharim* complicates this picture: “if he [a childless man] has not left behind a wife, even though he has not left a child behind, his transmigration is not delayed, because he has no handhold in this world to delay him.”⁵²¹ Unmarried, non-ْtsaddikim, childless Jewish men move on to the afterworld without special difficulties.

This observation problematizes the chapter’s argument regarding the necessity of leaving an offspring and the central role of a continuous embodied lineage for the Ottoman Sephardic communal identity. Seen in its proper context, however, this evidence does not constitute a counterargument but rather strengthens the chapter’s thesis, largely because of Caro’s idea of transmigration: “[people] come to this world [i.e., of the living], and return to that world [i.e., the afterworld]; then they return, transmigrating to this world, and so on constantly. They do not cease doing so.”⁵²² The transmigration described by Caro is a natural process experienced by all souls, childless or not, a type of transmigration that, as I noted above, characterized STM, Byzantine kabbala, and ibn Zimra’s work.

The childless man who does encounter difficulties pursuing this type of transmigration is “one who has not left any children in this world, yet left a wife, [he] is like water that has been delayed by grooves and ditches . . . his transmigration is delayed because of the widow he left behind. *Even if he is a righteous person he is delayed*.

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⁵²² Ibid.
The nuance in differentiation concerns the married men whose ties to the living world remain behind. The key to a proper transmigration of married men, righteous or not, is fathering a child or being unmarried at the time of death, a point Caro clarifies later in his work when discussing the purpose of halitsa: “[God] commands to remove his [the reluctant levir’s] shoe to signify that the deceased has separated himself from his wife. Then the corpse is treated like one who has left behind no wife, and transmigration is not delayed.”

The ritual of halitsa receives a new meaning in Maggid mesharim; if in earlier sources halitsa functioned either as a coercive shaming mechanism, a legal loophole, or a means to rescue the husband’s soul trapped in the widow’s “bosom,” Caro sees the ritual’s purpose in facilitating a post-mortem divorce of the husband from his widow rather than the reluctant levir from his family. In this light, halitsa changed the couple’s marital status as well as the dead husband’s miserable post-mortem condition.

Caro’s complication of a perfectly logical thesis goes further when he argues that “a person who leaves behind a wife but no brother does not undergo delay,” excluding only-children from the ranks of the childless men in need of yibbum. In Caro’s opinion it was not just a childless bachelor who should not be levirated but also a married only-child. Only the death of a childless married man who had left behind a widow and a brother should result in levirate marriage.

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523 Ibid. It is important to note here that Caro emphasizes the fact that one’s righteousness is not the deciding factor on whether levirate marriage is necessary, but rather, one’s paternal status is the deciding factor.

524 Ibid.

525 Ibid.
In short, only potential heads of family were required to levirate. It was not a potential son but a potential family line that had to be actualized. The offspring himself, as important as he may have been, was seen in the context of the lineage and the concern with the Jewish people’s demographic structure. From this perspective, Caro’s ideas of yibbum do not counter my thesis but rather strengthen it by essentializing a specific demographic structure that revolved around families’ lineages and was the driving force behind the Ottoman Sephardic concept of yibbum.

As I demonstrated above, the Ottoman Sephardic logic of levirate marriage aimed at regulating the divine emanation flow and the relationship between God and his people, the natural and the supernatural. Jewish men procreated not only to maintain their memory and their nominal or personal embodied lineage, to fulfill God’s commandment to be fruitful and multiply, or to ensure their post-mortem personal well-being. Rather, the goal of leaving a child behind served to maintain an embodied lineage as a means to secure the Jewish people’s unique and divinely ordered demographic structure. By doing so they secured the flow of divine energy and consequently Jewish communal health, as well as the world’s safety. The Jewish people’s communal identity, as perceived by Ottoman Sephardic writers, was therefore not merely a matter of localized and contested identity politics but of communal and cosmic survival.
Chapter 8

The Originality of the Ottoman Sephardic Yibbum Discourse

In the previous chapter I examined several alternative explanations for the attributes of the Ottoman Sephardic yibbum discourse. The current chapter addresses another challenge to my argument, namely, that the expellees’ interpretation of yibbum was not unique. The basis for this challenge is twofold. First, variations of the transmigratory-kabbalistic interpretation existed in Iberia well before the expulsion and in sixteenth-century Italy. Therefore, it could be argued that the Ottoman Sephardic interpretation was a continuation of medieval trends rather than an original interpretation influenced by the expellees’ social context. Second, some medieval Italian and Byzantine kabbalists presented the transmigratory interpretation as well. Thus, it may be argued that the expellees in Italy and the Ottoman Empire simply adopted established local traditions and did not develop a unique discourse to address their particular diasporic predicament.

This chapter addresses the aforementioned counterarguments. Regarding the medieval Iberian precedence, I argue that the evidence is not sufficient to deem the Ottoman Sephardic discourse a simple continuation of established medieval trends. In Chapter 4, I presented evidence to support my position, namely, that it was only with the expulsion generation that Sephardic sages came to imagine their interpretation as categorical and clearly differentiated it from that of their Ashkenazic brethren. 526 In the first section of this chapter, my analysis goes beyond the halakhic debate on the preferable resolution of the levirate bond. I examine the exposure of the general public to

526 See, esp., the section “Yibbum or Halitsa? Biblical, Rabbinic, Medieval, and Early Modern Answers” in Chapter 4.
the kabbalistic interpretation, as well as the logic governing this interpretation, the clarity of its message, and its influence on the halakhic discourse.

The first section demonstrates the novelty of the Ottoman Sephardic discourse in several ways. This section opens with an examination of the major differences between the medieval and the Ottoman Sephardic interpretations. First, the medieval Iberian evidence is not as abundant, as elaborate, or as clearly articulated as the works produced by the expellees. The medieval sources are relatively opaque and comprised of veiled kabbalistic messages that were intelligible only to the initiated. Second, the kabbalistic discourse changed from an esoteric body of knowledge restricted to small, elite circles to a public, exoteric tradition. Third, after the expulsion, kabbalistic knowledge became a significant factor in deciding general halakhic matters and, particularly, whether to prefer yibbum or halitsa. Thus, kabbala in general and the kabbalistic logic of yibbum in particular influenced legal decisions and, consequently, the general community rather than a tiny minority of kabbalists. Fourth, for more than a century after the decline of the Zoharic circle in the middle of the fourteenth century, we hear very little of the kabbalistic interpretation. The aftermath of the expulsion, however, witnessed a flourishing of kabbalistic activity in general and a thriving yibbum discourse in particular. Although a temporal hiatus does not render impossible a direct continuation of the medieval trend, it does make defending such a thesis a difficult task.

Regarding the Byzantine and the medieval Italian transmigratory interpretation of yibbum, I argue in Part III that for several reasons their influence on the Ottoman Sephardic discourse was marginal. First, it is difficult to discern the carrier of such influence because the expellees settled in regions free of indigenous Jewry or
populated by a small number of weakened communities. Second, the expellees’ resistance to indigenous traditions and their extraordinary efforts to conserve their Iberian customs and their pride and self-worth is a well-known fact, amply demonstrated in scholarship. Third, the fifteenth century did not produce a significant work that presents the transmigratory interpretation either in Italy, the eastern Mediterranean, or Iberia. Thus, a theory arguing for a simple continuation and direct influence of medieval trends does not convince. The expellees certainly adopted older trends and cited medieval sources; however, doing so was an original, creative exercise rather than a passive adoption of dominant, old traditions or local customs.

The chapter’s second section compares the Ottoman Sephardic *yibbum* discourse with that of the contemporary Italian one. The Italian discourse varied from its Ottoman counterpart in several ways. First, the strong position of Ashkenazic communities and religious tradition in Italy constructed a radically different discourse than its Ottoman Sephardic counterpart. The Italian halakhic discourse developed as a dialectic between the incoming Sephardic tradition and the indigenous (Ashkenazic and Italian) trends, a far cry from the relatively free-forming Ottoman Sephardic discourse.

Second, the Italian discourse was heavily influenced by rational philosophy, which was prevalent in Renaissance Italy. Expellees and indigenous Jews sought to reconcile the Iberian transmigratory interpretation of *yibbum* with rational philosophy. An influence of the surrounding host culture did not exist in the Ottoman Sephardic case. In addition, I show that efforts to resolve the tensions between rational philosophy and

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527 In addition, the *yibbum* discourse included attempts by Italian Jews to support the thesis of *prisca theologia*, namely, that a single theology exists that is present in all religions and was given by God to man in antiquity. See below “External Influences I: *Yibbum* and Metempsychosis in a Philosophical Context.”
the transmigratory logic of *yibbum* began in Iberia before 1492. The philosophical-transmigratory interpretation was another medieval Iberian interpretative tradition available for the Ottoman Sephardim. The expellees’ lack of interest in the philosophical-transmigratory interpretation shows that their adoption of the transmigratory interpretation was a manifestation of agency rather than a passive continuation of old trends.

Third, the Italian discourse was directly and significantly affected by the European religious-political context. The great importance of polygamy and *yibbum* to European politics drove an increased European interest and deeper involvement in Jewish theology and custom. In contrast, the Ottomans were accustomed to levirate marriage and polygamy and, in general, allowed the expellees greater freedom to fashion their communities, religiosity, and communal identity.

The Ottoman Sephardic perception of levirate marriage differed from similar medieval and contemporary trends prevalent in Ashkenaz and Italy. In addition, the expellees’ transmigratory interpretation was not directly affected by their Ottoman host cultures (either Jewish or gentile). Therefore, the Ottoman Sephardic *yibbum* discourse must be seen as a creation of its time and place.

**Medieval and Ottoman Sephardic Yibbum: Similarities and Differences**

The transmigratory-kabbalistic interpretation of *yibbum* existed well before 1492 in Iberia, Italy, and the eastern Mediterranean. However, the Ottoman Sephardic incarnation differed from its medieval counterparts. Compared with the Iberian medieval tradition, the Ottoman Sephardic discourse was more profuse, coherent, elaborate, and
exoteric. It wielded more influence on a larger, more varied audience because of its direct influence on halakhic matters.

Medieval Italian and Byzantine interpretations of *yibbum* display a transmigratory interpretation as well. Thus it may be argued that the Ottoman Sephardic interpretation is a simple adaptation of local Italian and Byzantine traditions. I will argue below that this was not the case. As for a possible influence of the medieval Italian tradition, this chapter’s second section “The Italian *Yibbum* Discourse: Internal and External Influences” shows that the sources of Italian influence on the local early modern *yibbum* discourse included the Italian Ashkenazic tradition, the Protestant Reformation, and rational philosophy, but not medieval Italian kabbala. As for a possible influence of the medieval Byzantine tradition, the chapters in Part III show that most Iberian expellees in the Ottoman Empire either settled in areas free from local indigenous Jewish communities or encountered extremely weakened communities unable to force their traditions on the dominant Sephardim. Therefore, the mere existence of medieval Iberian, Italian, and Byzantine transmigratory interpretations of *yibbum* do not deem the Ottoman Sephardic incarnation as a simple continuation of old beliefs.

**Medieval Transmigratory *Yibbum*: Iberian, Byzantine, and Italian Precedents**

J. Katz correctly asserted that the transmigratory-kabbalistic logic of levirate marriage was known well before the expulsion. Katz notes that “Nahmanides and the Zohar have already explained the purpose of the commandment of *yibbum* in the need to
enable the deceased brother’s soul an opportunity to reincarnate in the seed that the levir will raise in his new coupling with the yavama [widow].”

Katz’s observation is correct as medieval discussions of transmigratory yibbum exist. However, compared with the Ottoman Sephardic counterpart, medieval references are limited in number, clarity, exposure, and their effect on the general public. The logic driving the early references is not as clearly articulated but, rather, is hinted at, in a message clear to the initiated but unlike the detailed discussions of the expellees. The fact that the medieval Iberian sources perceive yibbum as the means to “reincarnate in the seed that the levir will raise in his new coupling with the yavama” as Katz suggests is not clearly articulated in the sources and can only be surmised by the initiated.

In the rare cases when medieval Iberian sages debated the logic of levirate marriage, it was often in a terse manner. Maimonides, for example, simply stated that the reason for the commandment is that “[it] was an ancient custom [even] earlier than the giving of the Torah, and the Torah kept it.” Maimonides’s statement is a conservative defense of the commandment whose ancient origin serves as its rationale. The Provence philosopher, Talmudist, and mathematician Gersonides (Levi ben Gershon, 1288–1344) shared Maimonides’s reluctance to openly discuss the logic of the commandment. In his commentary on the Torah, Gersonides elaborated on the different relevant precepts of the commandment yet never clearly articulated its purpose.

Another characteristic medieval Iberian approach was less opaque than those of Maimonides and Gersonides yet highly suggestive nonetheless. Consider, for example,

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528 J. Katz, “Post-Zoharic Relations,” 68.
530 Levi ben Gershon, Beur al ha-torah (Mantua, 1475), 236a–b.
Nahmanides and the Zohar, the sources mentioned by Katz as evidence for the pre-exilic, transmigratory interpretation. Nahmanides (1194–1270) was a leading medieval rabbi, philosopher, physician, kabbalist, and biblical commentator from Gerona, Catalonia. Nahmanides’s interpretation of the levirate commandment appears in his commentaries on Genesis and Deuteronomy where he criticizes Rashi’s characteristic and nominally Ashkenazic interpretation of yibbum. For example, in Nahmanides’s commentary on Genesis 38, he writes:

This [i.e., Rashi’s nominal interpretation] is not [the] truth . . . [and] the levir is not commanded to [levirate in order to] name his son after his dead brother . . . The matter [of yibbum is] a great secret . . . apparent to those who can see . . . [to] those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.531

In a similar fashion when commenting on Deuteronomy 25, Nahmanides asserted that the purpose of yibbum “[is] not that [they] shall name the first born after the deceased ‘Reuven’ or ‘Shimon.’”532

Nahmanides identified the wrong interpretation rather than clearly stating the right one. The reader is left to fill in the blank and identify the proper interpretation. Nahmanides’s method was a form of what the historian Huss refers to as “Kabbalistic hints.”533 From the perspective of a reader who is familiar with the kabbalistic tradition, Nahmanides’s hints are clear. Those who “have eyes to see and ears to hear” easily surmise that by eliminating the nominal interpretation, Nahmanides leaves us with the transmigratory interpretation alone.

While it is clear that Nahmanides alluded to the transmigratory interpretation, his text itself is too brief and opaque to form clear evidence for a simple continuation of the

532 Nahmanides, Commentary on the Torah, 214.
533 Boaz Huss, Ke-zohar ha-raqiya, (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 2008), 141.
transmigratory logic from medieval Iberia to the Ottoman Empire. In fact, it is more than
the brevity and opacity of Nahmanides’s analysis that differentiates it from later
traditions. Nahmanides’s suggestive style was intentional as he and other contemporary
sages sought to restrict kabbalistic knowledge to small circles of elite kabbalists. The
means to achieve this purpose was to limit the proliferation of kabbala to oral
transmission from a sage to a small number of select students. The intentional attempt to
maintain the kabbalists’ opacity did not survive the expulsion, after which kabbala
gradually turned into an exoteric tradition.

The Zohar alludes more clearly to the key role of metempsychosis in levirate
marriage: “His brother [i.e., the levir], who levirates his wife . . . must aim his heart and
will to the deceased to raise his name . . . [if he does so] then the [levir] will gather his
[brother’s] soul and spirit to him . . . and he [the deceased] shall return to dirt, that is the
renewal of the building [i.e., the body] as before.”\textsuperscript{534} I selected the previous quotation out
of a much longer and frequently more opaque text to present the strongest case for the
appearance of the kabbalistic interpretation in the Zohar. However, even this quotation is
not as clear or elaborate as the Ottoman Sephardic sources.

The Zoharic commentary on the book of Ruth provides a similar treatment of
\textit{yibbum}. Titled Midrash Ruth, the commentary is found in Midrash Ha-ne’elam, the first
stratum of the Zohar written between 1275 and 1280. The author writes about the
meaning of Ruth 4:7 (“and hand it to the other”):

\begin{quote}
R. Hanina said: it [i.e., the soul of a childless dead man] is analogous to a
man who was wandering in the wilderness in a place of robbers and wild
beasts . . . his friend heard, armed himself, and went to save him . . . what
did the rescuer do? He built him a house, gave him presents, and made
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{534} \textit{Zohar}, vol. 3, 177a.
other clothes for him . . . the latter came, put on these clothes, and
dwelled in this house.535

Later in the text Rabbi Nehunia, another of the sages participating in the discussion, tells
of “wicked” childless men whose souls “set out and drift about in this world.” God
addresses the souls’ predicament as he “builds them up and replants them in the world.”
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From the perspective of an informed reader, the Zoharic evidence is clear. In
addition, I have no doubt that the Zoharic transmigratory interpretation of yibbum
affected later kabbalistic interpretations. However, the evidence itself is not sufficiently
clear or elaborate to suggest that the early modern Sephardic interpretation is a simple
reiteration of Zoharic ideas.

Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia (1240–91) is another medieval Iberian sage whose
work echoes the transmigratory interpretation of yibbum. Abulafia was born in Zaragoza,
Spain, but lived a life of constant wandering in the eastern Mediterranean and Italy.

Ogren presents the following quotation where Abulafia reflects on levirate marriage:
“The masters of kabbala . . . know the secret of levirate marriage from the matter of
Judah and Tamar . . . Er and Onan and Shelah, and from the matter of Elimelech and
Naomi and Mahalon and Kilayon and Boaz and Ruth.”537 Ogren notes this quotation
appears in the midst of a discussion of metempsychosis and thus “betray[s] a
transmigrationist reading” of levirate marriage. Thus Abulafia displays the characteristic,

medieval Iberian tendency to hint rather than clearly articulate the transmigratory interpretation.

The medieval Iberian interpretation, therefore, is not as clear and elaborate as its Ottoman Sephardic counterpart. Medieval Italian and Byzantine sources are more elaborate and closely resemble the expellees’ interpretation. As for the Byzantine evidence, above I presented the STM that was authored most probably in Byzantium of the thirteenth century and appropriated by the Ottoman Sephardim. Isaac ben Samuel of Acre (1250–1340) is another eastern Mediterranean source that displays a transmigratory interpretation of yibbum. Isaac was a kabbalist who had lived in the Crusader city of Acre until its fall in 1291 when he was captured, redeemed, moved to Italy, settled in Navarre, and finally moved to North Africa where he spent his last years.

Isaac’s interpretation of yibbum is clearly transmigratory. However, Isaac differs from the Ottoman Sephardic discourse in his perception of the commandment’s purpose. For Isaac reincarnation is a testament of God’s “mercy on the soul of the wicked person.” Therefore, according to Isaac, the predicament of the childless dead is wickedness or moral corruption rather than childlessness per se. Isaac’s interpretation of the commandment as means of atonement is further exemplified in an exploration of the benefit that reincarnation brings to the wicked soul. Metempsychosis “is so that it [i.e., the soul] might not be forfeited due to the short time that it was in its body, so that its sins could be purified in the body into which it would transmigrate, and so it could obtain the afterlife in the Garden of Eden.” In this context yibbum is meant to prolong the soul’s

538 Isaac ben Samuel of Acre, Me’irat einayim (Jerusalem, 1978), 82.
539 Isaac ben Samuel, Me’irat einayim, 82.
time on earth so that the untimely deceased can repent and ensure his salvation. Thus, according to Isaac, the childless man’s predicament is his failure to purify himself as a result of his untimely death and not childlessness per se.

The social imagination underlying Isaac of Acre’s interpretation varies greatly from that of the expellees. The extended sojourn in the world of the living may include procreation, yet this act is not emphasized or put above other commandments that one may perform to purify one’s soul. As I showed above, the predicament addressed by the Ottoman Sephardic discourse is that of a broken lineage that is no longer attached to parallel lineages and together cannot serve as a proper conduit of the divine presence. Thus, for Isaac, transmigratory yibbum served individual sinners whereas for the expellees, the commandment was the means to mend a broken demographic structure.

Medieval Italian rabbis offer an elaborate and explicit transmigratory interpretation of yibbum. In Taamei ha-mitsvot, Recanati (b. 1250) clearly associates yibbum with metempsychosis and considers it a means to hasten the arrival of the messiah. In addition, commenting on Genesis 38, Recanati suggests that yibbum continues the lineage as a means to renew the flow of divine emanation to the world. Recanati even singles out the childlessness of the reincarnated soul as an especially severe transgression corrected by yibbum.

Recanati’s lengthy and elaborate exploration of levirate marriage greatly resembles its Ottoman Sephardic counterpart. However, Recanati’s interpretation differs from the expellees’ interpretation in several ways. First, much like Isaac of Acre,

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540 Menahem Recanati, Ta’amei ha-mitsvot (Basel, 1581), 16a–17b.
541 Recanati, Ta’amei ha-mitsvot, 17a. Ogren, Renaissance and Rebirth, 18.
Recanati emphasized personal redemption through *yibbum*.\(^{542}\) This is apparent in Recanati’s direct quotations from Midrash Ruth where the author singles out “the souls of the wicked” from the general body of the childless dead. Recanati clearly articulates his position in his words when describing the reincarnated soul as one “that still requires cleansing.”\(^{543}\)

A second difference between the interpretations of Recanati and the Ottoman Sephardim emanates from the first. Namely, Recanati argues that not all childless men should be redeemed through *yibbum*. According to Recanati only those of mediocre moral standing (*beinonim*) reincarnate and receive another chance at cleansing their souls. The righteous (*tsaddikim*) are exempted from the procedure as they have no need for further cleansing of their immaculate souls. The completely evil (*resha’im*) do not require *yibbum* as additional meritorious lifetimes will not undo their past sins. Excluding the evil and the righteous from levirate marriage further differentiates the medieval Italian tradition from the Ottoman Sephardic discourse. Whereas Recanati necessitates *yibbum* for the morally mediocre alone, the Ottoman Sephardic interpretation necessitates *yibbum* of all childless men.

Thus, according to Recanati, *yibbum* addresses the predicament of individuals with both the need and the ability to redeem their souls. This fact differentiates the social imagination underlying Recanati’s interpretation from the one underlying that of the expulsion generation.\(^{544}\) Whereas Recanati emphasizes the well-being of the individual

\(^{542}\) Recanati, *Ta’amei ha-mitsvot*, 17b.
\(^{543}\) Ibid.
\(^{544}\) Ibid.
soul and the fate of an atomized lineage, the Ottoman Sephardic counterpart stresses the integrity of the entire community’s demographic structure.

The reader who does not accept the above arguments and still seeks to prove a simple continuation of the transmigratory interpretation from the Middle Ages to early modernity must reckon with an additional fact. Namely, one must explain why there is no evidence for a transmigratory-kabbalistic interpretation of the commandment from the second half of the fourteenth century until the second half of the fifteenth century. The silence of this century characterized the entire Iberian kabbalistic production during the generations leading to the expulsion, as noted above, and is therefore not unique to discussions of levirate marriage. Thus, the revival of interest in kabbala and the abundance of kabbalistic treatments of levirate marriage deem the expulsion generation discourse its own kind.545

In addition to the differences presented above, the yibbum interpretation of the expellees differed from the medieval kabbalistic interpretation in its exposure to and effect on the general public. The medieval discourse was shared by a small minority of learned elite; the post-exilic discourse reached and affected a bigger and more varied audience than ever before.

Until the expulsion, kabbalistic knowledge and practices were shared orally by small groups of kabbalists loyal to the halakhic ruling against the public discussion of Jewish mysticism. The sages did not write or publicly sermonize concerning such matters. Nahmanides’s introduction to his commentary on the Torah is well-known evidence for this esoteric trend. “I inform the reader that my sayings will not be

545 For more on this subject, see the section “Historiography of the Kabbalistic Turn” in Chapter 3.
understood via intelligence or wisdom, [the meaning will be delivered] from a sage’s mouth to the receiver’s ear.”

Moses Halamish quotes another source to demonstrate the general vagueness and, perhaps, even ignorance concerning the kabbalistic interpretation of yibbum that was prevalent in mid-fourteenth-century Iberia. Halamish gives as an example a treatise titled *Exegesis on the Commentary of Nahmanides on the Torah* authored by the Iberian Rabbi Joshua ibn Shueib (first half of the fourteenth century) and edited by his student Meir ibn Solomon Sahula (c. 1260–1335). Sahula lived in Guadalajara and did not begin writing his kabbalistic works until his later years. To discuss the purpose of levirate marriage, the author presents a collection of kabbalistic hints concerning yibbum that is not molded into a coherent theory. Especially relevant is the author’s introduction to the disjointed collection:

The matter of yibbum is extremely wondrous and the rabbi [i.e., Nahmanides] was very brief [discussing the matter] as was his habit and only hinted very little. Some matters still require exegesis that is not in our possession; and the kabbala sages wrote about the matter . . . and they have doubts concerning the matter . . . [this] wisdom was lost during our exile [i.e., exile from the land of Israel] and what remained is what remained . . . and I heard that the rabbi of blessed memory [i.e., Nahmanides] was doubtful about many matters concerning yibbum and when he was asked about them said he did not know. And I shall write the entire thing [i.e., what the author heard], but I shall not insert myself [i.e., the author’s opinion] as it will lengthen the writing and as these things are not clear enough to me.

The quotation shows that medieval Iberian sages were aware of the transmigratory interpretation of yibbum. However, the author’s frustration clearly shows that already by the mid-fourteenth century, the devotion of medieval kabbalists to the esoteric nature of

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546 Nahmanides, *Commentary on the Torah*, introduction to Genesis.
their work denied their successors a clearly articulated coherent theory. In this context even if the Ottoman Sephardim utilized preexisting theories in their yibbum discourse, they could not have adopted a preexisting coherent and systematic medieval thesis. Molding the medieval traditions of the transmigratory interpretation into a coherent theory was a creative effort of the expellees rather than an adoption of an existing trend.

Another significant difference between the medieval and Ottoman Sephardic interpretations is the latter’s influence on daily life through its authority on halakha. J. Katz and others showed that before the expulsion, the presence of kabbala in the Sephardim’s daily life and its influence on halakha was extremely limited. Even when we hear of kabbala as a source of authority in halakhic matters, the authors never refer the reader to a particular kabbalistic source but rather state that they “heard” such notions or that it was “said” to them by some undisclosed source. After the expulsion, however, halakhic works are plentiful and contain direct and elaborate references to kabbalistic sources now perceived as a legitimate source of authority.

Particularly in the case of levirate marriage, Katz showed that before the expulsion the kabbalistic theory did not affect the ongoing halakhic debate over whether yibbum or halitsa was the preferable resolution for the levirate bond. As Katz demonstrated, the transmigratory model was introduced into the halakhic debate only during the expulsion generation and especially by Isaac Caro and David ibn Zimra.

Isaac Caro turned to the kabbalistic interpretation as a means to break through the long-lasting halakhic impasse. Consider, for example, a case from Salonika (1516)

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550 For a discussion of the halakhic debate, see “Yibbum or Halitsa? Biblical, Rabbinic, Medieval, and Early Modern Answers” in Chapter 4.
where a certain widow sought to delay *halitsa* until she was offered satisfactory monetary compensation. Responding to the case, Caro argued that when sages are in halakhic disagreement “and there is a kabbalistic decision as one of them [i.e., that supports one of them], then the ruling is [according] to [the opinion of] the kabbala sages.”

Katz locates a similar notion in the work of ibn Zimra. Katz points to a case that took place in Crete and involved an older widow (twenty-two at the time of her husband’s death) who had waited eight years until the levir came of age and was eligible to participate in a *halitsa* ceremony. Yet when the time came, the levir refused to perform *halitsa*. In his responsum, ibn Zimra criticized a certain sage for arguing that *halitsa* is the preferable resolution for the levirate bond. Ibn Zimra writes the following, personally addressing the criticized sage: “I came to know that you are acquainted with the hidden wisdom [i.e., kabbala], and [I do not understand] how did you agree to say that the commandment of *halitsa* precedes [yibbum].” Here ibn Zimra clearly articulates the significance of the kabbalistic interpretation of *yibbum* in deciding the long-standing halakhic debate concerning levirate marriage.

The Italian halakhic debate over the optimal resolution for the levirate bond further demonstrates the significant presence of the unveiled transmigratory interpretation in its Ottoman Sephardic counterpart. Elements of the transmigratory thesis found in Italian halakhic debates are expressed in a veiled fashion, characteristic of the medieval kabbalistic hints and not in the elaborate and clearly articulated Ottoman Sephardic fashion.

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551 Caro, *Bet yosef*, #2.
Consider, for example, the responsum of Rabbi Jacob Recanati Fanzi concerning the 1539 case of Isaac Sephardi from Ancona mentioned above. Fanzi asserted the following concerning the purpose of halitsa, namely, “[to] untie the woman [i.e., widow] who does not wish to levirate, and redeem the dead [husband by allowing him] to pass through the partition [i.e., the body or the afterworld] through the sandal.” In a responsum written in 1529, Rabbi Jacob Rafael Peglione of Modena presents a veiled interpretation of yibbum that echoes Nahmanides: “the matter [of yibbum] is a secret from the secrets of the Torah . . . and it is apparent to the eyes of those who can see, [those] who God gave eyes to see and ears to hear.”

In addition to entering the lives of the Ottoman Sephardim through the halakhist, kabbala entered the daily life of early modern Sephardim in other ways. For example, Huss showed that the rise in the importance of the Zohar in the aftermath of the expulsion was not limited to theological discourses (i.e., the purpose of the commandment treatises, the commentaries on the Torah, and an increased number of quotations from the Zohar in responsa) but also in cultural practices. Huss shows that customs inspired by the Zohar gained popularity, and references to the Zohar and kabbalistic notions were found in public sermons.

The increased presence of kabbala in the life of the Ottoman Sephardim was intentional. In Chapter 10 I show that the Ottoman Sephardic discourse was conceived by the rabbinic elite in crisis, attempting to battle religious laxity and to improve their

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554 Isaac Lampronti, Pahad yitshak (Venice, 1753), vol. 3, 27a. The word choice is quite opaque. The two readings of the sentence (i.e., enter a body or the afterlife) are possible.
556 Huss, Ke-zohar ha-raqia, esp., chap. 4.
weakened social status. Sephardic sages clearly asserted that they wished to increase religious devotion through public dissemination of kabbala. It is in this context that we should understand the exoteric, elaborate, and expansive nature of the Ottoman Sephardic yibbum discourse. The intent of the Ottoman Sephardic sages clearly differentiates the Ottoman Sephardic discourse from its contemporary Italian or medieval predecessors.

**The Italian Yibbum Discourse: Internal and External Influences**

One of the dissertation’s main arguments is that the relative lack of influence by the Ottoman host culture (Jewish or Muslim) is a unique attribute of the Ottoman Sephardic yibbum discourse. The relative freedom enabled the expellees in the Ottoman Empire to address their social predicament and express their communal organization and social imagination. This section further supports the above assertion in two ways.

First, the section shows that internal and external elements significantly influenced the early modern Italian yibbum discourse. Internally, the Italian Jewish cultural amalgam of relatively small communities comprised of varied and distinct ethnic groups of equal standing prevented the emergence of a dominant interpretation of yibbum. Externally, Renaissance philosophy and the Protestant Reformation directly influenced Italian Jewry. Together, these internal and external influences shaped a very different yibbum discourse from its Ottoman Sephardic counterpart, further demonstrating the unique qualities of the latter.

Second, the section shows that several alternative interpretations of yibbum existed in Iberia before the expulsion. Some of the interpretations were developed by Italian Jews (Sephardim and indigenous) whereas others dominated the Ottoman
Sephardic discourse. Therefore, even if the expellees in Italy or the Ottoman Empire chose to adopt one established Iberian tradition or another, their choice alone constitutes a manifestation of their agency.

**Internal Influence: The Italian Halakhic Debate**

Italy’s ethnic makeup directly affected the attitude toward the optimal resolution for the levirate bond. Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy witnessed intensive encounters between different Jewish ethnicities. Ashkenazim settled in northern Italy beginning in the second half of the fourteenth century. Romaniotes and Sephardim lived in the southern regions of the peninsula. By 1492 the Ashkenazim were the dominant sociocultural force among Italy’s Jewry. Consequently, Ashkenazic religious tradition in general and Ashkenazic attitudes toward yibbum in particular came to dominate and be associated with Italian Jewry.

After the expulsion, significant numbers of Iberian Jews settled in Italy strengthening the small indigenous Sephardic communities. Consequently, at the turn of the sixteenth century, Italian Jewry was comprised of a variety of ethnic communities of relatively equal standing. Accordingly, the sixteenth-century Italian yibbum discourse presented a strong, traditional Ashkenazic approach that gradually gave way to the Sephardic approach as the century progressed. By the seventeenth century, Italy was the home of two distinct interpretations of yibbum, one Ashkenazic and the other, Sephardic.

By the fifteenth century, the Ashkenazic attitude toward levirate marriage was the dominant tradition in Italy. Consequently, halitsa was the custom, and yibbum was rarely
Elimelech Westreich found that in the fifteenth century, no responsum was written for an Italian Jew concerning overriding Rabbenu Gershom’s ban (of polygamous marriage) to enable *yibbum*. This fact is even more significant when considered within the greater context of the general attitude toward procreation. As Westreich shows, the medieval Sephardic and Ashkenazic legal traditions varied greatly concerning the attitude toward procreation. [From] “the thirteenth century on, throughout the extensive body of Ashkenazic legal sources we have not found one case where the husband sued for permission to wed a second wife or to divorce his wife solely on the grounds of her being barren. This contrasted with Spain during the same period and with the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century.” The expellees in Italy, therefore, encountered indigenous Jewry that overwhelmingly preferred monogamy over fertility and consequently were generally resistant to *yibbum*. Thus the dominant halakhic tradition that couched the expellees in Italy was radically different from its Ottoman counterpart that lacked a significant Ashkenazic element.

The medieval Italian Ashkenazic dominance is evident in the primary sources. Joseph Colon ben Solomon Trabotto (Maharik; 1420–80) was one of Italy’s leading sages of the era and the most prominent authority on the Ashkenazic-Italian interpretation of *yibbum*. Trabotto’s Ashkenazi approach is evident in his choice to defend his position by quoting medieval Ashkenazic authorities such as Rashi and Rabbenu Tam. Trabotto’s approach is Ashkenazic in principal yet not identical to the contemporary Ashkenazic

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558 Joseph Colon ben Solomon Trabotto wrote one such responsum, but it was for an Ashkenazic man residing outside of Italy.
approach. Trabotto argued that only a married levir should be coerced to perform *halitsa*. The distinction between a married and an unmarried levir distinguishes his Italian Ashkenazic approach from his Ashkenazic contemporaries’ categorical preference of *halitsa*. As J. Katz notes, Trabotto’s position was rarely challenged, thus setting the Ashkenazic preference of *halitsa* as the Italian rule. According to Westreich, the Ashkenazic halakhic dominance in Italy was not accidental but rather a result of “steps one might call ‘imperialist’ striving to impose the Ashkenazi legal tradition on members of other ethnic communities.”

In the second half of the fifteenth century, Ashkenazic and Sephardic halakhic traditions presented conflicting views concerning levirate marriage. Above I mentioned the case in Candia where a heated debate took place in 1466 concerning the purpose of levirate marriage. A similar conflict occurred on the Island of Corfu in the late fifteenth century. Gershon Bonafazo, a local Romaniote rabbi did not father a child after ten years of marriage. Sometime before 1490 Bonafazo married a second wife with the hope that she would bear him children. Some community members protested against Bonafazo’s measure and were supported by Rabbi Judah ben Eliezer ha-Levi Minz (c. 1405–1508), the most prominent Italian rabbi of the fifteenth century. Minz asserted that Rabbenu Gershom’s ban did not allow taking another wife even for the purpose of procreation. For support Bonafazo approached the most prominent contemporary Romaniote rabbi Elijah Mizrahi (c. 1455–1525). Mizrachi argued that Rabbenu

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563 See pp. 169 and 202 above.  
564 Gershon Bonafazo’s responsum is quoted in *Binyamin Ze’ev* (Venice, 1538), #78.  
Gershom’s ban cannot prevent Bonafazo from performing a commandment, especially that of procreation. To support his case Mizrachi quotes a twelfth-century Ashkenazic responsum concerning levirate marriage. The Ashkenazic rabbis who were consulted forbade the enforcement of halitsa for a widow based on the interpretation that the commandment to procreate by yibbum overrides Rabbenu Gershom’s ban.

The turn of the sixteenth century witnessed an Ashkenazic tradition still dominant as is apparent in the 1505 responsum of Azriel Diena (d. 1536). Diena, a rabbi from Sabbioneta, Mantua, concluded that if the levir is married, halitsa is the preferred resolution for the levirate bond. The Ashkenazic tradition was dominant, yet not unchallenged. The challenges were varied and did not constitute a simple categorical endorsement of yibbum. For example, some rabbis presented a relatively extreme Ashkenazic position, arguing that all levirs should be coerced to perform halitsa regardless of whether they were married or not. Other rabbis presented assorted readings of the Sephardic tradition. Some allowed or even preferred yibbum as long as it did not result in an ill-fated marriage. Others saw yibbum as the only solution for the levirate bond. Consider, for example, Obadiah ben Abraham of Bertinoro (1445–1515) for whom yibbum is permissible, and coercion is not required even if the levir’s intention is to gain the widow per se or her wealth rather than for the sake of his brother’s name.

A case that took place in Ancona in 1539 demonstrates the complexity of the mid-century Italian halakhic discourse. The case revolved around a dispute between a married

\[567\] Ibíd, 10.
\[568\] Yacov Boksenboim, Sheetot u-teshuvot matanot ba-adam. (Tel-Aviv, 1983), 157.
\[569\] Trabotto, Sheetot u-teshuvot, #91; Westreich, Legal Status of the Wife, 216.
\[570\] See, e.g., Bonafazo’s position as examined by Westreich in Legal Status of the Wife, 216.
\[571\] Obadiah ben Abraham of Bertinoro, Parshanut al mishmayot (Venice, 1547), 46a.
levir and a widow over the proper compensation for the latter in case of halitsa. At a certain point the couple changed their minds and decided to perform levirate marriage. In the rabbinic exchanges that followed, the Italian Ashkenazic rabbi Moses Basola criticized a fellow Italian Sephardic rabbi who had approved polygamous marriage of the married levir in order to perform the commandment of yibbum. In his responsum, Basola states that in general halitsa is preferred, even strongly encouraged using moderate means rather than strong measures such as excommunication. Coercion is more fitting, argues Basola, if the levir is already married and the performance of yibbum would lead to a polygamous marriage.572

Basola’s approach is Ashkenazic in principal; however, the distinction between a married and an unmarried levir is similar to that of Trabotto and Diena, thus distinguishing Basola’s Italian Ashkenazic approach from the contemporary, categorical Ashkenazic preference of halitsa. Basola’s nuanced approach and the approach of the Sephardic rabbi he criticized clearly demonstrate the complexity of the Italian halakhic yibbum discourse and the variety of opinions it exhibited by 1539.

The responses to Isaac Sephardi’s case further exemplify the complexity of the Italian discourse. Adelman found evidence that an excommunication decree against Isaac was indeed written to coerce him to perform halitsa.573 And yet, in spite of the halakhic ruling and the excommunication decree, Isaac and the widow performed yibbum. This is evident from a note by Samuel Judah Katzenellenbogen (1521–97) who argued that in the days of “Moses Basola, may he be of blessed memory, yibbum was performed in Ancona

573 Ibid.
and the levir’s name was Rabbi Isaac Sephardi.”  

It seems that popular tradition and local custom affected religious practice at least as significantly as the varied halakhic positions.  

A later Venetian case (1614) involving a married Sephardic levir demonstrates how sixteenth-century conflicts between Italian Ashkenazic and Sephardic traditions reshaped the Italian discourse. Several Italian rabbis argued that it is permissible to coerce the levir to perform _halitsa_. One of the rabbis was Leon Modena, the leader of the Italian and German Jewish communities of Venice. Modena wondered whether it is practical to advise a Sephardic couple to perform _halitsa_ as they are accustomed to prefer _yibbum_. To support his assertion, Modena states that Sephardim levirate in Salonika “on a daily basis”  

Modena mentions several cases when _yibbum_ was practiced by Italian Jews. For example, Modena recounts a story he heard “from our elders” about a certain Joseph Pologna from Pisa who in 1573 received an approval to levirate from the rabbis of “Bologna, Ferrara, Mantua, Venice, Pesaro, [and] Siena.”  

Although a later source, Modena’s responsum shows that by the turn of the seventeenth century there existed a clear ethnic division between Italian Sephardic and Ashkenazic halakhic authorities concerning the optimal resolution for the levirate bond. Modena’s acceptance of this situation is a far cry from what Westreich calls “imperialist” measures of late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Italian Ashkenazim. In addition, Pologna’s case shows that in the second half of the sixteenth century, _yibbum_ was not a

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574 Westreich, _Legal Status of the Wife_, 219.
575 In addition Isaac Sephardi declared he will seek approval for his polygamous marriage from the pope. On the explosive potential of such a measure, see below “External Influences II: _Yibbum_ and Polygamy in a European Political Context.”
577 Leon Modena, _Zikney yehuda_ (Jerusalem, 1956), #60.
marginal phenomenon because it was approved by the rabbis of six major Italian communities. The religious context Modena describes marks the culmination of a century of conflicts over the proper resolution for the levirate bond between Italian Ashkenazim and Sephardim. In contrast, contemporary Ottoman Sephardim did not experience a significant challenge from indigenous Jewry.

Sixteenth-century Italian rabbis offered a variety of interpretations of levirate marriage. For some it was a desirable commandment whereas for others, halitsa was to be enforced. In between these extreme positions, some argued that yibbum should be performed but only if the union is desirable whereas others asserted that halitsa is to be enforced only when required to prevent polygamy. None of these positions is unique; their cohabitation in the same cultural and, at times, familial sphere is.

In the past historians sought to contextualize the mixture of Ashkenazic and Sephardic traditions that comprised the Italian halakhic yibbum discourse. Ogren argued that rabbinic authorities in need of political support “were aligned to these groups,” (i.e., the lay elite) thus developing discourses in alignment with the interests of the elite. For Ogren these early modern discourses of Italian Jewish identity constituted a crucial “imagining of origins and sense of community” of different groups in a multiethnic community in the midst of an identity crisis.578 As already mentioned above, Adelman provides a similar explanation, arguing that early modern Italian rabbis sought to address an identity crisis and foster group identity by formulating a “program of ethnic awareness based on perceptions of ritual difference”579 The explanations of Adelman and Ogren are

578 Ogren, Renaissance and Rebirth, 39.
similar to the thesis offered by J. Katz and discussed in Chapter 4. Katz argued that Isaac Caro and ibn Zimra asserted that Ashkenazim and Sephardim held categorical approaches to *yibbum* although they were familiar with evidence to the contrary because they sought to legitimize an emerging categorical Ottoman Sephardic preference of *yibbum*.580

The theories of Ogren and Adelman may explain the gradual strengthening of the Sephardic position in Italian halakhic debates as Sephardic communities increased in number and political influence during the sixteenth century. However, the theories offered by Katz, Adelman, and Ogren do not explain the particular choice of the Ottoman Sephardim of the transmigratory *yibbum*. Of course, such an explanation is redundant if we could prove that the expellees simply adopted ready-made, long-lasting Iberian beliefs. However, as this chapter shows, this was not the case, and therefore we must explain the expellees’ choice, which is the subject of the following chapters.

The above shows that the Italian Sephardic *yibbum* discourse took place in an internal Jewish context in which non-Sephardic communities and religious traditions posed a much more potent opposition than the Sephardim encountered in the Ottoman Empire. Consequently, the Italian discourse developed as a religious-ethnic dialog rather than a free expression of religious and social imagination characteristic of its Ottoman counterpart. However, external as well as internal differences distinguished the Italian from the Ottoman *yibbum* discourse. We now turn to these.

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580 See, esp., “Yibbum or Halitsa? Biblical, Rabbinic, Medieval, and Early Modern Answers” in Chapter 4.
External Influences I: Yibbum and Metempsychosis in a Philosophical Context

The following two sections examine two external phenomena that affected the Italian yibbum discourse, namely, Renaissance philosophy and the Protestant Reformation. The resistance of rational philosophers to the notion of metempsychosis focused much of its attention on the transmigratory interpretation of yibbum. Consequently, either in defense of their tradition or influenced by local trends, the incoming Iberian Jews joined their Italian counterparts in an effort to accommodate the transmigratory interpretation to rational philosophy. The Protestant Reformation generated several controversies that turned polygamy and levirate marriage into highly contested, volatile religious-political issues. Thus, early modern Europe was aware of, and invested in, the Jewish interpretation and practices of levirate marriage.

To properly contextualize the philosophers’ criticism of the transmigratory interpretation of yibbum, I briefly present rational philosophy’s main interpretations of the relationship between body and soul. Greek philosophy offers two general models, namely, the monistic and dualistic. The monistic theory argued for a union between body and soul, the latter animating the former. The dualistic approach perceived the soul as essentially separate from the body, the latter an earthly, material receptacle for the divine spiritual soul.

Plato and Aristotle developed influential variations of the basic models. In the dualistic fashion, Plato argued that there is no essential connection between body and soul. However, Plato did allow for the existence of an attraction that draws the soul toward the body. In the monistic fashion, Rejecting the dualism of Plato’s theory, Aristotle held that the soul was principle of life in the living body: the form or capacity of
the body for life and the act by which the body realized this capacity in life. Since different kinds of creatures lived different kinds of lives, he allowed that the soul could be described in terms of different kinds of forms and acts, which he called parts, although he insisted that the parts were not separable from one another. And in a condensed and difficult passage he allowed that the intellect (or rational part of the soul) with which humans uniquely among animals were endowed was in some sense immortal and eternal.581

Medieval Jewish philosophers developed three variations of the classical Greek theories:582 (1) a monistic approach, characteristic of the Ashkenazim, suggested that the soul is a material object created with, tied to, and acting through the body. After death the soul is separated from the body and resides in the afterworld; (2) a Neoplatonist approach envisioned the soul as a spiritual object separate from and superior to the body. The soul’s embodiment is contrary to its nature, and it seeks to elevate itself toward the divine. This approach was most popular among the kabbalists; (3) an Aristotelian approach perceived of the soul as inseparable from the body. The soul is comprised of five elements and only one of them remains after death. Therefore one’s identity, experience, and unique characteristics cannot survive death intact.

The different philosophical trends presented different challenges to the kabbalists’ transmigratory theory of yibbum. Dualistic philosophers may perceive the body as a receptacle, a carrier of the soul enabling its journey toward perfection and union with the divine. This theory makes redundant the kabbalistic insistence on a particular receptacle

581 Aristotle, De Anima, book 2, chap. 3. According to Aristotle, three elements comprised the human soul, namely, (1) a vegetative soul, responsible for reproduction and growth; (2) a sensitive soul, responsible for mobility and sensation; and (3) a rational soul, capable of thought and reflection.
582 Ha-entsiklopedyah ha-ivrit, s.v. “Nefesh.”
(i.e., the levirate offspring). For monistic philosophers, body and soul are inseparable and share a unique connection that cannot be recreated via metempsychosis. To support their assertion, the monistic philosophers could (and did) point to the fact that we do not know of any newborns equipped with learning, memory, and identity acquired during a past life (or lives).

Thus, it is easy to see how Aristotelian monistic and Neoplatonist dualistic Italian philosophers would resist the concept of metempsychosis in general and transmigratory yibbum in particular. Indeed such resistance drove the philosophers’ criticism of the transmigratory-kabbalistic interpretation of yibbum as well as the kabbalists’ defense of their tradition. Together the philosophers’ criticism and the kabbalists’ response constituted a unique attribute of the Italian yibbum discourse.

The Italian philosophical transmigratory discourse demonstrates the originality of the Ottoman Sephardic counterpart in two ways. First, because the attempts to reconcile transmigratory yibbum and rational philosophy started in Iberia before the expulsion, they demonstrate the availability of alternative pre-exilic interpretive traditions for the expellees to adopt. Therefore, the Ottoman Sephardic adoption of the transmigratory-kabbalistic logic of the commandment must be seen as an active choice rather than as a passive continuation of old trends. Second, the phenomenon shows that the Italian intellectual environment significantly affected the local yibbum discourse. The direct and significant Italian influence greatly differed from the marginal Ottoman counterpart that allowed the expellees to develop their discourse in relative freedom.

The philosophers’ challenge to the transmigratory-kabbalistic interpretation goes back to late medieval Iberia. Hasdai ben Judah Crescas (c.1340–1411) was one of the
first Iberian Jewish philosophers to criticize the notion of metempsychosis. Crescas was a Spanish philosopher and halakhist who is known as one of the major practitioners of the rationalist approach to Jewish philosophy. Crescas criticized the belief in metempsychosis on monistic Aristotelian grounds, arguing that a soul is a potential manifested through human efforts, a product of one’s learning.\textsuperscript{583} According to Crescas, a reincarnated soul can never be a reinstated person.\textsuperscript{584} To support his position, Crescas points to the absence of newborns whose souls include the potential fulfilled in their past lives, in other words, newborns equipped with the intellectual skills and experience of the persons they used to be.

Despite his criticism, Crescas does not delegitimize belief in metempsychosis, which is grouped with other beliefs in a category of “opinions and conjectures the mind leans toward as they are received [wisdom],” (i.e., customary, traditional, or conservative in nature).\textsuperscript{585} Arama’s later interpretation of \textit{yibbum} displays a similar combination of philosophical criticism and an acceptance of \textit{yibbum}: [The hidden purpose of \textit{yibbum}] “is the secret of \textit{gilgul} [metempsychosis] from the secrets of kabbala and is contrary to nature. Therefore, we shall accept it for it is God’s secret to his believers, and [even] if it is foreign to us.”\textsuperscript{586} Crescas and Arama represent a pre-exilic tradition that canceled the logic governing one of the main elements in the kabbalistic logic of \textit{yibbum} on philosophical grounds, namely, metempsychosis; however, it did not cancel the veracity of transmigratory \textit{yibbum} itself.

\textsuperscript{584} Crescas, \textit{Or ha-shem}, 4.
\textsuperscript{585} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{586} Arama, \textit{Akedat yitshak}, 285b.
Crescas and Arama do not accept the logic of metempsychosis yet do not reject it completely. Their approach is relatively inclusive and does not envision philosophy and kabbala as mutually exclusive. Crescas’s student Joseph Albo (c.1380–1444) presents a harder line toward the kabbalists’ belief in metempsychosis, evident in the following quotation from his *Sefer ha-ikkarim* (book of principles), the classic work on the fundamentals of Judaism:

> And from here came the opinion of the sages of kabbala concerning *gilgul* [metempsychosis] . . . [the sages argued that the soul] is a spiritual substance [able to] enter into the human body [in its inception] . . . thus it is possible that the [reincarnated] soul . . . will return to dwell again in a body. But this is not true . . . the soul that already served in a human body and has free will, why would it return to a body? . . . Further than this from the truth is that which they say that human souls transmigrate into the bodies of animals, and God knows. 587

Grounded in Aristotelian philosophy, Albo’s criticism deems metempsychosis unacceptable. Ogren shows that Albo’s criticism pertains to the question of free will, according to Albo, found only in the embodied soul. The disembodied soul lacks free will, and thus, God places it in a body so it may attain free will and properly follow the commandments. In this context, re-embodying a soul that already attained free will is redundant. 588

By the end of the fifteenth century, much like Albo, Isaac Abravanel presented a lengthy discussion of levirate marriage that is grounded in the assumption that metempsychosis and Aristotelian philosophy are contradictory in terms. However, unlike Crescas, Albo, and Arama, Abravanel does more than simply accept, criticize, or ignore

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transmigratory yibbum. Abravanel sought to reconcile the transmigratory interpretation with the philosopher’s resistance to the theory of metempsychosis.

Abravanel presents his interpretation of yibbum in a commentary on Deuteronomy he started writing in 1470 while in Lisbon and completed in Monopoli (on the Adriatic coast of Apulia south of Bari) in 1496. Thus, Abravanel’s interpretation of yibbum exemplifies the relocation of the pre-exilic philosophical treatment of the Iberian transmigratory-kabbalistic discourse to Italy in the aftermath of the expulsion.

To achieve his purpose, Abravanel poses and answers concerns she expects Aristotelian and Christian philosophers have with the transmigratory interpretation of yibbum. Among the concerns are the following: (1) According to the philosophers, a new body is already equipped with a soul. If reincarnated into the levirate offspring, the childless man’s soul must share the new body with the new soul. According to rational philosophy, this condition cannot exist as each body has only one soul. (2) A soul is compatible with a particular body. Therefore, the philosophers argue, it is unlikely that the body of the levirate offspring is compatible with the reincarnated soul. (3) If the new body is of a higher stature and thus better equipped to serve the soul, why would God limit its potential growth by assigning it a soul whose past-life transgressions already proved its imperfect nature? If the new body is of a lesser stature than the soul had during its previous life, why would God prevent the soul from fulfilling its potential by assigning it to a lesser body? If the new and the old bodies are of the same essence, why
would God remake the same person, a combination of form and matter, that already had proven itself imperfect and sinful?589

After presenting the philosopher’s concerns, and in a way of reconciling them with transmigratory yibbum, Abravanel turns to discuss the Aristotelian theory of the soul. The sources Abravanel presents are commentators on Aristotle, namely, the third-century Alexander of Aphrodisias, the fourth-century Themistius, and the twelfth-century Andalusian ibn Rushd.590 Abravanel finds that the cornerstone of the Aristotelians’ thesis, namely, that the soul is an intellectual potential inseparable from the body, is the source for their resistance to metempsychosis. Consequently, Abravanel sought to reconcile Aristotelian philosophy and metempsychosis by arguing that the soul is in fact an object and not a potential.591 As an object, the soul can be transferred from one body to the next, regardless of the body’s level of perfection.

Of course, it may be argued that if the body’s perfection is of no consequence, then the kabbalists’ insistence on a particular body for the levirate offspring is redundant. However, Abravanel asserts that compatibility between body and soul is indeed crucial. Echoing the Aristotelian thesis, Abravanel solves the paradox by arguing that attaining body-soul compatibility is a lifelong process rather than a precondition to life. Once in the body, the soul changes as new cultural and physical circumstances affect its growth.592

Abravanel presents another possible doubt already mentioned above, namely, did the reincarnated soul simply forgot its past life? If a soul does remember, why are there

589 Abravanel, Perush al ha-torah, 232.
590 Abravanel’s turn to these sources is in tune with the concept of prisca theologia discussed in this section.
591 Abravanel, Perush al ha-torah, 386–87; Regev, “Reasons for the Levirate Command,” 68.
no savant newborns among us? Abravanel’s answer again is grounded in the definition of
the soul as an object and the perfection of the body-soul connection as a lifelong process.
Abravanel argues that physical trauma is a part of the process and is a known cause of
memory loss among the living. In this context death, the most significant of physical
traumas, makes us forget our entire past. Not remembering our previous life, therefore,
is not surprising and surely does not diminish the veracity of metempsychosis.

Abravanel notes an additional concern, namely, to which body does the
reincarnated soul returns in the afterlife? Abravanel answers that it returns to the soul’s
first body. The other bodies are temporary receptacles, the means to achieve perfection of
the soul. It may be that Abravanel sought to present the connection of the soul and the
first body as unique, thus closer to the Aristotelian model that perceived the body-soul
connection as exclusive. Yet, for the current discussion, the particulars of Abravanel’s
treatment of the common philosophical counterarguments to metempsychosis are of
lesser importance. The main point to take from the above paragraphs is the existence of
Iberian traditions that examined the transmigratory theory of *yibbum* through the
philosopher’s lens, that these traditions flourished in Italy, and that they do not exist in
the Ottoman Sephardic evidence.

Abravanel presents an additional explanation for *yibbum* that is not rational-
philosophical or kabbalistic-transmigratory. Abravanel argues that *yibbum* was a
means of social welfare intended to keep the widow in the safety of a social network (i.e.,
the husband’s family). In this context *yibbum* was perceived as a means to ensure the

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593 Abravanel does admit that some of the past knowledge remains as some children are better students than others. Abravanel, *Perush al ha-torah*, 233–34.

widow’s well-being as well as the integrity of the paternal family’s material possessions. The social explanation demonstrates the existence of yet another pre-exilic Iberian interpretation of the commandment that did not turn into the dominant Ottoman Sephardic discourse.\(^{595}\)

Thus Abravanel offers rational-philosophical, transmigratory-kabbalistic, and social explanations for the purpose of levirate marriage. These potentially contradictory explanations seem to suggest that Abravanel offers an impartial informative list of the different traditions associated with levirate marriage known to him. However, this was not the case. At the end of his treatment of the philosophers’ criticism, Abravanel gives a hint concerning his opinion: “It is seen here that *gilgul* [metempsychosis] is not impossible as the students of Aristotle thought, but it is [in fact] possible. Indeed, its justification [i.e., that of *gilgul*] and affirmation is not by example [i.e., supported by evidence], but [because] it is received from [the tradition, lit., kabbala] of our holy ancestors that we are ought to accept it.”\(^{596}\) Thus, Abravanel’s extensive debate with Aristotelian philosophers should not be seen as an enthusiastic support of the transmigratory interpretation of *yibbum*.\(^{597}\) Rather, and much like his philosophically inclined predecessors, Abravanel reluctantly accepts the kabbalistic interpretation.

What then was Abravanel’s preferable interpretation of *yibbum* if not the transmigratory-kabbalistic one? Abravanel articulates his position in the following

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\(^{595}\) The concerns with the preservation of the possessions of the paternal lineage were indeed a significant element in the Ottoman Sephardic discourse. However, as shown in Chapter 7, it was not the principal logic of the expellees’ interpretation. In fact, if anything, the social trend was abandoned by the Ottoman Sephardim. As already noted above, Westreich found that late medieval and early modern Sephardim (and especially those in the Ottoman Empire) clearly prioritized procreation at the expense of regulations meant to ensure the wife’s well-being.

\(^{596}\) Abravanel, *Perush al ha-torah*, 235.

\(^{597}\) Below I examine the work of Genazzano who makes a similar gesture when locating *yibbum* in a category of supra-rational commandments that are “outside of the realm of the intellect.”
quotation: “and the Torah ordered that the name and nahala will be [invested] in the firstborn and not [in] the other sons; whether according to the [transmigratory theory of the] kabbalists, as in him [i.e., the firstborn] the [deceased’s] soul is reincarnated, and, in my opinion [emphasis mine], for the apparent reason [lit., visible, nigle, i.e., non-kabbalistic] that it is sufficient for the eternity of the dead man [i.e., its commemoration] that his son [i.e., the levirate offspring] will be named after him.” This quotation shows that Abravanel prefers the nominal interpretation of yibbum although he accepts the transmigratory-kabbalistic and social interpretations as well. Abravanel’s preference further demonstrates the variety of medieval Iberian approaches to yibbum.

The wealth of Iberian interpretive traditions further supports my assertion that the Ottoman Sephardic transmigratory interpretation was not a simple continuation of a dominant preexisting Iberian trend. In addition, Abravanel’s particular nominal interpretation serves the same purpose. The nominal interpretation could have been a result of Italian influence or an established belief brought with Abravanel to Italy. In any case, Abravanel’s preferable interpretation further differentiates the Italian from the Ottoman yibbum discourse. If his was a preexisting Iberian belief, it is noteworthy that the elite courtier Abravanel settled in Italy where Renaissance philosophy abounded and the Ashkenazic nominal interpretation was dominant. If acquired in exile, Abravanel’s interpretation exemplifies the distinct influence of the Italian host culture on the incoming Sephardim.

Abravanel’s contemporary, Judah Hayat (c.1450–1510) is another Sephardic expellee who settled in Italy and examined the matters of metempsychosis and levirate

598 Abravanel, Perush al ha-torah, 234.
marriage. Hayat settled in Mantua after a horrific experience in Iberia and North Africa. Above I presented Hayat’s questions to Joseph Alcastiel. Hayat’s letter clearly demonstrates a tendency to reconcile rational philosophy and transmigratory yibbum.

Consider, for example, Hayat’s question that is clearly couched in a philosophical context that has already been explained above: “[how] is it possible for two forms to apply to one body?”

A more extensive treatment of metempsychosis by Hayat is found in Minhat yehuda, a commentary on the early fourteenth-century anonymous book of early kabbala titled Sefer maarekhet ha-elohut. One of the classical works of medieval kabbala, Sefer maarekhet ha-elohut generated great interest among early modern Italian Jewry. The relatively high number of commentaries on this book written in Italy in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries demonstrate the work’s popularity. Two of the commentaries were printed, the anonymous commentary that Hayat called paz (perush zulati, lit., commentary that is not by me) and the commentary that Hayat wrote at the request of Mantua’s elders. The identity of the first commentator has not been established although recently it became apparent that he was the mid-fourteenth-century Italian rabbi Reuven Tzarfati. The contrast between Hayat and Tzarfati’s commentaries further demonstrates the influence of the philosophical trend on the Italian interpretation of yibbum.

As Recanati before him, Tzarfati clearly articulates the transmigratory interpretation of yibbum. “The [childless man] will have to undergo gilgul, and this is the secret of yibbum, because two brothers are of the same root and when the one dies

599 Scholem, “Li-idiat ha-kabbala bi-sefarad,” 176; Ogren, Renaissance and Rebirth, 139, 162.
600 Scholem counts thirteen such commentaries whereas his student Ephraim Gottlieb locates ten. See Gershom Scholem, Meikarei kabbalah, ed. Yosef Ben-Shlomo and Moshe Idel (Tel-Aviv, 1998), 181–84; Gottlieb, Meikarim be-sifrut ha-kabalah, ed. Joseph Hacker, (Tel Aviv, 1976), 576.
childless, the other will levirate her [i.e., the widow] and will make seed for his brother, and in this seed from the levir and the widow, he [the childless dead] will find greater benefit than in any other [seed] that is not of his relative[s].”

Hayat’s commentary skips over Tzarfati and the articulation of the transmigratory logic of yibbum in Maarekhet. The discrepancy between Hayat and Tzarfati may be a simple omission; however, at another opportunity Hayat directly refers to Tzarfati’s commentary, writing that “most of his words are not upright in my eyes.”

The fact that Hayat does refer to the transmigratory yibbum later in his commentary gives additional insight as to the reasons behind the omission. Ogren shows that for Hayat transmigration was a means to redeem a sinful soul rather than mending a broken lineage or a distorted demographic structure. To support his analysis, Ogren presents the following quotation: “Know that the secret of gilgul comes from the attribute of hesed, mercy, as is hinted [by the fact that] its number [i.e., the sum of the letters] adds up to [the same value as] gilgul.” Hayat perceived yibbum as a means to achieve perfection of the individual soul whereas the goal of Tzarfati and the author of Maarekhet was the survival of the lineage. Hayat’s social imagination, in addition to his interest in reconciling philosophy and yibbum, clearly distinguishes his treatment of transmigratory yibbum from the Ottoman Sephardic discourse.

Much like Abravanel and Hayat, Elijah Genazzano demonstrates the influence of Italian intellectual trends on the local yibbum discourse. Genazzano, an Italian physician and kabbalist of the first half of the sixteenth century, refers to metempsychosis as a

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601 Judah Hayat, Minhat yehuda (Mantua, 1557), 127b.
602 Ogren, Renaissance and Rebirth, 144–45.
603 Hayat, Minhat yehuda, 149b; Ogren, Renaissance and Rebirth, 150.
604 See Ogren, Renaissance and Rebirth, 150; 160–61.
kabbalistic secret much like his abovementioned contemporaries did. However, Genazzano’s interest is with *prisca theologia* rather than with reconciling philosophy and metempsychosis.\textsuperscript{605}

By *prisca theologia* (lit., first theology), I refer to an assertion that a single theology exists that is present in all religions and was given by God to man in antiquity. The concept emanated from a fundamental assumption of the Renaissance movement, namely, that the remains of classical antiquity constituted an invaluable source of knowledge to which the inferior moderns could turn in order to repair the damage caused during the Dark Ages. It was assumed that God had given a single unified truth to humanity, parts of which are preserved in the works of ancient philosophers. This approach generated a tradition of textual interpretation that strove to harmonize and reconcile different philosophical trends.

Genazzano’s harmonization efforts are apparent in his treatment of metempsychosis. Genazzano states that the belief in metempsychosis can be found in works of “later kabbalists” and not in the medieval classical works of rabbinic Judaism. Therefore, Genazzano argues, kabbalistic knowledge is a means to expose the true ancient threads woven in Greek philosophy, Judaism, and Christianity. For example, Genazzano argues that wisdom found in kabbala can also be found in ancient pagan traditions, namely of “Pythagoras and his sect.”\textsuperscript{606}


Ogren showed that Genazzano’s brief reference to yibbum must be seen in the context of his efforts to uncover the prisca theologia. Genazzano refers to yibbum when he criticizes the late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century Spanish rabbi Joseph Albo. Genazzano refers his readers to the fourth part of Albo’s Sefer ha-ikkarim whose subject is the three principals of Judaism (God’s existence, reward and punishment, and the divine nature of the Torah).

In chapter 29 of the fourth part, Albo asserts that the soul is separate from the body. To support his assertion, Albo points toward the kabbalists’ transmigratory interpretation of yibbum. Genazzano’s uneasiness is with Albo’s methodology rather than with his argument. Genazzano agrees that transmigratory yibbum proves Albo’s point. However, Genazzano wonders why Albo did not employ a much more convincing argument, namely, the antiquity of the belief in transmigratory yibbum. Genazzano argued that Jews performed yibbum (which he understood in transmigratory terms) from times even before the Torah was given, thus proving it was an ancient custom and consequently of great authority.

However, to establish the authority of levirate marriage, Genazzano went beyond its antiquity. Genazzano argued that “the people of India” received the belief in gilgul from “the people of Persia, and . . . [they] received it from Egypt, and . . . [they] received it from the Chaldeans, and the Chaldeans received it from Abraham whom they cast off their land . . . [because] he said that the soul is the source of movement and that there are

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607 Ogren, Renaissance and Rebirth, 169–75.
608 Genazzano, Iggereth Hamudoth, 12. A similar notion is found in Genazzano’s appreciation of Albo’s critique of metempsychosis presented above: “[Albo] erred a famous error in his statement that from this [i.e., the soul’s nature as a spiritual substance] the wise kabbalists derived the idea of gilgul. Because the matter is not that this opinion was created anew from their reasoning, but that it is a received tradition.” Genazzano, Iggereth Hamudoth, 12; Ogren, Renaissance and Rebirth, 173.
many souls, etc." Thus Genazzano sought to augment the validity of Albo’s argument by demonstrating that the Jewish transmigratory thread is entwined with similarly ancient threads, carriers of true divine wisdom. Genazzano’s effort at *prisca theologia* was in tune with similar efforts by Abravanel (whom Genazzano attacked in the same work), Hayat, and others. The works of these Italian Jews demonstrate a significant influence of the Christian host culture, an experience quite different from their Ottoman Sephardic counterparts.

The examination of *yibbum* and metempsychosis through a philosophical lens demonstrates the unique nature of the Ottoman Sephardic discourse in two ways. First, it shows that before the expulsion, alternative Iberian interpretations of *yibbum* existed and that some of these interpretations flourished in Italy. Therefore, the Ottoman Sephardic adoption of the transmigratory-kabbalistic approach must be seen as the expellees’ choice rather than a passive reception of an established tradition. Second, it shows that Italian Jewry was significantly affected by their host culture and developed a *yibbum* discourse that was in tune with the interest of the Renaissance movement in rational philosophy and *prisca theologia*.

**External Influences II: Yibbum and Polygamy in a European Political Context**

Whereas the influence of Christian philosophers was indirect, Christian European politics directly influenced and was invested in the Italian Jewish *yibbum* discourse. The great importance of levirate marriage and polygamy (the potential result of a married levir’s *yibbum*) to the early modern European religious-political context generated the

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Christian political interest in the Jewish interpretation and practices of *yibbum*. Three events demonstrate the Christian interest in polygamy and *yibbum*, namely, the mass polygamy of the Anabaptists in Münster (1534), the bigamous marriage of Philip of Hesse (1539), and the campaign to annul Henry VIII’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon (1527).

Levirate marriage was a significant Jewish commandment, which also was customary among early modern Muslims but not practiced by medieval and early modern Christians. 610 Some scholars argue that the Catholic Church curtailed endogamy, polygamy, concubinage, and divorce as a strategy for limiting the number of offspring. The purpose of this papal policy, according to this argument, was to prevent the aristocracy from producing heirs, thus leaving their estates to the church. Other scholars showed that the nobility and the wealthy wished to limit the number of possible heirs. In a time of high infant and child mortality it was imperative to ensure that there would be an heir, but not several heirs because in Roman law no provision was made to distinguish between heirs by birth order. Therefore, partible inheritance could deplete one’s patrimony and create rivals for succession. 611

Regardless of the reason for the Christian attitude toward polygamy, it is easy to see that a Jewish commandment that potentially involved polygamy could have caused unwanted tensions between Jews and Christians. Yet the inherent conflict between the Christian custom and the Jewish commandment would have remained latent had they stayed buried in forgotten theological treatises read by a secluded few. However, this was

not the case in Reformation Europe. Confessional conflicts generated heated debates with significant political ramifications. Some of these conflicts revolved around polygamy and *yibbum*, directly involving the Jews of Italy.

Polygamy played a significant role in the early modern confessional drama. Namely, continental reports of Anabaptist polygamy from the early 1520s culminating in the mass polygamy of the Münster Anabaptists and the bigamous marriage of Philip I of Hesse. Perhaps in response to this phenomenon, in 1532 the Holy Roman Empire made polygamy a capital offense.\(^{612}\)

In 1534 the Anabaptists in the German city of Münster declared polygamy an ideal form of marriage. The declaration was part of a campaign to hasten the end of times and prepare the city for the event. Münster’s Anabaptists believed that being fruitful and multiplying would hasten the second coming. Consequently, John of Leiden, the leader of the Anabaptists in Münster, made polygamy de facto compulsory. John ordered all single women to marry, annulled marriages of women whose husbands fled Münster so that they were eligible for remarriage, and ordered that a man who had impregnated his wife must marry (and impregnate) another.

Why polygamy became such a central issue for radical Protestants in general and the Anabaptists in particular is debatable. Some scholars suggest it was a direct result of the Reformation’s focus on unmediated encounter with scripture. For the Protestants the Old Testament and its patriarchs became a focal point of a growing public discussion, and so did the fact of the patriarchs’ polygamy. Another reason for the Anabaptists’

\(^{612}\) In 1532 Charles V approved the *Constitutio criminalis carolina*, the first body of criminal law applicable to all German principalities.
interest in polygamy was the Protestant denunciation of clerical celibacy as contrary to the biblical commandment to be “fruitful and multiply.” This commandment was taken literally and seriously by radical Protestants and the Anabaptists in particular.

Scholars offered additional reasons for the Anabaptists’ attitude toward polygamy. For example, some argued that Münster’s Anabaptists constituted a relatively small sectarian group that could only marry within its ranks, thus necessitating maximizing their procreative potential to survive as a community. Others note that the millennial belief that procreation will hasten the second coming might have been responsible for the popularity of polygamy.

The actual reason for the Anabaptists’ enthusiastic adoption of polygamy is of less significance to the current discussion than the great turmoil caused by the affair. To understand the impact of the event, it must be understood in the context of the Anabaptists gaining control of Münster in the winter of 1534. The Anabaptists sought to purify the city by re-baptizing all the infidels (i.e., non-Anabaptists) and expelling all those who refused to join them. The expellees left without their possessions or any sustenance in the middle of a snowstorm. Thus the extravagant story of the Anabaptists’ mass polygamy was perceived as a phase of a dramatic anti-Catholic campaign. Catholic Europe was in uproar, and anti-Anabaptists violence ensued.

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The bigamous marriage of Philip I, Landgrave of Hesse, returned polygamy to the forefront of the confessional struggles less than five years after the fall of the Anabaptists in Münster. Philip was a leading proponent of the Protestant Reformation and one of the most influential early Protestant rulers in Germany. In 1539, after twenty years of marriage, Philip took a lady-in-waiting Margarethe von der Saale as his second wife.615

Philip sought recognition for his bigamous marriage for several reasons. First, Philip sought to avoid a conflict with the Emperor, a clash that was unavoidable as the Holy Roman Empire had deemed polygamy a capital offense since 1532. Second, Philip sought to avoid a tear in the ranks of the Protestants by assuaging coreligionists who were reluctant to accept polygamy. And third, Philip’s existing marriage made the approval of Margarethe’s mother quite hard to obtain.

To legitimate the polygamous union, Philip harnessed the talents of no less than Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon. In response to Philip’s request, the two leading figures of the Protestant Reformation authored the Wittenberg Deliberation, a document that presented their positive position on polygamy.

Although Luther and Melanchthon supported Philip’s decision to take a second wife, they were concerned with the repercussions in case the matter became public. Melanchthon was concerned that the enemies of Protestantism would use polygamy to lump the movement together with the Turks and the Anabaptists in Münster who had practiced polygamy. The concerns were justified as from the early 1520s, the papacy actively criticized polygamy, singling it as a primary Protestant transgression. In fact,

Pope Leo X had directed his legate to the Diet of Worms (1521) to attack Protestantism for its supposed support of polygamy. Therefore, Luther and Melanchthon urged Philip to keep the matter a secret; they also suggested that Philip may tell a holy lie when directly confronted concerning his bigamy.

The attempts to keep the matter private failed, and the news of Philip’s bigamy spread throughout Europe. The fact that Philip’s second wife was a lady-in–waiting, not of a lower class, increased the public turmoil. Once the matter became public, Luther, Melanchthon, and other leading Protestants attacked Philip. Luther claimed the only reason he supported Philip’s bigamy in his Deliberation was to appease Philip’s conscience and under the impression that the matter would remain private. Melanchthon’s reaction was more dramatic—he fasted in contrition, anxious about the affair’s influence on the future of the Reformation.

Public criticism came from the ranks of Catholic and Protestant religious authorities and from lay leaders as well. One of the most significant of the latter was Philip’s fellow member in the Schmalkaldic League John Frederick I, Elector of Saxony. The emerging tension between Philip and John was of great political importance as the Schmalkaldic League was a significant element in the European political system. The League was a defensive alliance of Lutheran princes and a substantial military power within the Holy Roman Empire. Although originally founded for religious motives, with time and growing power its leaders came to see the League as a successor to the Holy Roman Empire. Thus, the affair directly affected an extremely volatile political context.

In addition to his involvement in the Schmalkaldic League, Philip was engaged in constructing far-reaching plans for reforming the Church and for drawing together all the
opponents of the House of Habsburg, which had led the Holy Roman Empire since 1438. However, at the same time Philip did not give up hopes of making peace with the Emperor Charles V. And indeed, Philip and the Emperor reached an agreement. The Emperor agreed to exculpate Philip for his violation of imperial laws (including bigamy). In return, Philip agreed to observe neutrality regarding the dispute between the Empire and the Duchy of Cleves (in the northern Rhineland) over the Duchy of Guelders in the low-countries.

The affairs of the Anabaptists in Münster and Philip’s bigamous marriage turned polygamy into an extremely controversial and high profile issue in Christian Europe. In this context it is clear that an open discussion of levirate marriage, a commandment that potentially required practicing polygamy, could have proven itself quite risky for Italian Jewry. One can only imagine the responsibility placed on the shoulders of an Italian rabbi asked to give his opinion concerning yibbum or polygamy. For example, imagine the factors rabbis had to take into considerations when deliberating the case examined above of Isaac Sephardi from Ancona (1539) who had sought permission for a polygamous marriage from the pope seven years after the events in Münster and in the same year that Philip’s bigamy became a public knowledge. The rabbis must have been troubled by more than strictly theological concerns as polygamy went against the position of the Church, was a highly contested political matter, and directly threatened the pope’s relationship with the Emperor.

Yet the affair that most significantly and directly affected the Italian yibbum discourse was the campaign conducted by Henry VIII between 1527 and 1533 to have his marriage annulled. In 1509 Henry was constrained to marry Catherine of Aragon for
political reasons. The daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella, Catherine was the widow of Henry’s brother Arthur. After eighteen years of marriage, Henry sought an annulment because the marriage had not produced a male heir. Pope Clement VII was reluctant to grant Henry his wish. Clement feared Catherine’s cousin, Emperor Charles V, an understandable concern because Charles was responsible for the Sack of Rome that took place in 1527.

Henry’s case for annulment was based on two biblical texts mentioned previously, namely, Leviticus 18:16 and Deuteronomy 25:5–6. Leviticus 18:16 forbids marital relations between a man and his sister-in-law. Therefore, argued Henry, his marriage to his brother’s widow was prohibited and should be annulled. According to Deuteronomy 25:5–6, a union between a man and his brother’s widow is required if the brother dies without a male heir. The English side argued that the purpose of levirate marriage was to produce a male heir and that Catherine’s failure to give Henry an heir necessitated the annulment of their marriage.

It was necessary to go back to the biblical sources to decide the matter of the seemingly contradictory commandments. To do so Henry and his opponents sought the assistance of learned European Jews. However, because Jews were not allowed to live in England or Spain at that time, Italian Jewry was the most readily available resource for knowledgeable scholars.

In 1530 the English representatives that were sent to Italy to make the case for the annulment reported that they had met with six Jewish scholars concerning the matter. The Venetian Talmudist and physician Elijah Halfon was the most prominent of the six. Halfon collected several signatures of other Jewish authorities in support of his assertion
that the Deuteronomic regulation (i.e., the obligation to perform yibbum) was no longer valid. The rabbis supported one of Henry’s main arguments, namely, that levirate commandment was a ceremonial law that had not been practiced by the Jews since the first century.616 The English found additional Jewish authorities to support their cause in Padua and among the converso communities.617

The English side was not alone in its attempts to recruit the support of Italian Jewish authorities. Henry’s opponents approached Italian rabbis hoping for a theological opinion to support their cause. Representatives of the Papacy and the Emperor approached, among others, the Venetian Jew Jacob Mantino (d. 1549), a scholar and physician whose family originated from Tortosa, Spain, and reached Italy after the expulsion of 1492. Mantino was approached on behalf of the pope in the early stages of the controversy. Mantino, as well as the majority of the Italian rabbis consulted, including the most important ones, supported the pope’s position that levirate marriage was not a ceremonial gesture but rather a commandment practiced by the Jews.618 To support their claim, some of the rabbis presented evidence of actual levirate cases that took place in Italy.619

The Venetian government was in alliance with Spain and therefore actively opposed the English representatives’ efforts to solicit opinions among its Jewry.620 Additional evidence demonstrates the great importance European powers assigned to the affair and particularly to the Jewish involvement in it. David S. Katz presents one

620 Ibid, 44. C. Roth, Jews in the Renaissance, 161.
example that demonstrates the seriousness with which the Emperor addressed the matter. In 1530 a certain converso named Marco Gabriello was on his way from Venice to England to aid the English side. The Emperor was advised to dispatch Imperial agents to prevent Gabriello from completing his journey. As Gabriello’s path to England was uncertain, the Emperor’s men approached their contacts in Asti, Alcantara, Castile Leon, and the Milanese. These agents, whom D. Katz identifies as the Emperor’s “heavy artillery,” were all employed to intercept one converso who might have been able to support Henry’s interpretation of the levirate commandment.621

The Italian Jewish yibbum discourse developed within an invested and influential host culture. Italian rational philosophic traditions and the great European interest in Jewish attitudes and practices concerning polygamy and yibbum directly and significantly affected the Jewish discourse. Accustomed to levirate marriage and polygamy, the Ottoman authorities did not interfere in the Ottoman Sephardic discourse allowing the expellees greater freedom in fashioning their religiosity and communal identity.

This chapter demonstrates the unique nature of the Ottoman Sephardic interpretation of levirate marriage. The evidence is clear and unequivocal that the Ottoman Sephardic interpretation of levirate marriage was not a direct continuation of similar medieval Iberian, Italian, and Byzantine interpretations. Documentation that the expellees had alternative medieval interpretations, namely, transmigratory, philosophical, nominal, and social ones, reveals the expellees’ agency in developing their discourse. Finally, a detailed analysis of the yibbum discourse shows that Italian Jewry developed an attitude on levirate marriage that was heavily affected by internal indigenous Jewish and

external Christian trends. The significant influence of the Italian host culture was a far cry from the relative freedom that allowed the Ottoman Sephardim to develop a *yibbum* discourse addressing their social predicament.
Part III: 1492 and Its Aftermath: The Social Context

Chapter 9

From Iberia to the Ottoman Empire

The three chapters in this part examine the Sephardic expellees’ real and perceived diasporic predicament through the lens of social context. The first chapter asks: What was the socioeconomic status of those who had left Iberia and moved to the Ottoman Empire? The second chapter examines the social context the expellees found upon their arrival in the Ottoman Empire. Did they encounter a dominant local congregation, interested Ottoman authorities, or centralized Jewish authority? What was their new form of communal organization? Who were the community leaders, and what were the challenges they faced? The third chapter examines the conclusion of this formative period. It explores the many challenges the nascent Ottoman Sephardic community faced during the second half of the sixteenth century and the communal identity that was created at the turn of the seventeenth century.

The answers to the questions posed in the first two chapters are marked by loss and inability. This general sense of incompetence characterized the expellees, the indigenous Greek-speaking Ottoman Jews (Romaniotes), and the Ottoman authorities. The expellees’ loss was varied; they were fragments of broken social structures and suffered the loss of many family members and most of their possessions. However, at the same time that the expellees suffered human and material losses, they were freed from an overbearing othering Christian host culture. They arrived in an empire whose Ottoman authorities had little interest in micromanaging religious minorities and therefore intervened in their daily life only in limited ways. In fact, the most dramatic Ottoman
intervention, the sürgün policy or forced internal relocation, greatly weakened the Romaniotes, hence minimizing their influence on the structure of the Ottoman Sephardic communal identity.\textsuperscript{622}

In 1453 most Romaniote communities were internally displaced by the Ottomans who, after conquering Constantinople, chose to revitalize the depopulated city by relocating large numbers of Romaniotes from the Balkans and Asia Minor to the city. As a result, at the turn of the sixteenth century, Sephardic expellees joined the displaced Romaniotes as part of an Ottoman Jewish community in the throes of an identity crisis. Relatively free from external influence, the impoverished expellees devised an egalitarian communal identity compatible with their diasporic predicament, emphasizing the tremendous importance of procreation and continuous lineages.

\textbf{The Real Predicament}

\textbf{Loss of Family Members}

A lament for family members (sons in particular), who were lost during the expulsion or its aftermath, was a salient theme in the writings of the expulsion generation. Indeed, this important phenomenon was examined by past historians and mentioned above in the context of the Ottoman Sephardic logic of yibbum.\textsuperscript{623} I showed that the expellees’ concern with their sons’ survival was in the context of ensuring a particular continuous patrilineal lineage rather than simply refilling the Jewish people’s depleted ranks. My aim in this chapter, therefore, is to examine this phenomenon in the context of

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[622] For more on this phenomenon, see Chapter 10.
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the expellees’ real and perceived diasporic predicament. I show that an extreme concern with the survival of their offspring, together with pauperization and an absence of dominant leadership, comprised the expellees’ diasporic experience, and consequently shaped their notion of communal identity and social imagination.

The expellees’ loss was real; the concern of the Ottoman Sephardim with the survival of their offspring had deep roots in an abundance of well-documented tragedies. We know that Jewish children were murdered or were kidnapped and given to Christian families to be raised as Christians.624 These measures were meant to save the young souls by detaching them from their Jewish families, or to influence the parents to convert and reunite with their children.625

Other evidence that the threat was real was the decision by many parents to prevent the abduction and forced conversion of their children by marrying them off at a very young age. Indeed, even in the relative safety of the Ottoman Empire, the expellees experienced extreme anxiety about the survival of their offspring. Historians also show that many of the expellees’ children died as a result of overcrowded neighborhoods, low

624 Regarding the expulsion of Jewish children to the island of São Tome, see, e.g., Joseph Ha-cohen, who was born in 1496 to a family of expellees. Ha-cohen describes this unfortunate episode in his Vale of Tears: “Thereafter they brought them [i.e., the children] to Africa, and then left them on a barren, empty, and unfertile land which seemed uninhabited. The children asked for bread, but no one could give them anything.” Harry S. May, The Vale of Tears: Emek ha-bacha. Joseph Hacohen and the Anonymous Corrector, trans. with a critical commentary (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1971), 104. See also Samuel Usque who writes: “[T]he island of Sao Thome had recently been discovered. It was inhabited by lizards, snakes and other venomous reptiles, and was devoid of rational beings. Here the king exiled condemned criminals, and he decided to include among them the innocent children of these Jews. Their parents had seemingly been condemned by God’s sentence.” Martin A. Cohen, Samuel Usque’s Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel [Consolaçam às tribulaçoens de israel] (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1965), 201–2.

standards of public health, and endemic diseases. The survival of offspring, therefore, was a real concern for the expellees, their children, and grandchildren. However, the Ottoman Sephardic obsession with the survival of their offspring cannot explain their unique communal identity. A loss of property and leadership were as dominant in this process. We now turn to these phenomena.

**Material Loss**

The majority of expellees who had left Iberia were impoverished either on their departure or on arrival in the Ottoman Empire. As mentioned above, historians contextualized the expellees’ material conditions in several ways. Some sought to explain what they perceived as a discrepancy between the expellees’ dire pauperization and their prolific cultural production. Others sought to explain the dissonance between the difficult material conditions and the expellees’ high sense of self-esteem. Some present the material crisis to emphasize an almost miraculous economic and cultural recuperation in the second half of the sixteenth century.

As shown in Chapter 2, these scholarly discourses proved fruitful in contextualizing important phenomena of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, namely the Sephardim’s unusual economic and cultural success in the later sixteenth century. However, in the process, these theories presented the expellees’ early and critical stage (1492–1550) as a stepping stone or background to highlight the later phenomena. In

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626 Rozen, *Jewish Community in Istanbul*, 102.
627 See Chapter 3.
628 See the section titled “The Triumphant Bias: Did the Sephardim Recover Quickly in the Ottoman Empire?” in Chapter 3.
629 See Hacker, “Pride and Despair.”
what follows, I examine the expellees’ real and perceived diasporic realia as a force that shaped contemporary communal identity rather than as a simple obstacle they overcame on their way to a speedy recuperation and reconstitution of their pre-1492 social, cultural, and religious identity.

My decision to focus on this early period does not signal an abandonment of longue durée developments. On the contrary, this research examines a formative period that witnessed the birth of historical developments and religious discourses that defined the early modern Jewish experience. The expulsion triggered a plethora of historical developments that permanently transformed rather than temporarily distorted Iberian Jewry’s identity. Pauperization, loss of family members and social structures (i.e., loss of traditional leadership and social stratification), increased mobility, and a crisis in rabbinic authority, resulted in a fractured Iberian Jewry dispersed in new Mediterranean and European locations. The different elements that once formed medieval Iberian Jewry were now distributed in new sociocultural contexts (i.e., Ottoman or Eastern Sephardim, Italian Sephardim, and Low Countries or Western Sephardim). In addition, the expulsion blurred or removed older lines that defined particular past identities; conversos, lay elite, rabbinic elite, rich, and poor were in the throes of an identity crisis.

To address their predicament, the Sephardic communities devised new identities rather than simply return to an older Iberian model. In the case examined in this dissertation, that of the Ottoman Sephardim, this process manifested in kabbalistic discourses that addressed the expellees’ predicament by emphasizing an egalitarian communal identity. As creatures of their time, kabbalistic discourses played a critical role

631 E.g., the introduction of Lurianic kabbala to Italy and Western Europe, Sabbatianism, Frankism, etc.
in *longue durée* developments that defined the early modern Jewish experience, namely, the rise of Lurianic kabbala and the success of the Sabbatian movement.

The expellees lost their property and arrived in the Ottoman Empire at various levels of poverty. Money owed to the expellees was forfeited, personal property had to be sold under market value, certain possessions were prohibited from leaving Spain, travel costs were high, means of livelihood was left behind, and much of what remained often fell into the hands of greedy sea captains or violent road robbers.

In the fifteenth century debt played a major role in an economic system where Jews were creditors and debtors.632 Facing expulsion, the Jews were worried about debt payment as they needed the funds to pay for their travels. The Christian creditors were concerned with their Jewish debtors’ disappearance together with their unpaid debts. As a result, the nobility, clergy, and local leaders bought promissory notes from the Jews and assumed their role in this system of mutual dependency.633 However, this measure did not prevent the mistreatment of the expellees as they received unfair compensation (if any) and sold their debts well below market value.634 In addition, and in spite of the crown’s guarantee of the expellees’ safe passage, Christian creditors collected debts arbitrarily, and some Christian debtors attempted to avoid payment altogether.635

The very poor did not have the means to fund the risky and expensive trip out of Iberia. The communities sought to fund the poor’s traveling costs by selling communal property. Although past municipal decrees allowed it, the Christian authorities generally

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objected to this measure, fearing the expellees would leave Iberia with their funds and
impoverish the remaining Christian and converso communities.\textsuperscript{636} This restriction had a
twofold effect on the expellees’ social status. It left the expellees without their share in
communal property and forced the most impoverished to stay in Iberia.

In addition to the unique set of circumstances during the expulsion, preexisting
regulations forbade leaving Iberia with certain possessions. For example, the fifth article
of the 1492 edict of expulsion states that the expellees were not authorized to take with
them “gold or silver or coined money or other things prohibited by the laws of our
kingdoms.”\textsuperscript{637} This prohibition was in addition to preexisting decrees forbidding export
of jewels, livestock, grain, and weapons.\textsuperscript{638}

On their way—either by land or sea—the defenseless expellees were arrested for
alleged debts, robbed, injured, seized and held for ransom, or murdered.\textsuperscript{639} In addition to
the outlaws lurking on the road, the expellees were tormented by their rescuers. The
Genoese fleet was the major naval force responsible for transporting Sephardim who
traveled by sea. It left a strong, negative impression in contemporary accounts of the
expulsion.\textsuperscript{640} Genoese fleet members raped, murdered, robbed, and sold expellees into
slavery. The expellees’ experience did not improve after the fleet brought them to Genoa
where they suffered a similar fate.\textsuperscript{641}

\textsuperscript{636} Beinart, Expulsion, 212.
\textsuperscript{638} Beinart, Expulsion, 291.
\textsuperscript{639} Ibid., 214.
\textsuperscript{641} Beinart, Expulsion, 223.
On their way to the Ottoman Empire, the expellees lost many propertied elite. The Iberian elite converted and stayed in Iberia; returned after a short spell in exile; resettled in Italian communities that had favorable economic opportunities or where they had personal connections, with a willingness to facilitate their successful transition; or arrived impoverished in the Ottoman Empire after a prolonged expulsion process.

As I show below, the expellees’ abandonment by the Iberian elite who chose to convert and stay in Iberia was a central aspect of their narrative. Here, however, I would like to emphasize that this was an actual condition rather than a perceived predicament alone. Yom Tov Assis, for example, argued that a large number of conversos belonged to the ranks of the elite, whereas most of the immigrants belonged to the lower social classes. Eliyahu Ashtor argued that in Sicily not all Jews left in 1492 and that “[a] great part of Sicilian Jewry and certainly the upper classes, embraced the Christian religion”. Henry Kamen quotes a source from 1483 arguing that “of those who had little property many Jews left and the others remained and were never again expelled.” Kamen argues that “there were substantial conversions, especially among the propertied.” The Crown’s attempts to facilitate a widespread conversion by forcing elite members to do so first further supports the notion that it was generally elite members who chose to convert.

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646 In some cases during the 1391, 1492, and 1497 unrest, the Jewish elite was specifically targeted by the Christian leadership, who hoped the conversion of the elite would lead the masses to convert as well. According to some sources, these attempts were successful. See a short discussion of this phenomenon in
The expellees lost family members and forfeited debts, their share in communal property, money, and material possessions. They overpaid for transportation and did not have accessible or sufficient means of livelihood. Therefore, it is not surprising that many chose to return to Iberia and reestablish their old lives with a new Christian or crypto-Jewish identity. Much like their brethren who chose to convert and stay in Iberia, the returnees belonged to the relatively wealthy or desperately impoverished. As Haim Beinart shows, some returnees were land owners, physicians, “those who had left property behind . . . people of means who could expect a secure livelihood.” Others were totally impoverished. Impoverished widows, single men and women, victims of robbery, rape, and those of poor health returned to Iberia as they could not sustain themselves anymore.

Ferdinand and Isabella stressed that their goal was conversion rather than expulsion. One of the means the Christian monarchs used to convince Iberian Jews to convert and stay in Iberia further supports the above evaluation of the expellees’ poor material conditions. Ferdinand and Isabella guaranteed that the “houses and goods and property that they sold and left be returned to them by the persons who presently hold them, at the price paid for them, paying extra only for improvements.”647 This quotation is evidence that those who had left did so without much property, that the propertied had a greater incentive to return, and that the Christian authorities made an effort to keep them in the kingdom.

Primary and secondary sources suggest that many of the propertied Iberian Jews chose to convert and stay or convert and return to Iberia. The path of other propertied expellees provides additional evidence for the dwindling ranks of the propertied elite. Some expellees chose to seek refuge in Italy and indeed some propertied elite managed to settle there. Italy, thus, turned into a further sieve draining the expellees from their still somewhat propertied, skilled, or well-connected elements. It is to this pattern we turn in the next section.

Through and to Italy: Patterns of Elite Resettlement

The stories of the expellees that reached Italy show that Italian Jews received into their fold the most propertied professional elite. Those who were less connected, skilled, or wealthy, however, continued to the Ottoman Empire. The number of expellees to settle on Italian soil was very small.648 The Kingdom of Naples was the only Italian region to receive a significant number of expellees, and their sojourn was extremely short-lived.649 King Ferdinand I (Ferrante, 1423–94) sought to attract the expellees and proclaimed that

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649 Cecil Roth, *The Spanish Exiles of 1492 in Italy* (Barcelona: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1956), 293. They also arrived at Genoa but were tormented and never established a permanent settlement there; on the poor state of the refugees in Genoa, see C. Roth, *The History of the Jews of Italy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946), 179: “‘you would have thought they wore masks,’ wrote a Christian eye-witness. ‘[T]hey were bony, pallid, their eyes sunk in the sockets; and had they not made slight movements, it would have been imagined that they are dead.’”; Rome and Ferrara were the other Sephardic centers in 16th-century Italy. Ferrara also became the home for a converso community later in the second half of the century. Rome had a small number of expellees.
they “should be held and considered his subjects and vassals, as though they had been born in the realm.”

The expellees’ safe haven, however, did not last long. With Ferdinand’s death and the accession of Alfonso II (1448–95), the French king Charles VIII invaded Italy and claimed the Kingdom of Naples. A wave of hostilities against the kingdom’s Jewry soon followed. Local Jews were attacked by local Christians and French and Spanish soldiers. In the following year a royal edict proclaimed the expulsion of the Kingdom’s Jewry. Only a few propertied loan agents were allowed to remain or return, but they were required to pay heavy fines for this privilege. In 1541 the last remaining Jews in the kingdom were expelled.

Most of those who did settle in Italy were of the propertied elite. According to Robert Bonfil only “individual families . . . because of their special occupations had no particular absorption difficulties or who simply adapted themselves to the local framework, settled in various localities and within a short time became well established in the region.” Those families’ “special occupations,” were money lending, medicine, scholarship, and printing. Therefore, “adapting” to the Italian surrounding required the means and skills to practice lucrative professions. The remaining, unfortunate

654 We know that most of the expellees settled in urban areas as they engaged in commerce and lending money, activities that demanded a certain amount of capital. See Moses A. Shulvass, *The Jews in the World of the Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 45 and 115 for Sephardic involvement in the loan business in the kingdom of Naples until the 1520s; Shulvass writes that “in terms of required capital for pawn broking, the Spanish exiles who came to Italy were also equipped for it”; Bonfil argues that “The Jewish settlers sometimes succeeded in assuring themselves a degree of exclusivity in money lending . . . some of them obtaining a virtual monopoly.” Bonfil, “Spanish and Portuguese Jews in Italy,” 218.
impoverished, uneducated, or unskilled, those “who did not wish to adapt to local conditions or were unable to do so, continued eastwards.”

The stories of those who “continued eastward” further exemplifies Italy’s role in draining the Ottoman Sephardim from their propertied elite. We know of several family lines originating in Iberia and branching to Italy in the fifteenth century; the elite families of Hayun, Ibn Yahyah, or da Pisa, to name a few, had solid personal, familial, and trade relations with their Iberian relatives. However, familiarity and shared history alone proved disappointing for some elite members for whom Italy proved a stepping stone on their journey eastward to the Ottoman Empire.

The story of David Ibn Yahyah, is an example of this phenomenon. David managed to leave Portugal with some possessions yet was impoverished along the way and, consequently, asked his Italian contacts for help. However, although he was aided by Italian Jews, he did not stay in Italy and continued to the Ottoman Empire. Sitting in the Balkan city of Arta, a dwelling he perceived as a wasteland, ibn Yahyah is lonely, estranged, and impoverished.

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655 Bonfil, “Spanish and Portuguese Jews in Italy,” 221. Idel, when reflecting on the expulsion’s effect on non-Sephardic Jewry, argued that the “idea of a unified Jewish nation at this time is a myth” and that “[non-Sephardim] had very little interest in the fate of the Sephardim.” Idel’s qualification of this sweeping statement, however, is telling: “[M]any [expellees] were helped, especially when the refugees were well known figures like Isaac Abravanel.” Idel, “Religion, Thought, and Attitudes,” 125.

656 On Lisbon as an intellectual center, on these aristocratic families in general, and on Joseph Hayun in particular, see Gross, R. yosef ben avraham hayun.


658 In his letter ibn Yahyah states he left with four hundred books and other assets. Ibn Yahyah states his possessions were stolen “on the ships” and after “we had paid the leaders to revive our souls” he also states he paid for the transportation “with my assets [that] I sold for cheap and with many books”; see Hacker, “Kvutsat igrot,” 96.

659 About 150 kilometers southwest of Trikala.
givers [and] ‘dressers [of] the naked’\textsuperscript{660} is now begging” an Ottoman Romaniote with whom he was not familiar (rather than his more natural Italian or Sephardic connection) to enable his relocation to Istanbul (rather than Italy).\textsuperscript{661}

Primary and secondary evidence clearly presents the expellees’ material and social diasporic predicament. The expellees lost many family members, material possessions, and a significant elite leadership element. In this chapter’s second section we turn to the expellees’ perception of their diasporic predicament. The next section asks what they thought they suffered from. Who was to blame? The sources clearly point toward loss of offspring and pauperization as the expellees’ perceived predicament. In addition, the fault for this unfortunate situation was placed on the Iberian elite.

**The Perceived Predicament**

**Loss of Family Members**

The expellees perceived the expulsion as an existential threat to the Jewish people. Saba, for example, warns that God should not tarry with his people’s salvation because if he does he may find that on that day “nothing will be left of them.” The expellees expressed their concern with this general threat in several ways. One concern was with the physical threat posed by an environment that was increasingly hostile to the displaced Jewish minority, its weak position, and its dwindling numbers. Consider, for example, Arama who writes: “[Judah] ‘dwelleth among the heathen, she findeth no rest: all her persecutors overtook her’ . . . [Judah] was not exiled to another country ‘a people

\textsuperscript{660} A reference to the morning blessing.
\textsuperscript{661} Hacker, “Kvutsat igrot”, 96–97.
that shall dwell alone’ . . . but instead ‘dwelleth among the heathen’ who confine it from all its sides.”

Others saw assimilation as the main threat to the Jewish people. For Joseph Hayun, for example, the personification of the Jewish people is concerned with “[being] dispersed among the nations” and as a result “mixing with them and do[ing] as they do”

Yet others, as the Ottoman Sephardic logic of yibbum shows, were concerned with the existential threat posed by the expulsion’s disruption of lineages. The most basic social building block, the family, was in grave danger. Parents, children, spouses, and siblings lost contact forever, ending long-standing social and familial traditions. Solomon ben Moses the Sephardi, a poet of the expulsion generation, aptly conveys this notion: “they flee to the [ship’s] stern . . . and while the woman embraces her son, woe to the husband, where did he turn?” Solomon continues: “from every side their captors swarm, separating fathers from sons, [the fathers] ask their oppressors ‘where are my sons?’”

The lost family members meant a social and personal loss. Scholars show that this process, real and perceived, lasted two generations after the expellees recuperated.

Although physical danger and assimilation is a risk a minority community living among a hostile majority can naturally expect, the expellees’ extreme concern with their sons’ survival was unique in its content and context. As for the content, the Ottoman Sephardic concern with sons’ survival was with continuous particular patrilineal lineage rather than simply a manifestation of a lament over sons lost during the expulsion or its aftermath.

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662 Arama, Akedat yitshak, 286b.
663 In Joseph Yahalom, “Guilt and Accusation: Responses to the Expulsion from Spain and the Forced Conversion” in Yom Tov Assis and Yosef Kaplan, Dor gerush sefarad, 277.
As for the context, Hacker noted that the expellees’ intense anguish over their lost sons was unique in its European and Mediterranean environment. Suffering from a similar rate of child mortality, Christian, Ottoman, Ashkenazic, Italian Sephardic, and Romaniote Jewry did not display such extreme concern with the continuity of its lineage. The Sephardic expellees perceived lost sons and discontinuous lineages as a direct threat to the Jewish people’s existence. This concern lasted well into the sixteenth century and differed dramatically from its Jewish and gentile Ottoman and European cultural environment.

Material Loss

The writings of the expulsion generation present pauperization as a concern of equal importance to lost offspring and discontinuous lineages. The expulsion generation author of the prominent Aragónese de la Cavalleria family history, for example, states that the expellees “forgot their habitats and left their fortresses to others [i.e., did not sell their homes] . . . they threw out their money on the streets.” From an anonymous chronicle or what Hacker calls a “historical eulogy,” we learn that from the pre-expulsion community “no one was left, maybe one from a thousand, two from ten thousand, and all of them poor, all impoverished, wandering around, restless.”

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664 Hacker, “Pride and Despair,” 579-82.
665 British Museum Or. 9126, 2 in Joseph Hacker, “New Chronicles on the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain: Its Causes and Consequences” [in Hebrew], Yitzhak F. Baer Memorial Volume, Zion 44 (1979): 222. According to Hacker this chronicle was written shortly after the expulsion by a member of the de la Cavalleria family. For more on the chronicles, see ibid., 5–9. For more on the de la Cavalleria family history, see Norman Roth, Conversos, Inquisition, and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 125–26.
666 Mss. in the Jewish Theological Seminary Library, Mic. 3541 (New York); in Hacker, “New Chronicles,” 226. According to Hacker this anonymous chronicle was written by a Castilian expellee shortly after the expulsion from Spain.
This impression survived among the second generation expellees as well. Alkabets, for example, states that “[the expellees] left their possessions and their comfortable houses [in Iberia]. Alkabets also presents the expellees who left their houses as those who did “not value money and did not want gold.” By doing so Alkabets emphasizes the expellees’ religious devotion even at the price of extreme pauperization. Alkabets thus molds the Ottoman Sephardic, post-expulsion ideal Jew, namely, one who had abandoned self-definition based on material possession in Iberia for a religious and egalitarian, Ottoman Sephardic Jewish identity. A sense of material crisis among the expellees is clear from additional primary and secondary sources. However, for the purposes of this research, it is unnecessary to survey the entirety of the source material to reestablish an already solid body of primary and secondary sources. Of much greater importance are the explanations the sources provide for this predicament.

Resentment toward the Lay Elite

Scholars showed that the expellees gave a variety of explanations as to who was responsible for the catastrophe of 1492. Hacker collected nine of the most popular explanations: (1) The expulsion was conceived and executed by Ferdinand and Isabella. (2) The Christian courtiers were the real power that propelled the expulsion. (3) The catalyst for the expulsion was religious; the Church, the inquisition, or popular religious fervor was to blame. (4) Some point to the proximity between the fall of Granada and the expulsion suggesting the latter enabled the former. (5) Others found the reason in contemporary Iberian social tensions. Popular anti-Jewish sentiment fueled by

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social strife, so the argument went, drove the masses to demand an expulsion of the Jews. (6) A different theory of the role of the monarchs viewed the expulsion of 1492 as an attempt by the Spanish king and queen to resemble other European monarchs that already had rid their countries of their religious minorities and Jews in particular. (7) Some blamed the conversos for turning their fellow Christians against their former coreligionists. (8) Some argued the expulsion was a divine retribution for religious laxity. (9) For others it was the Jews’ involvement in money lending that rightly generated Christian unhappiness with them.669 However, our discussion’s purpose is to evaluate the role social tensions played in the narrative of the expulsion generations. Thus we avoid examining additional explanations that appear in the expellees’ interpretation of their misfortunes. Therefore, what follows examines the expellees’ perception of the responsibility of different social groups for the catastrophic events of 1492.

In their writings, the expellees voice disappointment with their Iberian elite and leadership in addition to despair over material and familial loss.670 The criticism is aimed at two groups of lay elite, or perhaps two manifestations of the same group, namely, courtiers and philosophers. These notions were thoroughly researched in the past and require no further support.671 Therefore, in what follows I contextualize rather than establish these solid historical facts. I examine the expellees’ attitudes toward their Iberian elite in the context of their perceived diasporic predicament. I do so by placing

669 Hacker, “Kvutsat igrot,” 70.
the evidence in a larger historical and social perspective. As for the historical perspective, the Iberian Jewish past is abundant with social strife. Therefore, social unrest in 1492 and in its aftermath marks a continuity of an established Iberian Jewish social dynamic. However, the larger social perspective shows that something changed.

The expulsion reshaped the spatial locations where social tensions were worked out. The popular discourse critical of the Iberian elite was left unchecked in the Ottoman Empire. Before 1492 the Iberian Peninsula housed lay elite, rabbinic elite, middle classes, courtiers, conversos, rich, and poor. The narratives of the religious and communal identity of these groups shared a geographical, social, and a discursive space. Iberian Jews from different social classes participated in a dialectical process of identity formation.

After the expulsion, however, we find a dispersion of these groups and discourses in Spain (conversos), Italy and the Low Countries (elite expellees and returning conversos, especially after the constitution of the Portuguese national inquisition in 1536), and the Ottoman Empire (impoverished rabbinic and lay middle classes, especially before 1536). The dialectical environment in which the medieval Iberian identity developed no longer existed, as the separate social groups and their discourses of communal identity were now untangled. Therefore, although not the beginning of the social tensions, the year 1492 did bring a significant change. The expulsion dispersed different Iberian Jewish groups, untangled the discourses that previously constituted this Jewry’s organic social imagination and communal identity, and isolated the popular egalitarian discourses in the Ottoman Empire.

See a description of Nirenberg’s argument in Chapter 7.
Social Tensions on the Eve of the Expulsion

The expellees’ baggage included a history of social strife in addition to their impoverishment and loss of family members. Though the Sephardic collective memory tended to remember the Iberian past as characterized by internal and external harmony, the historical facts tell a story of clashes between different Jewish congregations and between different social classes within the congregations.

Scholars found that by the second half of the thirteenth century, Iberian Jewish communities were divided into three social classes according to level of income. According to Yom-Tov Assis, for example, between the eleventh century and the thirteenth century the Reconquista started processes that polarized and destabilized Iberian Jewish society. Jewish wealth, skills, and connections, so the argument went, facilitated the Christian kings’ Reconquista and produced a social layer of privileged Jewish elite. The elite’s privileges were varied; their meat, for example, was supplied by the Jewish community in compliance with the court’s orders; they were not required to wear distinguishing Jewish attire, and they paid lower taxes than their fellow Jews. The propertied and well-connected elite worked as financiers, diplomats, translators, court physicians, and merchants; they had mistresses, enjoyed a hereditary succession of privileges, and lived in a manner closer to that of the courtier than to the average Iberian

673 This trend varied by region; in Castile the courtiers, through an oligarchy of rabbis and lay elite, ruled the Jewish community until its end in 1492. In Aragon, however, beginning in the fourteenth century, the oligarchy had to incorporate increasing numbers of beinonim [middle class] and aniyim [poor]. However, the elite’s power increased in the second half of the fourteenth century, only to fall again at the end of the century after the catastrophe of 1391 marked the end of the democratization efforts in Castile, Aragon, Majorca, and Valencia. Yom-Tov Assis, “Rich and Poor in Jewish Society in Mediterranean Spain” [in Hebrew], Peamim 47 (1991): 117–18, 124–25, 129.
674 Assis, “Rich and Poor.”
Jew. This behavior, real or imagined, created a significant social, cultural, religious, and financial gap between the Jewish elite and the majority of Iberian Jews.

These social tensions gave birth to a polarized social imagination manifested in discourses that viewed the poor man’s predicament as the rich man’s gain. One of the era’s leading rabbis, for example, suggested it would not bode well if spouses belonged to different social classes. Extra-leadership agents erected confraternities to alleviate the poor people’s predicament and defuse social tensions. The confraternities supplied alms, education, care for the sick, and burial services. This golden age of relief for the poor, however, ended in 1391 when a third of Iberian Jews were killed, and an additional third were forced to convert. The severity of the crisis did not bring the disjointed community together but rather increased the gap between the social classes, a trend that lasted well into the fifteenth century and the twilight of Iberian Jewry.

At the time of the expulsion the divisive social discourse reached a peak. It provided the expellees with the discursive tradition and intellectual tools to explain the expulsion. The impoverished expellees directed their criticism toward the Iberian elite, namely the courtiers and the philosophers. Rather than two actual groups, these categories articulated what the expellees perceived to be the elite’s negative qualities. The expellees identified religious laxity (which was perceived as a result of an interest in philosophy) and an estrangement from the masses (as a result of the close ties of the

676 A notion that was manifested in contemporary rabbinic sources; see Assis, “Rich and Poor,” 116.
677 Assis, “Rich and Poor,” 129.
678 Ibid., 132–33.
679 Ibid., 135.
680 For enduring issues between social classes after 1391, see ibid., 135–36.
Jewish elite with the Christian elite) as the elite’s main failures and its contribution to the catastrophe of 1492. Elite voices were not mute; their interpretation of 1492 survived mostly in the works of elite expellees residing in Italian lands. This discourse emphasized the masses’ lack of intellectual and religious qualities as the reasons for Iberian Jewry’s debacle.

The Ottoman Sephardic Interpretation of the Expulsion

Blame for the Courtiers and Philosophers; Praise for the Masses

The sources of the expulsion generation presented a twofold culpability on the part of the courtiers. They were blamed for their acts (i.e., conversion) as well as the inability to act (i.e., neglecting their responsibility as community leaders). The sources emphasized that the elite who converted did so willingly and not due to “fear or force.” Therefore, they could not exculpate themselves by means of pointing toward the historical necessity. The courtiers’ choice to convert was perceived as a sin against their coreligionists as well as against God. This choice, so the argument went, pushed the lower classes to follow their leaders into sin, exile, or conversion.

The writers of the expulsion generation blamed the Iberian elite’s study of philosophy for weakening the people’s faith and social fabric. The philosophers, so the argument went, delegitimized the literal interpretation of the Torah and belittled their less fortunate fellow Jews. As for the delegitimation of the Torah, the elite’s sin was perceived as advocating Averroism, a school of thought derived from the teachings of Aristotle that emphasized time, the universe, and human existence as eternal. This

\[681\] Or. 9126, 182b; in Hacker, “New Chronicles,” 222.
\[682\] Ibid.
ahistorical approach was characterized by an absence of a beginning, an end, heaven, hell, an afterlife, reward and punishment, or a significant difference between religions. This approach, so the argument went, pushed the marginalized Jews, whether elite or poor, to convert to Christianity to improve their objective status that was held back by their Jewish identity.

In *Hazut kasha*, Arama’s treatment of the relationship between philosophy and the Torah, the philosophers are described as those who ignored “the divine religion . . . they who robbed her . . . they who mutilated its law.” As a result, Arama argues, the philosophers prevented God from “scattering his enemies and driving them away from his borders . . . and for this they surely postponed their people’s salvation.”

Yosef Yaavets in his anti-philosophy treatise *Or ha-hayim* blames the philosophers for the failure of the Sephardim to successfully endure the torments of the expulsion (i.e., without converting to Christianity):

> [T]hey [the philosophers] learned their wisdoms from the heathen . . . and when they entered the rooms of the Torah with feet filthy by the philosophers’ opinions and they could not get rid of them . . . one of a hundred of them followed Torah and commandments . . . they desired the books of wisdom . . . saying this [philosophy] is the supreme essence [of living] and [therefore] did not have a *tsitsit*, *tefillin*, *sukkah* or * lulav* [i.e., commandments]. We, in our many sins were expelled from Sepharad, and the entire majority of those boasting the wisdoms [philosophy], converted their honor [i.e., religion] on that bitter day.

Yaavets was not alone in blaming the elite’s interest in philosophy for pushing the Jewish people away from their religion. According to the preacher Garson, “a man should not be involved in external wisdom but in the work of God alone . . . not only does it

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683 Isaac Arama, *Hazut kasha* (Sabioneta, 1552), 2b.
685 For more on the author and treatise, see Gross, *R. yosef ben avraham hayun*, 89–95. Ibid., 23.
[philosophy] not draw anything useful, but sometimes it will draw damage as it is drawn from evil beliefs.  

In addition to the obvious religious significance, the philosophers belittled the masses and weakened the social structure of Iberian Jewry. This notion is apparent in Isaac Arama’s analysis of the philosophers’ message in the context of social relations on the eve of the expulsion. According to Arama, the elite philosophers perceived of the literal meaning of the Torah to be “not the true Torah but a fable for the masses that did not know or understand philosophy.” The intellectual movement whose marker is a detachment from traditional interpretation of Judaism also marks an alienation of the lower social classes. The elite was blamed for converting and doing so willfully, for leading the lower social classes to do the same, and for weakening the religious devotion and social fabric of Iberian Jewry.

In addition to blaming the elite, the expellees praised the masses for maintaining the kernel of Iberian Jewish existence and hope for its salvation. This is apparent in the Cavalleria family chronicle. Whereas the writer wished the leaders to be destroyed, he also hoped “the many who converted due to trouble and distress” would be forgiven, that “the merciful one will grant them atonement.” According to Isaac Arama, if elite philosophers brought about the disaster, prevented salvation in their pursuit of philosophy, and belittled the lay members of the lower social strata, it is the masses that

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686 Garson, Ben porat yosef, 66.
687 Arama, Hazut kasha, 13b.
688 Or. 9126, 2; 55–56; in Hacker, “New Chronicles,” 218. Baer presents additional sources in Toldot ha-yehudim; e.g., Shem tov Ibn Shemtov (d. 1493) [236] makes the connection between the study of philosophy and the courtiers (i.e., higher social classes), [241]; in his Iggeret musar Solomon Alami argues that “these great men of the community who stand before kings . . . despised religion and humility and all work and handicraft.”
hold the key for salvation, “and how shall we hope for salvation from the house of the gentiles . . . if not for the innumerable graces of the many we lean upon . . . on the poor and lacking people who did not sin.”

In his Or ha-hayim, Yaavets presents a similar notion; the women and the masses gave their bodies and material wealth for their creator’s sanctity.” Yaavets identifies those who converted, namely, propertied, educated men, in addition to informing his readers of the cause for the conversions (i.e., the philosophers’ misconduct). Women and lower class members who had followed the commandments, however, had the strength of character necessary to avoid conversion, save their souls and the Jewish people.

The same notion is found in Yaavets’ explanation of the conversos’ failure to maintain their faith. Yaavets identifies the Jewish people with a tree, and the converso, “those who are smart in their own eyes (i.e., philosophers),” are likened to a “tree with many branches yet only a few roots.” This tree, or trees, fell easily as “the wind of exile, the storm wind came, and the expulsion turned them upside down and tore them from their religion.” Unlike the conversos, “the masses . . . with their commandments as roots . . . passed their trial as their interest in their creator was stronger than their interest in their wisdom.

A similar emphasis on the superior faith of the lower social classes is apparent in an anonymous contemporary account of the expulsion. The source describes the persecution of the conversos in Spain; it tells of many “who did not sanctify God’s name in their death . . . they chose to die in the Christian faith to die an easier death. And they

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689 Arama, Hazut kasha, 15b.
690 Yosef Yaavets, Or ha-hayim, (Lublin, Poland, 1911), 13b.
691 Ibid., 5a.
692 Ibid., 14a.
died holding a cross. Only a minority died in the Jewish faith, most of whom were women.”693 Men of the lower social class and women, then, form the most significant element in Iberian Jewry that passed the trials with some degree of success. The lower social classes are perceived as the embodiment of the expellees’ hope for salvation, whereas their elite fellow Jews are perceived as the catastrophe’s enablers.

The Iberian Elite’s Interpretation of the Expulsion

An elite response to the persecutions leading to the expulsion and its aftermath emphasizes the unique nature of the Ottoman expellees’ narrative; it highlights the impoverished expellees’ egalitarian discourse. In a nutshell, the elite’s argument is that the propertied elite simply made better Jews; they were familiar with the Torah on a deeper level, and were better equipped materially and intellectually to follow its commandments. Materially, they perceived physical religious manifestations, acts, ceremonies, and rituals, as the key for a proper Jewish life. Intellectually, they were trained in philosophy and theology which they believed was necessary to properly interpret the Torah.

Through a discourse emphasizing wealth and philosophical education, the turn of the century propertied and educated Iberian Jewish elite asserted its superiority over the masses. The general notion of the elite’s superiority is apparent in the work of Hayun, one of Iberia’s leading rabbis in the generation preceding the expulsion.694 As Abraham Gross, the leading historian of Hayun and the Lisbon community has noted: “one of the

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most prominent characteristics of Hayun on this matter [i.e., his treatment of the theme of exile] is a lack of self-flagellation or criticism. This is apparent when comparing [him] to socioreligious critics in Spain from 1391 onwards, from Solomon Alami to Abraham Saba and Ibn Verga.”

Hayun’s sense of superiority, in addition to a lack of self-flagellation, is apparent in the following example of social criticism. Hayun reports that after he saw that “due to their poverty and stupidity the masses would not listen to me I turned to the gedolim [lit., big ones, i.e., those of importance], sarim [lit., ministers], and rich . . . because they knew God’s way.” He continues to make the connection between wealth and righteousness abundantly clear: “it is known that wealth is the reason for the existence of the Torah, because with fortune men can perform righteous acts requiring wealth . . . such as tefilin, sukkah, tsitsit, tsedakah . . . and [one] can study the Torah since he [i.e., his material need] is satisfied . . . and he can purchase many books.”

Hayun’s notion of the incomplete or flawed Jew, as well as the whole or complete Jew, further exemplifies his idea of social hierarchy. When one is properly educated, one is in possession of good qualities “drawn from the mind,” whereas an uneducated man “draws afar from the mind . . . and drawn after the matter,” he will have a “bad heart . . . and bad mind.” Hayun condemns those who follow “the vain pleasures of this world,” that is, the uneducated masses; he argued that for this reason the psalmist (80:17) chose to pray first for “‘the man of thy right hand’ meaning the few exceptional men [i.e.,

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695 Ibid., 38.
696 Yosef ben Avraham Hayun, Exegesis on Jeremiah, British Museum Add. 27560 MSS 228, 19a in Gross, R. yosef ben avraham hayun, 23.
697 Yosef Hayun, Mili de avot (Venice, 1600), 4, 11a.
698 Ibid., 4, 18b.
educated] and only then ‘for the son of man’ meaning the masses.”699 After the expulsion we find similar voices among the expellees in Italy. For example, Joseph ibn Yahyah, a second generation expellee, recognized a problem of popular disbelief, similar to that identified by Garson and others. “Many foolish ignorami [say] . . . there is no justice and they think they have no redeemer . . . [and therefore] they enter the evil waters [i.e., convert].”700 According to ibn Yahyah, therefore, the weak, uneducated lower classes converted to Christianity more readily than their elite fellow Jews.701

In addition to wealth, mastery of philosophy was a manifestation of the elite’s superiority. Gross argued that intellectual pursuits were perceived by the Iberian elite as the key element of a complete Jew. Because such intellectual pursuits were open to very few propertied men, it led them to develop “an exclusionary and belittling attitude towards the masses.”702

Hayun exemplifies this notion in his interpretation of the concept of God’s image (tselem elohim). If for the Ottoman Sephardim the complete Jewish man followed the commandments and ensured the survival of his lineage and the Jewish people’s demographic integrity, Hayun’s vision emphasizes intellectual pursuits and material affluence. Hayun argues that God’s image is comprised of spiritual and material images. The spiritual image is an intellectual activity “wisdom and science.” The material image, however, is an assortment of things “[that are] necessary to maintain his body . . . home

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701 The phrase “evil waters” is a reference to Psalms 124:5: “over us would have swept the seething waters.” Foaming waters, washing the Jewish people away, is an expression that is used to refer to gentiles.
Therefore, the material image is a proper embodiment required to enable intellectual pursuits rather than ensuring personal or communal continuity through lineages. This approach is as different from the Ottoman Sephardic interpretation as it is similar to the contemporary Ashkenazic and Italian interpretations.

The elite discourse emphasizes social harmony (yet by no means equality) and the absolute necessity of material elements in worshiping God. They presented social welfare, *tsedakah*, as an act that is spiritually enlightened and enlightening, a religious act, needless to say, in which the rich excel. A similar notion is apparent in Yaavets’ *Or ha-hayim*: “There [in Lisbon] sat the great righteous men, men of Torah and mitzvoth [commandments] and especially the mitzvah of *tsedakah* [alms giving]. They gave *tsedakah* literally in any moment; there was no single day when those responsible for *tsedakah* did not go to the Jewish neighborhoods.”

The great emphasis on the material aspect of the religious life and social harmony is apparent in David Ibn Yahyah’s writing about the “expulsion” of 1497 (i.e., the forced conversion of Portugal’s Jewry). While recounting the destruction of Jewish life in Lisbon, Yahyah reflects on the lost “wealth and fortune,” the beauty of the lavish synagogues now gone, the magnificent covers for the Torah scrolls, table cloth, lamps, and so on. We also learn that the synagogue, in addition to being adorned with lavish

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704 See “Yibbum or Halitsa? Biblical, Rabbinic, Medieval, and Early Modern Answers” in Chapter 4.
705 Government by the rich, conducted “without rulership”; the same harmony is found in his description of the mechanics of welfare; we learn it was conducted peacefully, without “shouting, or making a sound.” Gross, *R. yosef ben avraham hayun* 16–17. Avraham Meir Haberman, “Kina al gerush portugal” in *Otsar yehude sefarad: Le-heker toldot yehude sefarad ve-tarbutam* (Jerusalem, 1959) 5, 11–16.
decorations, contained spaces used to house the poor, and confraternities dedicated to social welfare.  

The sources above uncover an elite discourse that emphasized welfare as means to maintain social harmony, the material aspects of the religious life, and a model, educated Jewish man trained in philosophy. In addition, this discourse identified the above qualities with the elite. In the context of the expulsion, these sources saw the masses as one of the reasons for the demise of the Jewish people. In addition, the discourses were concerned about the ability of the masses to persist in living as Jews now that they are a smaller and weaker minority, surrounded by gentiles and lacking proper leadership.

Social Relations Post–1492: Yearnings for Leadership

What we have seen thus far is that the Sephardim developed two interpretative traditions to explain the expulsion of 1492 in social terms. Both traditions revolved around the roles played by the Iberian elite and the masses during the years leading to the expulsion and its aftermath. Whereas some held the elite responsible for the various processes that generated the expulsion, others viewed them as the true possessors of the Jewish tradition. Some writers viewed the intellectual, material, and religious weaknesses of the masses as the main reason for their diasporic predicament. To others, any hope for communal salvation lay with the devout lower social classes.

708 The geographical location and characteristics of this discourse are very similar to other phenomena we have discussed thus far in the dissertation. We described the Ashkenazic and Italian Sephardic interpretations of the yibbum and hybrid offspring phenomena. In addition, Idel identified similar differences between Ottoman Sephardic kabbala and contemporary Italian kabbala. The similarities between these phenomena are exciting and thought provoking. However, substantiating and solidifying a claim regarding the origins and effects of the similarities is beyond the scope of the current research. In the current context this discussion serves to highlight the unique qualities of the Ottoman Sephardic communal identity.
However, we should not mistake these different interpretations for a state of social warfare, an absolute antagonism between two distinct and separate social groups. The expellees’ attitude toward the elite was not always or essentially negative. Indeed, some evidence suggests the expellees thought highly of their former elite and yearned for their leadership. In the following pages I contextualize this evidence. I argue we should read it as a manifestation of a nuanced view, articulated during a complicated transitional phase, rather than a counterargument to my thesis. The expellees voiced their concern about a lost social structure that included a thin layer of propertied elite. Therefore, concern with their lost social world rather than an undying yearning for the Iberian leadership generated the expellees’ positive evaluations of the elite.

Haim Hillel Ben Sasson made a strong case for the courtiers’ sway over to the expellees: “the courtiers became their people’s leaders as a result of their service to the kings. They and their brethren (emphasis mine) saw it as a service to God out of which the rights of an aristocracy came out . . . the worsening of the Jews’ state did not change this opinion . . . criticism remained limited.”

According to Ben Sasson, the symbiotic relationship between the Sephardim and their elite survived the expulsion almost unscathed and was “absolutely continuous.” The pre-expulsion social hierarchy was quickly reinstated “in the days after the expulsion. Abravanel continued it in Naples, the house of Hamon . . . Mendes-Nasi and others in Turkey.” Ben Sasson’s observations regarding the general attitude toward the courtiers ultimately support the following thesis:

The Spanish expellees’ and their ancestors’ social concept is not of rebellion and reform, neither inward nor outward. None among them disputed the communal

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709 Ben-Sasson, “Dor golei sefarad al azmo,” 7.
710 Ibid., 8.
711 Ibid., 12.
social stratification. [They] extremely appreciated the courtiers. It was consistently articulated since the days of Rabbi Yosef ibn Shushan [c. mid-fourteenth century] to Rabbi Joseph Caro [1488–1575].712

However, there are two caveats involving Ben Sasson’s evidence and argument. Ben Sasson’s evidence does not support a significant or essential continuity of courtier leadership. Ben Sasson based his assertion on the elite families of Abravaenl, Hamon, and Mendes-Nasi. However, these families form a shaky basis for the thesis. As for the Abravanels, it is true that the family had branches in Slonika and Istanbul. However, its head, Isaac (1437–1508), settled in Italy and the family’s main source of power in the Ottoman Empire came from later intermarriage with elite Romaniote and other Ottoman Jewish families.713

Joseph Hamon was the founder of the Ottoman branch of the Hamon lineage. Joseph, a Sephardic expellee, served as a court physician from 1512 and started an aristocratic lineage of court physicians. However, the Hamons prove an exception to the rule. First, although the number increased dramatically later in the century, the number of Jewish physicians in the expulsion generation was relatively small, whereas the majority of the incoming expellees suffered from a severe financial crisis.714 The way out of this predicament was open to those who had special skills (for example, medicine) or significant wealth, something only the converso immigrants in the second half of the century had. Second, we know that even before the expulsion, the Sultans employed a few Jewish doctors and that this position did not necessarily come with a responsibility to

712 Ibid., 38.
714 See, e.g., ibid., 47–49 and the sources mentioned there.
their ethnic community.\textsuperscript{715} Their small numbers and limited interest in communal leadership make the few examples of early Ottoman Sephardic elite weak evidence for a leadership by an uninterrupted courtier system.\textsuperscript{716} The Nasi family is very different than the previously mentioned families. This was a family of extremely powerful converso international bankers and merchants who had moved to the Ottoman Empire and assumed an openly Jewish identity only in 1552.

Even if we accept Ben Sasson’s argument, what do we make of the popular discontent with the Iberian elite? I argue that the expulsion writers’ sense of betrayal and abandonment spelled yearning for a functioning leadership rather than a blanket denouncement of the elite. This notion is apparent in an anonymous family chronicle from the expulsion generation published by Hacker:

\textit{[A]nd we saw the greats of our generation, our defenders, who had spread their wings [in protection], now they ground in mills [numbers 11:8, i.e., menial labor]; their voice [was] as God’s voice yet [now] no one answers their wailing . . . and no one is sorry for them . . . [for God] lowered our heads [i.e., the elite] . . . humiliated the glory of our precious [ones] . . . our people’s dignitaries.}\textsuperscript{717}

In the context of the chronicle, the elite’s downfall is an integral part of Iberian Jewry’s demise. A similar notion is conveyed earlier in the chronicle: “[W]here are they? Our champions, our kings, our ministers . . . protecting us, fighting our fight . . . Where did our good ones go? Our glory, brilliance, and splendor?”\textsuperscript{718} Hacker reads this quotation as a popular criticism of the elite’s failure as communal leaders: “[I]t seems to

\textsuperscript{715} E.g., the case of the Italian Jacopo Gaeta (Hekim Yakub, d.1484) or his successor Efraim ben Nisim ibn Sanchi. From what we know about them, Yakub and Efraim did not show great interest in the Jewish community. Rozen, Jewish Community in Istanbul, 75, 203; Mark Alan Epstein, The Ottoman Jewish Communities and Their Role in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries (Freiburg: K. Schwarz, 1980), 62–66.

\textsuperscript{716} The second chapter of this part includes a discussion of the question of the courtiers of the first half of the 16th century.

\textsuperscript{717} Mic. 3541 in Hacker, “New Chronicles,” 226.

\textsuperscript{718} Ibid., 225.
have been addressed at the futility of the courtiers’ intervention.”\footnote{Hacker, “New Chronicles,” 225n219.} However, whether the author criticizes the courtiers or not is a secondary concern in the chronicle’s context. The chronicle describes rather than explains the Sephardic diasporic predicament; the courtiers’ inadequacy is simply one more piece in the mosaic of the expellees’ misfortunes. The expellees mourn their loss of leadership. This is evident in the lines immediately following the description of the failed Iberian elite:

> How was the remainder of Judah left bereaved and lonely, exiled and turned aside, without a guide, and with no one to hold her hand? . . . we have no stay or staff [lit., something to lean on] and no one to renew our glory . . . no one has a redeemer . . . And the helped one shall fall, And both shall perish together. \[Isaiah 31:3\]\footnote{Mic. 3541 in Hacker, “New Chronicles,” 225.}

The expulsion generation’s authors articulate a sense of disappointment and neglect by their leadership. They mourned the loss and sought an alternative leadership, guidance, and salvation.\footnote{Ibid. Hacker shows that these chronicles present the lay leadership as those who had failed.} Therefore, we should follow Ben Sasson’s path and beware of mistaking the expellees’ attitudes toward the elite for a complete denouncement of the latter. However, we should also beware of this fallacy’s evil twin and dismiss the social tensions as a minor rift quickly patched without leaving a significant trace. On the contrary, the turn of the century was a complicated defining moment in Sephardic social relations. The expulsion denied the expellees a reconstitution of the familiar Iberian social context with its thin elite. The year 1492 gave birth to a new social reality and new discourses that played a significant role in the history of early modern Jewry.

In this chapter I showed that the expellees’ real and perceived diasporic predicament consisted of loss of family members, material possessions, and leadership.
The next chapter examines the social context in the Ottoman Empire and the preexisting Ottoman Jewry at the turn of the sixteenth century. What did the impoverished remnants of Iberian Jewry find in the East? How did the Ottoman authorities and Romaniote Jews affect their identity formation?
Chapter 10

The Diasporic Predicament: In the Ottoman Empire

The previous chapter examined the social context of the incoming Sephardic expellees through an examination of their real and perceived diasporic predicaments. This chapter examines the expellees’ social context in the Ottoman Empire by posing four questions: (1) What was the social context of the Ottoman Jewish communities that received the Sephardic expellees? (2) What was the Ottoman Sephardic communal organization in the aftermath of the expulsion? (3) What was the attitude of the Ottoman authorities toward Ottoman Jewry? (4) What were the challenges faced by the Sephardic leadership in general and rabbinic leadership in particular?

The answers to these questions convey a sense of absence and lack. First, the expellees did not encounter a dominant communal identity because the indigenous Ottoman Jewish communities were internally displaced in 1453. Much like the expulsion from Spain, this traumatic process shook the social structures and weakened the communal identity of Ottoman Jewry. Second, the first half of the sixteenth century witnessed the absence of significant leadership or organization, as well as a central Jewish authority. Third, the Ottoman authorities did not intervene in the daily life of the expellees in ways that had important effects on their social context. Fourth, the rabbinic leadership suffered from a major loss of legitimacy and authority.

Sephardic expellees, therefore, were relatively free from dominant external traditions of communal identity, a freedom joined by the loss of internal Iberian traditions described in the previous chapter. However, the diasporic coin had two sides; in addition to freedom, the absence of a dominant external influence together with the loss of family...
members, material possessions, and elite members gave rise to a severe identity crisis. The expellees addressed this crisis by reconstructing a sense of communal identity suited to their particular predicament. The result was an egalitarian communal identity that emphasized one of their few assets, their offspring.

Who Was There? Ottoman Jewry at the Turn of the Sixteenth Century

What was the social context the expellees encountered upon their arrival in the Ottoman Empire? As we saw in the previous chapter, for the expellees the turn of the sixteenth century was a time of social, cultural, and religious upheavals. However, for the indigenous Greek-speaking Ottoman Jews (Romaniotes), this was a formative period as well. This chapter’s first section asks how changes in the Ottoman political and social spheres shaped local Jewry before and during the arrival of the expellees. To answer these questions we must note key developments that fundamentally changed the Ottoman social fabric. Conquests, internal and external migration, and forced displacement removed, re-planted, reorganized, mixed, or abolished long-standing communities. The result was a destabilized Ottoman Jewry comprised of fractured micro-communities of a varying sociocultural, economic, legal, intellectual, and religious profile. This fractured, horizontal social structure, together with an absence of a dominant Jewish or Muslim central authority, facilitated the development of an egalitarian communal identity.

Migration and Forced Displacement

Increased mobility at the turn of the sixteenth century broke apart, transplanted, and mixed different Jewish ethnic groups, creating an ethnic amalgam lacking clear
identity. The year 1492 witnessed the most dramatic of the migrations that reshaped fifteen-century Ottoman Jewry. However, a close second was the traumatizing 1453 employment of the Ottoman policy of forced displacement (sürgün) of the Romaniotes. Sürgün was an Ottoman policy of forced displacement that affected Jews and gentiles alike. The policy served as means to revitalize recently conquered depopulated areas rather than as a punitive measure. The 1453 sürgün caused a severe identity crisis for the Romaniotes, who had formed the majority of Ottoman Jewry until 1492. The displaced Romaniotes were joined by small groups of incoming Ashkenazic and Italian Jews, some expelled from German lands and some who had left voluntarily.

The expansion of the Ottoman Empire in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East (1516–17) further diversified the ethnic mixture comprising sixteenth-century Ottoman Jewry. In addition, the Ottoman conquests set in motion a large Jewish immigration to newly acquired areas of commercial and religious significance. This process further increased Ottoman Jewry’s numbers and ethnic diversity. As additional ethnic Jewish communities found their way to the Ottoman Empire (or when the Empire found its way to them), the Romaniotes’ demographic, liturgical, social, and economic dominance was critically diminished. The migrations introduced a turn-of-the-century Ottoman Jewry of unprecedented size, ethnic diversity, and in the throes of acute social crises.

However, if the expulsion from Spain in 1492 initiated the largest wave of

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723 Rozen, Jewish Community in Istanbul, 47.
725 Levy, Jews of the Ottoman Empire, 12.
migration, the protracted sürgün policy had a long-lasting and more nuanced influence on the demography, social structure, and organization of Ottoman Sephardim. The sürgün policy did more than simply displace Romaniote Jewry. The policy weakened the Romaniote communities before the arrival of the Sephardim in varied ways. A frayed Romaniote social fabric and weakened elite, together with increased social polarization, caused by limiting and polarizing social and legal categories within Ottoman Jewry further prevented the establishment of a homogenous organic community with a clear sense of communal identity.

The most dramatic case of sürgün occurred in 1453. After conquering Constantinople, the Ottomans chose to revitalize the depopulated city by relocating there other subjects from the Empire, including the majority of Romaniotes from the Balkans and Asia Minor. However, the policy’s effect was much more complex than a simple act of displacement. First, the policy facilitated the migration of the vast majority of Romaniotes to Istanbul, creating ethno-geographical clusters in Istanbul (Romaniote) and later in the periphery (Sephardic). Second, the policy placed the displaced population in a restrictive legal category, permanently differentiating them from the rest of Ottoman Jewry. Third, the policy targeted the affluent and educated elements in the community that were thought to better facilitate economic revitalization of newly conquered or otherwise weakened areas. The result was a brittle social fabric comprised of a variety of displaced weakened communities.

The sürgün policy created relatively clear Ottoman Jewish ethnic clusters. Istanbul was the biggest and most influential Romaniote community at the time of the

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726 Rozen, *Jewish Community in Istanbul*, 45.
expulsion. However, although local Romaniotes did assist Sephardic refugees, only a minority of the refugees settled in Istanbul. 727 This was so because in 1453, the policy relocated most Romaniotes to Istanbul yet in the aftermath of 1492, it channeled most incoming Sephardim to the Empire’s periphery. 728 The result was two ethno-cultural Ottoman Jewish poles located in Istanbul (comprised of equal Romaniote and Sephardic elements) and Salonika (Sephardic). These centers had different history, ethnic make-up, communal organization, and trades.

The majority of the expellees, therefore, migrated to the Balkans and Asia Minor, especially to Salonika, a city that constituted a fine example for the refugees’ demographic impact. 729 Only 780 Jews were left in Salonika after the 1453 sürgün that practically emptied the city of its Jewish population. By 1519, however, 2645 out of Salonika’s 4863 households (54%) were Jewish. 730 Therefore, and as a result of the sürgün policy, the Sephardic effect on the Ottoman Jewish demography was not only in increasing its total numbers but also in creating two different ethno-cultural centers: a purely Sephardic center in Salonika and a mixed environment in Istanbul shared by Sephardic and Romaniote elements of equal strength. The sürgün system weakened the indigenous Romaniotes, separated them from the majority of incoming Sephardim (geographically, legally, and for tax purposes), and thus effectively prevented the creation of a homogenous organic Ottoman Jewry.

The population that was relocated as a result of the sürgün policy was subject to a permanent legal status that dictated their place of settlement, communal association, and

727 Levy, Jews of the Ottoman Empire, 3–4.
730 Ibid., 4.
tax burden. In addition, this legal status was passed from one generation to the next. For example, one could receive a permit to leave and resettle somewhere else; however, the sürgün community that one left behind was still obligated to pay the same tax portion. Therefore, every sürgün individual who chose to resettle was obligated to pay twice the tax portion—as an individual member of a new community and as a member of the old sürgün community. As a result, sixteenth-century Ottoman Jewry was divided into two legal categories consisting of different geographical areas, legal status, and sociocultural heritage. The first, simply called sürgün, mostly comprised of Romaniotes who were forced to relocate, suffered from the legal limitations mentioned above. The other group was comprised mainly of Sephardic Jews and was called the kendi gelen, that is, those who came voluntarily.731

The sürgün policy dramatically affected the Ottoman Jewish elite. The policy placed capable elite in key trade and economic centers. In the short term, the policy flattened the Ottoman Sephardic social structure as it weakened the Ottoman Jewish elite, at times even completely separating certain elite families from their old community. However, the picture changed in the second half of the sixteenth century with the recuperation of the displaced elite and the arrival of affluent converso merchants and bankers. These developments resulted in a potent oligarchy that led Ottoman Jewry for centuries. The policy’s long term effect, therefore, was an increased gap between Ottoman Jewry’s elite and the masses from the second half of the sixteenth century onward.

The assertion that elite members were often targeted by the sürgün policy was not

731 Rozen, Jewish Community in Istanbul, 12–13.
obvious as many scholars considered the groups to simply represent different ethnic
groups. Scholars came to associate the sürgün community exclusively with the
Romaniotes that were displaced in 1453 and the kendi gelen with the Sephardim expelled
in 1492. Sürgün became a synonym for Romaniote and kendi gelen for Sephardim.
However, as Joseph Hacker shows, the sürgün policy started earlier than 1453, lasted
after 1492, and affected, among others, the elite of the Sephardic expellees well into the
sixteenth century.732 In 1516–17, for example, Sephardic Jews who had previously
immigrated to Egypt were now relocated to Istanbul after the Ottomans conquered Egypt.
In another instance, Sephardic Jews from Salonika were relocated to Rhodes to settle and
develop its economy in 1522.

Noting that many of the relocated sürgün were elite members, either of
Romaniote or Sephardic origin, Hacker offers an alternative lens for examining the
policy’s significance. The Ottoman authorities, so the argument goes, perceived the
Jewish elite as especially useful for the purposes of revitalizing newly acquired areas.
Selecting people “of the richest and most respected . . . in the land” was a deliberate and
consistent Ottoman procedure whose purpose was to create an economic infrastructure in
new territories.733 Although Christian and Muslim subjects were relocated as well, Jews
were more prone to relocation under the sürgün policy because they were considered an
element that would improve the region’s economic productivity.734

In the short term the trauma of the sürgün elite continued a prolonged and

732 Hacker, “Sürgün System.”
733 Ibid., 27–29.
consistent process of elite pauperization described in the previous chapter. It contributed to the flattening of the Ottoman Sephardic social structure and the subsequent developments of kabbalistic discourses that emphasized an egalitarian social imagination. However, the sürgün elite’s economic recuperation and the arrival of Portuguese conversos in the second half of the century increased the gap between the elite and the masses and initiated a process of social polarization. This process persisted well into the seventeenth century when the Sabbatian movement targeted this phenomenon using kabbalistic discourses developed during the first half of the sixteenth century.

The sürgün policy affected both Romaniotes and Sephardim in dramatic and varied ways: (1) It created two ethno-cultural Jewish centers thus making a molding of the different ethnic groups into a homogenous Ottoman Jewry an extremely unlikely scenario. (2) Although it weakened the entire Romaniote community, it targeted elite members more often. This trend lasted well into the sixteenth century and affected the Sephardic elite as well. (3) As scholars show, the 1453 sürgün was a traumatizing ordeal in a very similar way for the Sephardim four decades later. It weakened the Romaniotes in general, their leadership in particular, and caused a crisis of communal identity. The Ottoman Jewry that received the Sephardic expellees, therefore, was displaced, weakened, and found itself in the throes of an identity crisis. However, the incoming Sephardim themselves contributed to the crises of the Ottoman Jewry in addition to the effects of the massive mobility and the sürgün policy of the period. To these processes, we now turn.

The arrival of the Sephardim in the Ottoman Empire marked a radical refashioning of the Ottoman Jewry at the turn of the sixteenth century. The Sephardic expellees altered the already destabilized demography, ethnic identity, cultural profile, intellectual background, and professional diversity of Ottoman Jewry. In fact, some scholars argue that the arrival of the Sephardim, together with other, smaller minorities (Ashkenazic and Italian Jews) and the expansion of the empire in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, brought most of the world’s Jewry under the aegis of the Ottoman Empire. These changes further fueled the identity crisis afflicting Ottoman Jewry.

Although the exact number of expellees that arrived in the Ottoman Empire is not clear, partial evidence suggests they did contribute to a significant increase in the total number of Jewish subjects in the Ottoman Empire. For example, Ottoman tax registries from 1490 documented two thousand Jewish households and a total of ten thousand Jews living in the Empire. In 1535, however, we know of eight thousand households and a total of forty thousand Jews. In addition, and as mentioned above, the arrival of the Sephardim changed the demographic and geographic make-up of the Jewish Ottoman community by creating distinctive Sephardic and Romaniote communities.

The Sephardim’s impact on the intellectual and economic profile of Ottoman Jewry was as dramatic as their influence on the demographic and ethnic make-up. The expulsion coincided with significant Ottoman expansions that created many exciting economic opportunities and emptied entire regions of their indigenous population (including indigenous Jews). In addition, the Sephardim possessed knowledge,

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736 Levy, Jews of the Ottoman Empire, 12.
737 Rozen, Jewish Community in Istanbul, 50–55.
experience, skills, and connections that fitted the needs of the rising Ottoman economy. As graduates of European universities and as possessors of a tradition of valuing education, the refugees brought with them desirable intellectual and scientific knowledge. Especially instrumental was their knowledge of bureaucratic enterprises (e.g., tax farming) and commercial skills (ports and customhouse management, banking). In addition, the refugees’ increased mobility and dispersion facilitated commercial success because these supplied them with reliable contacts in key new and old world commercial centers. 738

The turn of the sixteenth century witnessed a dramatic restructuring of Ottoman Jewry’s demography, geographical centers, economic profiles, legal status, ethnic make-up, social structure, and intellectual profiles. The dramatic upheavals that the Romaniote and Sephardic communities experienced in 1453 and 1492 required them to rethink and restructure their communal identity. However, before examining this process in the next chapter, I now turn to the communal organization of Ottoman Jewry, another phenomenon that contributed to its crisis of communal identity. In what follows I show that Ottoman Jewry developed forms of communal organization that further prevented the creation of a unified, centralized, homogenous community.

Communal Organization: Kahal and Kehillah

The organization of the Ottoman Jewish community at the turn of the century is another reason for the crisis of communal identity. Kahalim were the basic building blocks of the community. These were small, independent micro-communities based on

738 Rozen, Jewish Community in Istanbul, 47–49; Levy, Jews of the Ottoman Empire, 28–39.
the place of origin or ethnicity of their members. The organization of the Ottoman Jewish
kahalim presented a horizontal, fractured, and local rather than vertical, hierarchical, and
central communal identity. In addition to the prominence of the kahalim, Ottoman Jewry
actively and successfully resisted the formation of solid, consistent, and potent structures
of central organization. The result was a horizontal structure of loosely connected micro-
communities lacking central authority, organization, identity, or a significant elite
element.

The kahal was geographically and organizationally independent and had a
common geographical, cultural, and religious core. The kahalim were as big as a few
hundred families or as small as a few dozen families or even less. Each kahal had its
own leadership and benevolent organizations responsible for education and welfare. The
kahal members followed their customs and liturgy in the community’s synagogue, a
space that served as the kahal’s physical, religious, cultural, and social center. The
synagogue was an educational space as well.

The kahal sponsored primary (talmud torah), and advanced religious schools
(yeshiva), both usually located near or inside the synagogue. In addition, the synagogue
included offices used by confraternities responsible for social welfare; some handled
burying the dead, others cared for the sick and the poor. One of the most important roles
of the kahal was its function as a fiscal entity. It was responsible for tax collection, both
internal (i.e., for purposes of running the community) and external (i.e., taxes demanded
by the Ottoman authorities). Responsible for these tasks were tax assessors and collectors

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739 Levy, Jews of the Ottoman Empire, 46.
740 Shohat, “Notes on the Jews’ Communal Organization,” 136; Shmuelevitz, Jews of the Ottoman Empire,
appointed and supervised by the executive council of the kahal.\textsuperscript{741} The kahal then was an independent organization that supplied its members with education, welfare, religious, legal, social, and tax services.

Scholars offer several explanations for the establishment of kahalim as the dominant form of the Ottoman Jewish communal organization. Some suggest the expellees simply felt more comfortable surrounded by their peers. Others argue it was a result of the Ottoman sürgün policy that limited the geographical area in which the displaced communities could settle (at times to specific neighborhoods).\textsuperscript{742} Some argue it was a continuation of a traditional medieval Iberian communal organization that emphasized local identity and lacked a supra-communal organization.\textsuperscript{743} Another possible reason is related to the Ottoman authorities following the shariah, which forbids construction of new synagogues. Therefore, Ottoman Jewry congregated in multiple, small inconspicuous synagogues rather than in a few large structures. Those small spaces sufficed to contain a small kahal rather than an entire kehillah that required a large central synagogue. Regardless of the reason, however, the turn-of-the-sixteenth century witnessed a horizontal organization of micro-communities that varied ethnically, physically, legally, fiscally, and theologically.

The division of the leadership of the kahalim into lay and religious branches augmented the fragmentary nature of the Ottoman Jewish community. The lay authority was represented by the executive council (sometimes known as ma’amad, lit., deputation, \textsuperscript{741}Ibid.\textsuperscript{741} \textsuperscript{742}Joseph Hacker, “Community Organization in the Jewish Communities of the Ottoman Empire, 1453–1676,” in Grossman and Kaplan, eds. Kehal yisra’el: Ha-shilton ha-‘atsmi ha-yehudi le-dorotav (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar le-toldot Yisra’el, 2001), 2:290.\textsuperscript{743} Jonathan Ray “Images of the Jewish Community in Medieval Iberia,” Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies, 1:2 (2009): 195–211.
assembly, or status). Although the council was elected by representatives of the three
Ottoman tax brackets of the kahal, it was usually dominated by the elite. The religious
leader was the community’s rabbi, himself appointed by the council. Rabbis were
associated with and active in the community’s synagogue where they performed several
roles. They acted as judges (dayanim) when administering justice according to Jewish
law. They taught (marbitz torah) and delivered sermons on Saturdays and holidays.
Outstanding rabbis whose scholarship was widely recognized could also act as judges
(poskim), passing judgment on complicated theological issues. The first half of the
sixteenth century witnessed power struggles between lay and religious leadership. The
result was yet another destabilizing element of communal organization that prevented the
formation of a clear, consistent, and solid model of communal leadership.

The Ottoman Jewish communal organization was a mosaic of semi-independent
micro-communities. However, under certain circumstances the different communities did
come together to form a central communal organization (kehillah). The kehillah was an
institutionalized community that consisted of two elements: (1) supra-communal
organizations (e.g., welfare organizations, judicial committees, schools, etc.) and (2)
unified self-representation, that is, functionaries that represented the community to the
central government. These were, however, temporary and weak ad-hoc structures. The
main reason for the establishment of such organizations was the Ottoman authorities’

744 Of course, the elite made sure it retained control of these institutions. See Levy, Jews of the Ottoman Empire, 48–49.
745 Large communities had several rabbis. Small or poor communities shared a rabbi.
746 This was the case until the arrival of the Portuguese conversos in the middle of the 16th century and the polarizing social trends that followed. These processes are examined in the next chapter.
need for a central organization to effectively manage their interaction with the entire Jewish community.\textsuperscript{747}

Tax collection was the main reason for the establishment of and the main function of the supra-communal organization. The Ottoman authorities considered the entire Jewish community as a fiscal entity and assigned it a certain sum that was due. It was then the task of the kehillah to divide the responsibility among its members. Kehillot and other supra-communal organizations, therefore, came into existence despite the preference of the expellees for the smaller kahalim.

Ottoman Jewry actively and successfully resisted central organization. Among the explanations that scholars offer for this fact are that the long held Sephardic preference for local authority naturally led to antagonism toward centralizing tendencies and, as communities of internal or external immigrants, Ottoman Jews sought to live in a familiar cultural environment. The sürgün policy with its emphasis on relocation of organic ethnic groups made a homogenous community and a central Jewish authority extremely unlikely. The reluctance of the kahalim to form a central communal organization and the Ottoman authorities’ principle of laissez-faire prevented the establishment of an effective centralized leadership.

The alternative was a variety of ad-hoc, temporary, weak, and loosely structured delegations that represented the communities to the Ottoman authorities. At times the responsibility was assigned to prominent individuals, usually the lay leaders or merchants. Another type of communal representative was the ketuda or kaiya, a representative of the professional Jewish guilds. At times the communities resorted to

\textsuperscript{747} Levy, Jews of the Ottoman Empire, 30.
haskamot (lit., agreements or contracts), which were loosely followed because there was no central authority to enforce them.

Until the 1970s scholars argued that a particular central Jewish authority existed in the Ottoman Empire. The hakham bashi or rav rashi (i.e., chief rabbi), so the argument goes, was a political and religious leader, tax collector, and head of the Jewish legal system, a middleman between the Ottoman authorities and the quasi Ottoman Jewish nation. More recent research, however, paints a different picture. It shows that the office of chief rabbi truly emerged as an element of central leadership only in the nineteenth century. It seems that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, hacham bashi or rav rashi were titles of local Istanbul officials of limited capacity, and that they were not equivalents or superior but in fact subordinate to the local Ottoman judiciary system.

The above examination of the Ottoman Jewish communal organization shows how fractured and fluid this collection of micro-communities was. The kahalim were separate, independent, of different ethnic and legal nature, and weakened by internal struggles between lay and religious leadership. The supra-communal structure (kehillation) was a weak collection of ad-hoc personalities and organizations that handled the interaction between the communities and the Ottoman authorities and never matured to a pan-Ottoman Jewish central authority. As a result the Ottoman Sephardim were able to address their diasporic realia with very little sociocultural and structural Romaniote

748 Hacker, “Community Organization,” 288–89.  
749 Ibid,” 288.  
750 Ibid.
external influence. The next section shows that the expellees were free from influence by the Ottoman authorities as well as the Romaniotes.

**Relative Freedom: The Authorities’ Attitude toward Ottoman Jewry**

The turn-of-the-century Ottoman Jewish community was in the throes of an identity crisis. Both Romaniotes and Sephardim were displaced, organized in small independent communities, and objected to Ottoman attempts to fashion a Jewish central organization. To complete our survey of the social context of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire, this section describes the attitude of the Ottoman authorities toward the Jewish communities in the empire. In general, the Ottoman authorities allowed the Jewish communities a high degree of autonomy in managing their communal affairs. As a result, Ottoman Jewry was free to address its diasporic context with very little external Ottoman influence.

Through the *Millet* policy, the Ottomans allowed a religious minority significant autonomy in managing its communal affairs. It was based on the Islamic concept of *dhimma*, a covenant of protection given to peoples of the book (i.e., Jews and Christians). The *dhimmi* [the people of the *dhimma*] are guaranteed life, property, freedom to practice their religion, and a large degree of autonomy. However, they were required to pay higher taxes than the Empire’s Muslim subjects and one additional tax (*jizyah*). In addition to their less favorable economic status, *dhimmi* were restricted in symbolic ways to demonstrate their acceptance of Islam’s superiority: they were not allowed to carry weapons, ride camels or horses, ring church bells, build new churches or synagogues, and
testify against Muslims in a Muslim court.\textsuperscript{751}

Even with these restrictions, considering the era as well as the othering Christian alternative, the Ottoman Empire was one of the most tolerant early modern cultures to host a Jewish minority.\textsuperscript{752} The Jews could settle almost anywhere they wanted (the sürgün communities were an exception, of course), engage in almost every occupation, travel freely, establish religious and social institutions, and run their communal life with minimal interference.

Scholars offered several explanations for the Ottoman tolerance toward Jewish communities. One scholar argued that the Ottomans never formed an ethnic majority in their own Empire and therefore found religious tolerance a small price to pay for the internal peace that enabled them to effectively handle external conflicts.\textsuperscript{753} Others argued it was the Ottomans’ following of the hanafi rite of Muslim jurisprudence that was responsible for their relative tolerance as it was the most liberal of the Sunni rites.\textsuperscript{754} In any case, during most of the sixteenth century, Ottoman Jewry enjoyed unprecedented religious tolerance. A turn for the worse came only at the turn of the seventeenth century.

\textsuperscript{751} Shmuelevitz, Jews of the Ottoman Empire, 6–8. Levy, Jews of the Ottoman Empire, 15–16. According to some scholars who advance the notion of an Ottoman Jewish central organization, the chief rabbi headed the system or the quasi-national Ottoman Jewish community. However, more recent research showed the word itself (i.e., millet) is rarely used in the Jewish context; in addition, when it is used, this term refers to local Jewish communities rather than some national body (see Hacker, “Community Organization,” 289); Shmuelevitz, Jews of the Ottoman Empire, 18–21; Levy, Jews of the Ottoman Empire, 42–44. Under this order, minorities enjoyed wide latitude regarding religious and cultural freedom, as well as considerable administrative, fiscal, and legal autonomy under their own ecclesiastical and lay leaders. The term millet originally meant both a religion and a religious community. In the nineteenth century, while still retaining its original meanings, it also came to denote such modern concepts as nation and nationality. The Ottoman millet system had its origins in earlier Middle Eastern states, both Muslim and non-Muslim, and it was not, therefore, an Ottoman innovation. The Ottoman contribution was mainly to regulate and institutionalize the policy and to pay greater attention to its proper operation.

\textsuperscript{752} Levy, Jews of the Ottoman Empire, 19.

\textsuperscript{753} Shmuelevitz, Jews of the Ottoman Empire, 15–17.

\textsuperscript{754} Hanafi refers to one of the four schools of law constituting Sunni Islam.
when Ottoman conquests brought increasing numbers of conservative Muslims into the empire. As a result, Ottoman society became more conservative and less tolerant of religious minorities than before.

Jewish life in the Ottoman Empire during the sixteenth century, however, was not serene. In addition to the dhimma restrictions, we know of numerous cases of violence against Ottoman Jews. Ottoman soldiers, as well as Christian and Muslim neighbors, all partook in sporadic attacks on a community that was perceived as, and indeed was, weak and small. However, we should not confuse this violence with the type of hostility the expellees suffered in Europe. In fact, the expellees themselves were careful not to do so.

Whereas in the Christian world it seems the hostility was verbal, intellectual, and religious and served to define the Christian majority by othering the Jewish minority, in the Muslim world the persecution took the shape of physical violence directed against individual Jews. For example, in Eshkol ha-kofer, Saba presents a discussion between a Jew from a Christian land and a coreligionist from a Muslim land. The two try to decide whose diasporic experience is worse. The Jew from the Christian land recognizes verbal abuse and othering as his torments: “Edom [Christianity]’s power is in his tongue [with which] they humiliate and degrade . . . with their slippery tongue . . . they harm Israel yet they do not kill and beat [them] up.”

In the Muslim world, however, the opposite is true. The Muslim tongue cannot inflict much damage as the Ottoman host culture prefers to “darken and blacken a man’s

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756 Ibid, 40.
757 Saba, Eshkol ha-kofer, 66a.
face by beating [him] without [any] words as he cannot understand their tongue.”

The Ottoman Empire presented a different kind of persecution, focusing on the individual Jewish body rather than the communal identity. The Muslim persecution sought to take advantage of the weak and vulnerable individual, whereas the Iberian Christian discourse sought to create new barriers between Christians, Jews, and conversos in the aftermath of the mass conversions of 1391. Whereas the Christian persecution came from the top down and was debated and articulated by intellectuals, religious authorities, and political leaders, the Muslim persecution came from the bottom up, from the streets, from neighbors, angry or greedy soldiers, and fellow ethnic minorities. Therefore, the relative autonomy manifested in the nature of the Muslim persecution left the expellees free to develop a sense of communal identity with minimal external influence.

**Crisis of Rabbinic Authority in the Aftermath of 1492**

This chapter’s fourth and last section examines a particular aspect of the identity crisis facing Ottoman Jewry in the aftermath of 1492, namely a crisis of rabbinic authority. I placed this discussion in the current chapter for three reasons: (1) I consider it to be one of the main elements of the Sephardic experience in the Ottoman Empire, (2) It is a direct result of the crises described above and in the previous chapter, (3) It is an important explanatory tool, a key linkage between the expellees’ diasporic predicaments and the construction of kabbalistic discourses. I argue that in the absence of effective sources of legitimacy, Ottoman Sephardic rabbis developed discourses presenting an

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758 Ibid.
egalitarian social imagination and emphasizing social justice to validate their authority as communal leaders.

**The Crisis of Rabbinic Authority as a Defining Marker**

Recently scholars began to view a general crisis in rabbinic authority as one of the defining qualities of the early modern Jewish experience.\(^{759}\) This was a process of metamorphosis rather than disintegration, a transition of power from the hands of the religious leadership to the lay oligarchy. In an exceptional and rare attempt to offer a broad survey of early modernity in a Jewish context, Ruderman recently argued that two of the period’s markers are “[the] growing decline of rabbinic authority, and the rising power of lay oligarchy.”\(^{760}\) For Ruderman these developments came as “the rabbinic office was more clearly defined, more professionalized, and more circumscribed by the lay leadership than ever before.”\(^{761}\)

Yet what were the temporal boundaries of this crisis? Did rabbinic authority survive the shock of 1492 and remain sufficiently robust until the second half of the sixteenth century when a strong oligarchy began to lead the Ottoman Sephardic world? Indeed, it seems most scholars would answer in the affirmative because they often point toward the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the height of a crisis in rabbinic authority.\(^{762}\) This observation is accurate only if we take into consideration threats to


\(^{760}\) Ibid.


rabbinic authority originating from above, from the lay oligarchy. A different timeline emerges if we treat the phenomenon as a general crisis of rabbinic authority and include challenges from below, from the lower classes. Broadening the conceptual scope, we reveal challenges to rabbinic authority that preceded the rise of the lay elite in the second half of the sixteenth century. These challenges came from below, from the masses of Sephardic expellees, from the elements of popular culture.

Ruderman offers another model for examining the crisis in rabbinic authority. Ruderman goes beyond describing a simple power struggle between lay and religious elite when he makes the following assertion: “[the] seeds of the crisis over rabbinic authority . . . [are located] at the very inception of powerful communal structures at the very height of Jewish self-government.” I agree with Ruderman’s observation that a crisis in rabbinic authority was directly connected to the rise of lay communal structures. However, I argue that the successful inception of such powerful organizations was preceded by a struggle over their nature.

This struggle was as old as the expulsion from Spain and was conducted between the lower and upper social classes and between the lay and religious leaders. Beginning an examination of this phenomenon with the actual establishment of such communal organizations misses the rich history of struggles over it. It describes the end result rather than the process that made it happen. Therefore, I suggest that we should extend

763 Ruderman, “Michael A. Meyer’s Periodization of Modern Jewish History,” 34.
764 Ruderman, Early Modern Jewry, 96–97; this view works as well when examining the Sabbatian heresy, a movement Ruderman sees as a direct challenge to the rabbinic establishment. See, e.g., Ruderman, 150–52, where we encounter the words of Moses Hagiz, an opponent of Sabbatianism: “He [Sabbetai Zevi] spoke slanderously not only about all the aggadot [rabbinic stories] and the midrashim [homilies] of the sages, interpreters . . . [of the Torah], but also about the works of the rabbinic authorities and moralists, recent as well as ancient, until they caused us to be abhorred.”
the examination of the struggles over communal leadership and organization back to 1492. In the rest of this section, I show that as early as the turn of the century challenges from below, together with new social structures, communal organization, and the Ottoman authorities’ approach to the expellees, caused a dramatic crisis in rabbinic authority. The rabbis were left with very few sources of legitimacy and turned to egalitarian kabbalistic discourses to regain authority as community leaders.

**Social Tensions among Ottoman Jews**

As I showed in the previous chapter, the Sephardic expellees brought with them a history and discourse of social strife. However, this phenomenon was a significant problem for Ottoman Jews well before the arrival of the Sephardim. Hacker shows that the turn-of-the-century Romaniote rabbinic leadership saw the laity as fundamentally aloof and disconnected from the rabbinic establishment.\(^{765}\)

The crisis deteriorated to a point where the rabbis declared a strike and did not teach or give public sermons.\(^{766}\) The rabbis identified the main reason for the lay people’s disinterest not as “due to poverty or exile, God forbid, but to abundance and serenity”.\(^{767}\) This crisis demonstrates that the uprooted Sephardim arriving in the Ottoman Empire entered a turbulent Jewish social sphere rather than a serene land unfamiliar with intra-communal disputes.

\(^{765}\) The rabbis perceived lack of lay appreciation was manifested in two main qualms: (1) that the lay members brought mundane activities and business into the synagogue, turning a holy site into a lay public space; (2) popular appreciation did not simply abandon the rabbis but transferred to the community’s lay elite.


\(^{767}\) Ibid.
Indeed, soon after the expulsion of 1492, the Sephardic rabbis experienced an extreme authority crisis. The reasons for this crisis are varied. In addition to the loss of material and legal sources of authority, the rabbis of the expulsion generation lost social and religious contexts that had sustained their elite positions of social leadership. As mentioned in the previous chapter, some expellees suffered from a general sense of disillusionment with God in the aftermath of 1492, leading to skepticism or unbelief.\footnote{On skepticism as a threat to Rabbinic authority in this period, see Jeffrey Howard Chajes, “Spirit Possession and the Construction of Early Modern Jewish Religiosity” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1999), 171–72. As Chajes notes, popular skepticism in contemporary Judaism was not studied sufficiently as scholarship’s main interest was with elite intellectual skepticism. Or, in case of converso skepticism, the subject was studied in the context of 17th-century European communities.} However, in this section I examine the particular structural reasons for the rabbis’ crisis in the Ottoman context.

The rabbis’ relationship with the Ottoman authorities was the reason for the absence of effective sources of rabbinic authority. On the one hand the Ottoman authorities allowed a significant measure of religious autonomy. On the other hand the authorities did not provide the rabbis with sufficient means to enforce their rulings. In fact, the mechanisms that the Ottoman authorities allowed required the rabbis to conduct their business openly and inform the authorities of their activities. The rabbis found this option undesirable as it was less lucrative and more risky than not notifying the authorities at all.

The rabbis knew that their religious autonomy was only as significant as the Ottoman authorities would allow it to be. Although they were able to establish rabbinic courts where they could officially pass judgment on religious matters, by law the rabbis and Jewish law were secondary to the Ottoman legal authorities and Muslim law. For
example, no judgment of a rabbinic court was ever officially recognized from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth century. At times the Ottoman legal authorities would approve rabbinic judgments but only if they were compatible with Muslim law and were brought to the attention of a Muslim court.

The Ottoman authorities ordinarily did not investigate rabbinic infringements of the legal exclusivity of Ottoman authority as long as a rabbinic judgment did not threaten Ottoman legitimacy or became a public matter. Officially rabbis who sought to lead their communities had to apply for a written document authorizing them to do so. Rabbis preferred not to sign such documents because they were expensive and attracted undesired attention from the Ottoman authorities. Such additional scrutiny increased the risk that a rabbi’s freedom would be further limited or that he would have to provide additional payments to the Ottoman authorities. As a result rabbis were reluctant to discuss religious matters in public or to turn to the Ottoman authorities to enforce their judgments.

Some Jewish individuals took advantage of the weakened status of the rabbis. For example, Hacker identified three types of friction between rabbis, individuals, and the Ottoman authorities. At times, an individual who was unhappy with a rabbi’s judgment would turn to the Ottoman authorities, hoping they would cancel the rabbi’s verdict. Others reported real or imagined illegal activities to facilitate removing rabbis from their positions and gain the positions themselves. A third type of friction involved power struggles between different Jewish ethnic groups or kahalim rather than between particular individuals.

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The predicament of the Ottoman rabbis—caught between their communities and the Ottoman authorities—led them to insert clauses into the contracts with their congregations guaranteeing their protection in case a member of the congregation appealed to the Ottoman authorities. However, a protected rabbi does not necessarily make a community leader. Why did a community seek a rabbi’s leadership? How did the rabbis increase the demand for their services? The following section examines one of the rabbis’ strategies to increase their legitimacy, namely, a dissemination of previously esoteric kabbalistic knowledge among the general public.

Legitimacy through the Dissemination of Kabbalistic Knowledge

Scholars argue that one of the reasons for the rabbis’ dissemination of kabbalistic discourses in the aftermath of the expulsion from Spain was the absence of traditional sources of legitimacy (i.e., material or legal capital and the social and religious context that sustained their position of social leadership). Some scholars argue that the rabbis sought to frighten the people into submission by exposing them to kabbalistic knowledge. Idel and Chajes, for example, point to the work of Hallawa as an example of this phenomenon.

Hallawa was a North African rabbi who in the early part of the sixteenth century moved from Fez to the land of Israel where he settled in Safed. While in Safed, Hallawa wrote the homiletic treatise *Tsafnat paneah*, which described the various punishments

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770 Hacker, “Community Organization,” 370–71. Hacker found that the Ottoman authorities were—actively or passively—more often involved in the rabbinic courts’ activities in the second half of the 16th century; Joseph Hacker, “The Boundaries of Jewish Autonomy: Jewish Self-Jurisdiction in the Ottoman Empire from the Sixteenth through the Eighteenth Centuries” [in Hebrew], in Shmuel Almog, Israel Bartal, Michael Graetz, Arthur Hertzberg, Isadore Twersky, Zvi Yekutiel, Otto Dov Kulka, and Menahem Stern eds., *Temurot be-historiah ha-yehudit hadashah. Sefer yovel le-shmuel ettinger*, 376–77.
incurred by the soul after death. In the second half of the century, Hallawa moved to Damascus where he once had lived at some point before 1565.

In the introduction to *Tsafnat paneah*, Hallawa tells of his motives for writing this kabbalistic anthology: “[I] saw people following their evil inclination . . . because the nations [the Ottomans] will not allow judging them according to the law of the Torah.” Turning in such culprits to the Ottoman authorities is unwise, Hallawa claims, because once in Ottoman hands they would “convert . . . and inform on the other Jews [i.e., their misbehavior] . . . and therefore the sages do not judge.” For Chajes this quotation is evidence that Hallawa intended to “instill fear in the hearts of the readers; inculcating fear is the only means of social control left to rabbis such as himself, he explains, since rabbis have no real power to punish under Ottoman rule.” For Idel, Hallawa’s recipe for combating religious laxity was: “a persuasion through fear . . . the only way left to the rabbis to strengthen religion.”

Although I agree that frightening the masses was indeed necessary for Hallawa’s purpose, it was not sufficient. In the context of Hallawa’s argument, punishing or striking fear in the sinner can only work alongside rewarding the righteous. Therefore, in its essence this was an educational measure rather than a coercive one. The rabbis sought to teach the essence of Judaism in a time of scarce religious knowledge (books were lost; Jews were forced to live as Christians or in unfamiliar foreign surroundings) and a weakened religious leadership. However, they sought to appeal to their congregations rather than simply frighten them into submission. This is clear in the context of Hallawa’s

774 Idel, “Rabbi Yehudah Hallawa,” 123.
choice of the sermon as the medium for conveying his message:

I composed this work, revealing the secrets of the Zohar and the Talmud in [regarding] the punishments of the soul, maybe it will open the eyes to save them from Gehenna; and it is appropriate for the sages to sermonize them in public so they may hear, and learn.775

Hallawa’s preference for the sermon as a delivery method clearly shows that his target audience was the general public rather than a few elites who could purchase, read, and understand printed works of arcane theology. The preacher’s task, however, is to convince a public of intelligent agents. The spiritual leader equips the masses with the knowledge required for making an informed decision rather than frightens passive subjects into submission. In this context, fear results from knowledge and empowerment, from the students’ understanding of the “secrets of the Zohar and the Talmud.” In this context only, the preacher’s goal is to “open their [i.e., the masses’] eyes” rather than close them. Such leadership, through persuasion, required a compromise with the masses’ cultural values rather than a simple dictation of a rabbinic truth and its enforcement through fear. These were the values of a community in search of identity, a community that lost family members, material possessions, lay and religious leadership, social structures, and patterns of communal organization.

We find a similar logic for the relationship between the rabbis and the masses in Joseph Caro’s mystical diary Maggid mesharim. On the 28th of Kislev, Caro’s maggid informed him of the following:

I will grant you the merit of having miracles and wonders performed through you as were done by others in ancient times. For [the] people of the world do not consider the people who learn the Torah important, since the latter do not perform miracles and wonders as they did in earlier days . . . I will have miracles

775 Hallawa, Tsafnat paneah, 58a in Idel, “Rabbi Yehudah Hallawa,” 123.
and wonders performed by you, and thus people will know that God is in Israel.\textsuperscript{776}

It seems that much like Hallawa, Caro was confronted with similar issues of religious laxity, a crisis in popular belief, and a lack of rabbinic legitimacy. The thesis of the \textit{maggid} is that an absence of signs (i.e., miracles and wonders or evidence) is responsible for the crisis of rabbinic authority. Although in certain contexts miracles may very well be frightening, the message of the \textit{maggid} does not seem to convey this notion. Rather, the signs are a confirmation that the “people of the world” are required to “esteem” rather than fear “the people of the Torah.” Convincing the people to follow the Torah through the performance of miracles rather than through teaching the Talmud is an act of negotiation between the rabbinic elite and the masses rather than intimidation or coercion.

Theology was not the only genre that adapted to the hard realities of the Sephardic diaspora; nor was theology the only means of the elite to affect the general public. Chroniclers, as well as theologians, accommodated their work to the new social context. Elijah Capsali’s work demonstrates how chroniclers adapted their craft to the new target audience. Capsali, a member of an important Venetian Jewish family with branches in the Ottoman Empire, finished writing his chronicle in 1523. In the introduction to his \textit{Seder eliyahu zuta}, Capsali explains how the readership he had in mind affected his literary production:

Because our thoughts are perturbed by the pestilence that rages in the darkness and the destruction that wastes us at noon, we are prevented from studying Talmudics and other subjects that require great concentration. Because every day we say: what will

be our end? . . . Therefore have I written this history, which comes from the mouths of old and wise men, in order that we should be occupied in reading and writing it, and that our minds be diverted to other things.777

Capsali’s target audience, therefore, is the weary general public, rather than lay or religious elite who are capable of reading works that “require great concentration.” It is clear that the general public was the target audience of the rabbinic elite. It is also clear that the rabbis did not simply scare their congregations into submission but rather sought to educate and convince them to follow the Torah. The means to do so was a growing body of kabbalistic discourses, now more egalitarian and exoteric than ever.778

Chajes acknowledges the didactic function of spirit-possession stories, a dominant phenomenon in the sixteenth-century Ottoman Jewish world. Chajes convincingly argues that instances of spirit possession were used to curb immoral behavior and that the rabbis knowingly used them as such.779 However, rather than negotiation, the means of instruction in this narrative is fear, and the successful instruction ends with the submission of the crowd rather than education. This is apparent in Chajes’s observation that in both Christian and Jewish sources “[it] is an ‘evil’ spirit that often provides the powerful spur to repentance.”780 This instruction, therefore, is more in the way of

778 Benayahu found a similar attempt to negotiate an elite theology with the reluctant masses in the sermons of Garson. Benayahu found that often Garson incorporated popular proverbs and sayings in Ladino in his sermons in an attempt to simplify an otherwise arcane theological message to a congregation primarily comprised of lower social classes; Benayahu, “The Sermons of R. Yosef b. Meir Garson,” 58. Additional points in Garson’s work expose the expellees’ social identity, the preacher’s target audience, and his educational agenda. E.g., in a eulogy for Joseph ben Abraham al Sarakusti (d. 1506–7) we learn that Sarakusti’s most prominent feature was that he lobbied for two kinds of peace: “[H]e appeased man and his friend, husband and wife. Second, he appeased God and the poor.” Benayahu, “The Sermons of R. Yosef b. Meir Garson,” 99. See also Scholem, Kabbalah, 68.
779 Chajes, Spirit Possession, 166; and the secondary sources there. See also p. 177.
780 Ibid, 232; and on p. 167 “while a nightmare might have sufficed in former good days to inculcate fear of the Lord, such phantasms pale before the persuasiveness of a face-to-face meeting with a denizen of the world of the dead.”
coercion—frightening the masses to acknowledge the veracity of the sages’ teachings and, especially, to acknowledge that the soul is punished after death. What is missing in this model is a dialogue between the masses observing the possessed and the exorcism ritual and the sages that control the event.

It could be argued that the possessed themselves were representatives of the non-elite engaged in a cultural negotiation with the exorcising rabbinic elite. In addition, it might be argued that the fact that the majority among the possessed were women produced a gendered negotiation of social, cultural, and religious values between the masculine elite exorcist and the feminine possessed. However, Chajes notes that most of the possessed women belonged to the upper classes. Therefore, if cultural negotiation did take place, it was gendered and conducted within the ranks of the elite rather than between different social strata.

The notion that kabbala was meant to strike fear among the general public is in agreement with the traditional relationship between Iberian rabbis and their flocks. The relationship of the rabbinic elite and the masses was far from harmonious. Jonathan Ray suggests an oppositional dynamic characterized this relationship; the rabbis perceived themselves as disciplinarians rather than as “shepherds kindly tending to their flocks.” Although the rabbis complained about the laxity of the masses, they were afraid to lose their support. This dynamic was not new; however, it was exacerbated after the expulsion because the pressures were greater, and the means of the elite to address them were less effective than ever.

781 Ibid., 242.
782 Ray, After Expulsion, 17.
The crisis in rabbinic authority and its restoration through dissemination of kabbala must be seen in the general context of the expellees’ attempts to regain social stability. We can discern a variety of approaches taken by lay and rabbinic elites to restructure their society and establish leadership status. Greater standardization of marriage practices is one means the rabbinic elite used to regain social standing and shape the emerging Sephardic society.\textsuperscript{784} The sages made their involvement in the marriage ceremony indispensable. They did so by stipulating that one of the witnesses must be a rabbi and by making it obligatory that the marriage ceremony be conducted in Hebrew, a language they mastered better than most.\textsuperscript{785} The rabbis insisted on the public nature of the marriage ceremony to ensure that rabbinic involvement did not remain on a theoretical level. This goal was achieved by stipulating that the ceremony should be conducted in a public space and in the presence of a certain number of witnesses.\textsuperscript{786} Some sages sought to base their legitimacy on providing material benefits to their congregation rather than on their theological prowess. Ibn Zimra, for example, criticizes rabbis who use charitable funds to improve or beautify buildings and not for the moral betterment of the poor.\textsuperscript{787} Correctional efforts and material benefits were not the only response of the

\textsuperscript{784} Ray, \textit{After Expulsion}, 96-97.
rabbinic elite to the social and moral chaos. Some communities of scholars chose the esoteric path and cut their ties to the general public to form closed religious circles.⁷⁸⁸

The sages were not alone in their attempts to regain leadership status and to curtail immoral behavior. Some lay communal leaders attempted to force their community to assume greater responsibility for righteous behavior and religious observance. Jonathan Ray presents several such cases; for example, in the community of Fez craftsmen were required to ensure that their apprentices attended daily prayers and fulfilled religious obligations.⁷⁸⁹ Lay and religious elites of the expulsion generation, therefore, reacted in a variety of ways to battle religious laxity and the severe crisis in elite authority. It is in this context that we should consider the emerging Ottoman Sephardic yibbum discourse.

The sections above show that the expellees lacked many of their family members, material possessions, established social structures, and Iberian leadership, as well as a dominant indigenous Jewish community and an othering Christian discourse of communal identity. The absence of these defining identity markers created a vacuum in terms of a communal identity. Rabbinic leadership, lay leadership, and the masses, all participated in the process of identity formation. This process continued for two generations until the arrival of propertied conversos and the establishment of a thin layer of leadership by an oligarchy comprised of representatives of the conversos and the recuperated local elite. Although culminating in an oligarchic society, the first half of the

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⁷⁸⁹ Ray, After Expulsion, 118.
sixteenth century produced discourses that emphasized a horizontal, egalitarian communal identity.
Chapter 11

The End of a Formative Period: A New Social Context

The third chapter of this part is comprised of three sections and concludes the discussion of the social context that couched the development of the Ottoman Sephardic yibbum discourse. In the first section, I address two counterarguments arising from the preceding chapters. I show that the egalitarian, organic social imagination that animated the logic of yibbum was not exceptional but rather was a staple of the kabbalistic discourses of the expulsion generation. This section demonstrates this point by briefly examining an additional kabbalistic discourse, the Cordoverian logic of the interconnectedness between God and the Jewish people.

The second section shows that the urge to develop an egalitarian social structure by means of marriage and procreation characterized the general population of the expellees and was not limited to the closed circles of elite kabbalists. This trend existed in the realms of imagined (through kabbalistic discourses) and real social structures (through the expellees’ strategies of marriage and procreation). This section demonstrates this point by showing that the expellees responded to their predicament by prioritizing marriage and procreation. However, to do so, the expellees abandoned social taboos and leveled the hierarchical social structures of the past.

The third section explores the end of the postexilic, formative period of Ottoman Sephardic history. This period stretched from the expulsion to the arrival of the Portuguese conversos in the middle of the sixteenth century. The section examines changes in social structure and imagination from the middle of the century onward. It
describes the rise of a less egalitarian and exceedingly polarized social structure and imagination.

**Social Imagination Reflected in Cordoverian Mirrors**

Thus far I examined the Ottoman Sephardic social imagination as manifested in the kabbalistic discourse of *yibbum*. However, additional discourses exist and demonstrate that an egalitarian social imagination was a dominant characteristic rather than an anomaly in postexilic, Ottoman Sephardic kabbalistic discourses. To demonstrate this point, I briefly examine the notion of communal solidarity as it appeared in Cordoverian kabbala.

Cordovero was a prominent Safedian kabbalist. Cordovero was a central character in the development of Safedian kabbala and was the student of Joseph Caro and, for a brief period, the teacher of Isaac Luria. Bracha Sack identified an extreme sense of communal solidarity in Cordovero’s work, as well as the works produced by his circle of teachers, colleagues, and students. Cordovero’s social imagination perceived of the Jewish people as a union between members living and dead, natural and supernatural. Ultimately, this organic community was connected to God in a symbiotic fashion through his emanations, the *sefirot*.

One Cordoverian discourse that exemplifies this notion of organic communal identity explains the interconnection between the *sefirot* and the Jewish people by likening them to mirrors reflecting each other’s light. Individually, so the argument goes,

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the sefirot reflect the divine light or image emanating from God. However, as an organic unit, they collectively reflect God’s image onto the Jewish people. The individual Jewish souls comprising the Jewish people then reflect among themselves the image received from the sefirot back to the upper world of the sefirot and, much like the latter, reflect the divine image as an organic unit.

The main purpose of this system is a continuous circular transmission of God’s image, light, or life-giving energy between the earthly and divine worlds. Such transmission occurs only when the mirrors are perfectly clear, a condition attainable when the souls are spotless (i.e., free of sins). Alkabets, a Sephardi from Salonika who had immigrated to Safed with Joseph Caro in 1535, likened the shekhinah, the sefira connecting the upper and lower worlds, to a mirror. Alkabets perceived of the sins of the Jewish people as rusty stains on the surface of the mirror-like shekhinah. As the shekhinah is the lower sefira, connecting the sefirotic world with the Jewish people, such stains prevent the effective transmission of divine light to the world, disrupting the connection between God and his people.

This was an organic system. As mentioned above, each sefira reflects the other sefirot, and each Jewish soul mirrors its brethren. Therefore, Cordovero argues, “[Only] the merging [shituf] of the souls is [i.e., brings about] the complete world.” The key for a “complete” or fully functioning sefirotic system or relationship between God and his people, therefore, is an interconnected community of equals rather than an elite family line, righteous saintly men (tsaddikim), or atomistic continuous lineages.

792 Sack, Be-shaare ha-kabbalah, 208; Solomon Alkabets, Sefer berit ha-levi (Levov, 1863), 9b.
Cordovero directly ties the discourses of *yibbum* to the mirror imagery in addition to displaying an egalitarian social imagination that is reminiscent of the *yibbum* discourse. He does so by connecting the mirror imagery to the tree branches or conduits imagery that dominated the *yibbum* discourse:

[The secret of the mirror is] according to [i.e., follows the same logic as] the secret of the sixty ribo [600,000] *tsinorot* [lines or conduits] of the Upper Tree [ilan]. When one of them is missing, the world is imperfect because the conduits of the Torah are not open. And Israel [i.e., the total number of the Jewish people] was never less than sixty ribo . . . and as all of those conduits are included in the sixty ribo, [i.e., as all of the sefirotic supernatural channels] so each soul in Israel is included in the sixty ribo [i.e., in the parallel earthly system of 600,000 Jewish people] and together they [i.e., the upper sefirotic and lower Jewish systems] are as the image of the mirror; each mirror one places in front [of another] will show itself.  

Whether mirrors or conduits, both images are linked in the sages’ imagination and convey the same interpretation of the relationship between God and his people—sustaining the flow of the divine into the world is a group effort. An individual’s success or his friend’s failure is reflected in the collective mirror of the Jewish people and the world. This organic, egalitarian social imagination, reflected in the *yibbum* discourse and the Cordoverian mirror imagery, clearly constituted a dominant interpretation of the relationship between God and his people in the aftermath of the expulsion from Spain. However, this realm goes beyond the imagined and religious; its origins reside in the actual reactions of the expellees to their real and perceived predicament. This fact becomes clear when examining contemporary evidence recounting the response of the expellees to their diasporic predicament.

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794 Ibid.
An Egalitarian Community: The Testimonies of the Expellees

Thus far I described the Sephardic logic of *yibbum* and the social context during the expulsion and its aftermath. It was observed that the expellees lost family members, material possessions, a clear hierarchical social structure, and their cultural traditions. In addition, I examined how in the aftermath of the expulsion, the Sephardim developed a logic of *yibbum* that displayed an organic and egalitarian social imagination. Yet, can we establish a causal relationship between the expellees’ social context and their theological production?

The shared chronological and geographical boundaries of the phenomena constitute evidence for such a relationship. I also argued that the rabbis’ decision to disseminate kabbalistic theology as a strategy to regain a leadership position is additional evidence for a connection between social context and religious production. I find these arguments convincing. The validity of these assertions is strengthened when we identify a direct connection between the expulsion, the social context that followed, changes in the structure and logic of kinship (both real and imagined), and the theological production of the expellees.

This section demonstrates these connections. It shows that material and familial loss forced the expellees to choose between continuous lineages with a level social structure or hierarchical social structures in keeping with Iberian taboos from the past. The evidence shows that the expellees chose the former. The egalitarian social imagination manifested in the *yibbum* discourse was only one manifestation of the conscious and active strategy of a displaced community seeking to regain a sense of communal identity.
In response to their diasporic predicament, the expellees reshaped their actual social structure and re-signified the concepts of family and community. The first change took place in the earthly realm of marriage and procreation while the second occurred in the realm of the kabbalistic social imagination.

This section also explores the expellees’ attempts to reshape their actual social structure. It does so by examining reports (chronicles and responsa) written by the expellees and their descendants. Among the sources are descriptions of the reactions of the expellees to their diasporic predicament by Saba (d. 1508), ibn Zimra (b. 1479), Garson (1514), Shamsolo (1508), ibn Verga (c. 1506), Abraham ben Solomon Torrutiel (c.1510–1525), Capsali (1523), and Joseph ha-Cohen (b. 1496).

Garson aptly described the predicament of the expellees in a sermon he delivered in Damascus in 1514:

> In our many sins, since the times of the expulsions . . . we were left few out of many, each one and one by himself, without a family, and without a relative, because some of them were killed at sea, and some on land, and some died of hunger, and some were eaten by the lions and wild animals, and some converted in our many sins, until we were left each one and one alone. And now we come to these kingdoms to save our souls, and the souls of our future sons, and it is obvious that this curse of loneliness will not turn away from us. And we see our sons dead, and are not reaching ripening, as have happened to me in my many sins, and to many like me . . . that is to say since the expulsion this curse of loneliness persists, because we see it does not turn away from us, since we see our sons dying, and we put them in coffins . . . and a man would not live to see them under the canopy.  

Twenty-two years after the expulsion and despite their best efforts, these expellees still perceived their predicament as being alone, few in number, and in fear of the discontinuance of their lineages and of the Jewish people. This predicament is perceived in terms reminiscent of those explored in the first and second chapters of this

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795 Garson, Ben porat yosef, 108.
part. We hear that only “few out of many” survived the ordeal of the expulsion, echoing the expellees’ concerns with their dwindling numbers as a result of a significant loss of family members.

The expellees perceived this phenomenon as a cause of distress on a personal level, as well as an existential threat to the Jewish people. In addition, Garson notes that the diasporic experience is marked by the “curse of loneliness” and that each of the expellees was “by himself” rather than a member of a community. This curse echoes the expellees’ concern with the absence of the old social contexts resulting in an extreme crisis of communal and personal identity.

Six years before Garson’s sermon, an expellee named Shamsolo, who had fled to Greece from Portugal, described the predicament of his fellow expellees in terms similar to Garson’s:

[They] are bewildered in a land not their own . . . among people whose language they did not understand . . . they have not yet recovered from what befell them during their exile . . . their fear of death and the terrors of the sea . . . men arrived without wives and women without husbands . . . they were beset by poverty and travail, want and famine and loneliness . . . and when they recalled their homes the blow was desperate. 796

The traumatized expellees that Shamsolo described, much like the lonely remnants of lost families in Garson’s description, were in the throes of an identity crisis. 797 However, the isolation of the expellees described by Shamsolo is even worse than the isolation exposed in Garson’s sermon. The absence of the familiar is amplified by the surrounding

797 My reading of the evidence through the lens of communal identity is not meant to downplay the real material deprivations. Rather, I wish to draw attention to the ways in which the material predicament affected the expellees’ identity formation.
unknown diasporic environment, a “land not their own” in which reside “people whose language they did not understand.”

To the loss of family members, family lines, and familiar surroundings, Shamsolo adds material deprivation such as hunger and poverty. The mental and material crises of the “bewildered” expellees drive their search for actual and symbolic “homes,” earthly abodes and a sense of familiarity, belonging, and safety.

Other chroniclers documented similar responses as the expellees’ social and familial structures fell apart. Consider, for example, the chronicle Vale of Tears (Emek ha-bacha) of Joseph ha-Cohen whose family originated in Cuenca, Spain, and settled in Avignon, France, after the expulsion. At the age of five, Joseph and his father left Avignon and settled in Genoa, Italy, where he was educated and practiced medicine. In his chronicle ha-Cohen tells of an older man who was “cast off on the islands of Provence” (France). The man was on the brink of starvation. In desperation, the man’s son went to a nearby town and sold his own (youngest) son for bread to feed his famished father.798

Ha-Cohen’s story did not represent an isolated incident. Ibn Verga tells a similar story in his chronicle Shevet yehuda. Ibn Verga (b. 1460) was a Sephardic physician and scholar who fled to Portugal in 1492 where he experienced forced conversion (1497). After the violence of 1506, ibn Verga moved to Italy and then finally settled in Adrianople (Turkey) where in 1550 he published Shevet yehuda, a history of the persecutions of the Jewish people before and during the expulsion from Spain. According

798 Joseph Ha-Cohen Vale of Tears, Krakow, 1895, 101. For an anonymous chronicler writing c. 1495 who had documented a similar story, see Raphael, Expulsion 1492 Chronicles, 132.
to ibn Verga, the expellees in Fez (Morocco) experienced a fate similar to their brethren in Provence; afflicted by famine, some sold their sons for food. However, “the king of Fez . . . after the famine had ended . . . decreed that whoever had acquired a Jewish child for bread had to return him to his parents.”

Ha-Cohen and ibn Verga demonstrate the extent to which the extreme conditions affected the expellees’ most fundamental social unit, the family. However, the social catastrophe extended well beyond the confines of the family. The chroniclers documented the painful lack of group solidarity that previously bonded the expellees.

Ha-Cohen describes the social meltdown paraphrasing a biblical quotation: “And if a woman asked her neighbor or the dweller in her house to borrow silver and gold objects and they did not give them to her, [she] would go [to the Christian authorities] and report them [for Judaizing].” Ha-Cohen’s reference here is to Exodus 3:22 and 11:2. Exodus 3:22 states: “Each woman shall borrow from her neighbor and the lodger in her house objects of silver and gold . . . and you shall put these on your sons and daughters, thus stripping the Egyptians.” Exodus 11:2 states: “Tell the people to borrow, each man from his neighbor and each woman from hers, objects of silver and gold.”

The biblical quotations reflect the Israelites’ preparation for their exodus from Egypt. The biblical journey is presented as a successful model for leaving diasporic oppression and journeying toward solidary communal life. This physical and metaphorical journey, ha-Cohen suggests, begins for the biblical expellees even before they take one step out of the Egyptian diaspora. It is when they come to rely on each

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799 Solomon ibn Verga, Shevet yehuda (Leipzig, 1864), 91.
800 Ha-Cohen, Vale of Tears, 100.
other and share in their possession and deprivation that they begin their metamorphosis into a functioning community, a people. In this context the failure of the Iberian expellees is clear. They lack solidarity, are motivated by greed, and plot the breakdown of their community rather than forging it into a solidary unit.

A similar notion is found in Shevet yehuda where ibn Verga tells the story of a group of expellees that disembarked from a boat on the coast of North Africa “where there was no settlement.” The exhausted and famished expellees started marching with the hope of finding a settlement. While marching in the wilderness, one of the women collapsed and died. The woman’s husband and two sons continued marching. Soon after the woman’s death, the husband was forced to bury his sons who also had collapsed and died. Noticing the tragedies that befell the expellee, the rest of the group, “fearing for their lives, [moved on and] did not wait [for the man to bury his sons] as each one was occupied with his own distress, not noticing or feeling sorry for the distress of his fellow.”

Ha-Cohen and the chronicler Torrutiel provide further evidence for the breakdown of group solidarity among the expellees. Torrutiel was approximately ten years old at the time of his arrival in Fez after the expulsion from Spain. In 1510 he began writing an appendix to Sefer ha-kabbalah, the historical work of the Iberian astronomer, physician, and historian Abraham ibn Daud (d. 1180). Torrutiel continued ibn Daud’s account of the history of Iberian Jewry from the death of ibn Daud to the year 1525. This appendix is comprised of three parts. The third part includes an account of the

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801 Ibn Verga, Shevet yehuda, 90.
expulsion and of the fortunes of the expellees in Fez to which young Avraham was an 
eye-witness.

Torrutiel demonstrates the disintegration of social boundaries, reporting that:

“The survivors reached Fez, and all were gathered there, old and young, the wise and the simple.” 802 In his Vale of Tears, ha-Cohen supplies further evidence for the breakdown of 

social structures where he tells of men who “fought with each other, young and old, 
despicable and esteemed.” 803

In their reports ha-Cohen and Torrutiel do more than simply note the lack of 
group solidarity or principals of social organization; the chroniclers detail the particulars 
of this process. The expulsion generated helplessness and aggression. The expellees’ 
desperation overwhelmed old social taboos that regulated the relationship between 
different social classes and age groups. The community failed to support its members 
now hurled into a Hobbesian state of nature. With the failure of the established Iberian 
social organization, the expellees came to disregard the principals that sustained long-
lasting social structures and institutions as well as the religious and lay elite that managed 
them.

Another story from ibn Verga’s Shevet yehuda further exemplifies the social 
chaos experienced by the expellees but describes one possible strategy for coping with 
this unfortunate predicament. Ibn Verga, therefore, leads us from the expellees’ 
predicament to their coping strategies and practical solutions.

In Shevet yehuda, ibn Verga tells of a group of expellees that arrived in the North

802 Abraham ben Solomon Torrutiel, Sefer ha-kabbalah, in Raphael, Expulsion 1492 Chronicles, 173.
803 Ha-Cohen, Vale of Tears, 100.
African kingdom of Fez and settled in the port town of Salé. The group included two hundred single women that were “either agunot [i.e., women whose husbands were either unable or unwilling to divorce them] or [women] requiring a levir . . . [i.e., widows of childless men].”

Remarriage, the traditional means for the reintroduction of single women into the Sephardic social fabric, could not bring a happy end to this unfortunate situation.

This was because remarriage required first an untying of the women’s ties to their husbands, dead or alive, by means of divorce or yibbum. These means required certainty with regard to the fate of the husband or the potential levir. Such certainty remained a desideratum in the tumultuous time following the expulsion. Even if a levir or a separated husband was found, traveling was expensive (especially so for the impoverished expellees) and risky (especially for those who survived the horrors of the expulsion and usually lacked the support of family or social networks). In addition, many of the husbands or levirs were conversos. Therefore, even if one was able to locate and contact the person, there was the thorny matter of divorcing a man or marrying a levir who had converted to Christianity.

The group in Fez overcame the impediments to reintegrating so many single women by placing them in an alternative and acceptable social context. The group housed the women in a “big house . . . where they engaged in handicraft and from the profit they

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804 Ibn Verga, Shevet yehuda, 110.
only bought bread and water, and all the rest they gave to the [Torah] scholars.”

This “big house” seems to have been a Jewish monastery of sorts where labora of single women sustained the ora of rabbinic scholars. However, these means could not have served as a sustainable and complete solution for the expellees’ predicament. Congregating the unwed women solved a particular and immediate problem by reintroducing them into the expellees’ social fabric and, in addition, this measure sustained the community’s theological and cultural production by supporting Torah scholars. However, it did not address the expellees’ concern with familial and communal survival, as well as their yearning to establish family lines and ensure the continuous existence of the Jewish people.

Perhaps in response to the desperation of the agunot, the expellees in Fez sought to minimize the potential for a married woman to turn into an aguna. One way to achieve this goal was to force a dying childless husband to divorce his wife, thus preventing the levirate bond from forming. Westreich examined a communal regulation of 1494 from Fez. Article 14 of this regulation stipulates the following: “And one who appears to be dangerously ill must grant a proper get to his wife if asked to do so in order that she may not remain in need of a levirate marriage [i.e., become an aguna].” Westreich found that no such legal tradition or similar means appears in Iberian regulations before the expulsion. Therefore, the regulation must be understood as a response of the expellees to their unique diasporic predicament. The expellees sought to remove the theological

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806 Ibn Verga, Shevet yehuda, 110.
obstacles standing between an *aguna* and her reintegration into the Sephardic social fabric.

Indeed, as the reports by Garson and Shamsolo show, it seems that the popular choice among the expellees was to reconstitute an orderly social context and a viable community through marriage and procreation. However, to do so, the expellees had to break from past Iberian customs of marriage and procreation and adopt new ones that were more appropriate to their perceived and objective diasporic conditions. This ad hoc process gave birth to a radically novel and egalitarian social structure and imagination that was manifested in kabbalistic discourses.

Garson’s sermon clearly shows that the expellees sought to reconstitute a sense of communal identity through marriage and procreation. Above we saw that Garson identified the predicament of the expellees as “[a] curse of loneliness.” However, we also learn from Garson’s sermon that the expellees’ crisis was not a result of loneliness per se, a simple lack of social context, but rather the state of being “without a family.”

Yet, what is a family in this context? Is it an inheritor’s generational line of transmission of goods, or perhaps a member of the elite’s proof of a prestigious pedigree? Garson’s portrayal of the expellees’ response to this curse charts a path toward an answer. According to Garson, the expellees addressed what they perceived as an existential threat by moving to “these kingdoms [i.e., to the Ottoman Empire]” where they hoped to save their “souls, and the souls of our future sons” and to see their offspring “under a canopy.” The goal then was to ensure a continuous line of married sons and heads of families. It is clear that the family was seen as an embodied generational chain requiring marriage and procreation.
Garson’s sermon shows that the expellees saw a way to reclaim their identity in the renewal of the continuity of their lineage through marriage and procreation. Shamsolo’s evidence, however, suggests that to do so they had to abandon past customs and break old social taboos. Shamsolo describes the expellees’ response to their predicament immediately after his description of the predicament itself:

[But] as each one found himself alone he sought a helpmate. They obtained what they needed from whatever they chose . . . they courted without respect to pedigree and standing of one another in their families and town. . . . Each went to his tent, young and old, and both young and virgin returned to their tents. 808

The expellees sought stability through marriage and procreation. However, forming new families necessitated abandoning restrictive taboos that limited potential spouses to a certain social class, region, or age group. This was an ad hoc process that rationalized necessity-based modifications to the expellees’ marriage practices. The expellees achieved their goal by replacing a medieval, local, and hierarchical communal structure with a level, egalitarian model. The evidence shows that the expellees responded to their diasporic predicament by changing their actual social structure in addition, or in parallel, to the social imagination animating the theological production of contemporary kabbalists.

Torrutiel supplies additional evidence for the expellees’ radical alteration of their social structure in response to the extreme diasporic circumstances. Torrutiel describes the fate of the two thousand Jewish children who were sent to São Tome, a barren island off the coast of modern Gabon around 1500. 809 He writes that “there, most of them died, and the others married among themselves, brother and sister, in order to populate the

809 For more on the expulsion of Jewish children to the island of São Tome see n.626 above.
area.” A similar view of the São Tome episode appears in *Shevet yehuda* where ibn Verga writes that: “some of those youth died on the boats . . . and some were eaten by crocodiles after landing on the island. . . . Over the course of time brothers married sisters, some knowingly and some unknowingly, and one of them went back to his country [Iberia] and married his mother.” Much like Shamsol’s expellees, the young adults expelled to São Tome chose to abandon old social taboos in order to rebuild their community. The expellees preferred to establish new lineages through procreation at the expense of established social structures and institutions.

It may be argued that I incorrectly assign agency to the expellees because they could be viewed as passive victims of extreme circumstances and too weak to affect their social context. However, the expellees did not perceive their predicament that way. Even if they did not possess significant means to generate an alternative social organization, the expellees did master the imagination and the ability to reconstruct family lines. The evidence above demonstrates that the expellees perceived themselves as actors that could overcome historical circumstances through marriage and procreation. This analysis is strengthened by evidence related to the São Tome episode. Although ibn Verga exculpates some of the expellees for committing incest “unknowingly,” he also reports that others did so “knowingly.” Torrutiel suggests the expellees knew what they were doing as he clearly states their purpose was “to populate the area.” Ibn Verga went even further to show the extreme to which the old taboos were abandoned and that incest

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became endemic among those expellees. He reports that one of the expellees made it back to Iberia from the social chaos of São Tome only to marry his own mother.

The chroniclers demonstrate that the expellees responded to an existential threat by forming new families in spite of social taboos that were related to social hierarchy, ethnic identity, or family relations. The breakdown of social order involved this world and the next one, affecting the living, the unborn (as the levirate discourse shows), and the dead. The effect on the dead is apparent in Capsali’s chronicle Seder eliyahu zuta.

In chapter 71 of his chronicle, Capsali tells of a group of expellees who had arrived in Naples. These expellees were hungry, impoverished, and suffered from a disease that ultimately killed many of them. Lacking means, time, or contacts to properly inter their relatives, the expellees haphazardly buried their dead. The result was that “all those who died were buried unceremoniously, regardless of who they were.” Indeed, it may be argued that it is not uncommon to avoid elaborate burial rites during a plague. However, it is significant that out of the many details one could choose to describe such horrific experiences, the chronicler chose to emphasize the expellees’ disregard of social status. Pedigree was less of a concern with regard to death as well as to marriage and procreation; social standing lost its appeal for the living as well as the dead. In the new diasporic reality, long-standing rites of passage meant very little.812

In this dissertation I examine the interconnection between social context and communal identity as manifested in the interpretation of levirate marriage. Previous chapters revealed the social imagination underlying the yibbum discourse, the social context that couched it, and the responses of the expellees to the diasporic predicament.

812 Capsali, Seder eliyahu zuta, Chapter 71. In Raphael, Expulsion 1492 Chronicles, 19.
These conditions and responses consciously shaped a new social context parallel and similar to the egalitarian social imagination exposed in the *yibbum* discourse. However, can we show that the sages responsible for the religious discourse had their brethren’s social context in mind? Above I suggested that the shared chronological and geographical boundaries of the expellees’ social context and imagination constitute evidence for such a relationship. In addition, I argued that the rabbis’ decision to disseminate kabbalistic theology as a strategy to regain a leadership position is additional evidence for a connection between social context and kabbalistic production. However, the following account by ibn Zimra moves us even closer toward a proof that the sages who had authored the theological discourse saw a direct link between the social context, the masses’ religious behavior, and consequently their status as communal leaders.

In a responsum concerning the potential split of a certain community, ibn Zimra clearly articulates what he sees as a connection between the diasporic realia and the expellees’ religious and moral behavior. The question presented to ibn Zimra is under what circumstances is such division permissible. Ibn Zimra’s answer is telling: “With the breaking away of groups from their fellow townsfolk and their common language, there is a corresponding breaking up of devout hearts; nor are their prayers of praise to God united.”

This is a telling observation by ibn Zimra concerning the expellees’ social context and religiosity and the way these affected each other. The sociocultural breakdown caused by the expulsion from Spain, the “breaking away of groups from their fellow townsfolk and their common language” caused religious laxity, a “breaking up of devout

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hearts.” Religious laxity diminished the utility of the Jewish people’s interaction with the divine as those who retained some measure of piety were not “united” in their “prayers of praise to God.” Here ibn Zimra notes a direct connection between what he perceives as a disrupted social context, the expellees’ religious laxity, and their interaction with the divine.

Ibn Zimra’s solution to religious laxity tells us even more about the expellees’ broken social context. “But if they are of one city of origin and one language then will peace dwell among them, for each one will feel at home and know his status. . . . We should not mix up the communities and set up new classifications.”

Sociocultural harmony and a sense of belonging (as “each one will feel at home”) will be ensured as community members will share “one city of origin and one language.” A proper organization, according to ibn Zimra, is based on ethnic and familial affinity and is necessary for the Jewish people to properly function as a religious unit.

In the social organization suggested by ibn Zimra, the rabbi holds a key function. The rabbi’s necessity for the reunification program is apparent in the following quotation. Here ibn Zimra explains how a harmonious community improves the Jewish people’s connection with the divine. The relevant discussion appears at the beginning of ibn Zimra’s answer where he unpacks the effect of proper social organization and of the rabbi on the prayer process: “when a man looks at his loved ones, or relatives, or rabbi, or whomever he is satisfied with . . . [such a man will have] complete devotion [kavana] and [he] shall have excessive spirit from above.”

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814 Quoted in Goldman, *Life and Times of ibn Zimra*, 85–86.
necessary for an efficient relationship between God and his people. A harmonious organic society increases the efficacy of the Jewish people’s prayers and the flow of divine affluence to the world. The rabbi’s role in this process is critical as he is perceived as one of the pillars of the effective social organization.

In the same paragraph quoted above, ibn Zimra elaborates on the particular function performed by the rabbi in the mechanics of prayer:

[W]hen a [praying] man aims at his rabbi [i.e., prays with devotion], his [i.e., the praying man’s] soul will connect to his [i.e., the rabbi’s] soul, and the affluence [shefa] that is on him [i.e., on the rabbi] will be on him [i.e., on the praying man], and he shall have a nefesh yetera [lit., an extra soul], and they [kabbalists] call it the secret of ibbur [impregnation].

The religious act is not the responsibility of an individual believer but rather of solidary communities. The rabbi joins the family or community (“relatives” or “loved ones”) as an agent enhancing communal devotion and, consequently, the efficacy of the religious act. It is true that Ibn Zimra’s agenda asks for a re-compartmentalization of the expellees’ chaotic social organization. However, the guiding principal in this re-compartmentalization effort is ethnic homogeneity rather than social stratification. Ibn Zimra highlights the organic quality of the ideal community. Such emphasis stands in contrast to the rationalization of oligarchic rule characteristic of the rabbis of the second half of the sixteenth century. These rabbis emphasized the necessity of social hierarchy and the invaluable contribution of the lay elite to social stability and religious devotion.

Ibn Zimra’s analysis of the religious crisis and the possible solution clearly displays the social chaos experienced by the expellees during the first decades after the expulsion. In addition, ibn Zimra demonstrates the particular predicament of the rabbinic

816 Ibid.
elite. It is important to remember that ibn Zimra is not a neutral observer but directly invested in the expellees’ religious behavior. Ibn Zimra understood that his was a position of a community leader and that his authority depended on the masses’ “proper” social organization and religiosity. It is therefore no wonder that the rabbi’s ideal community is comprised of clearly defined social units whose interaction with the divine is best mediated by a rabbi. In other words, the “breaking up of devout hearts” and old social structures and institutions is also the breaking down of rabbinic authority.

The evidence above clearly demonstrates the agency of the expellees in the aftermath of 1492. This agency is apparent both in their choice to adopt a new and more suitable social structure and imagination, as well as in the logic of the latter. First, the choice to develop a new social structure and complementary social imagination was the initiative of the lay expellees rather than the result of external influence by kabbala sages or the dominant Ottoman host culture. Second, the egalitarian nature of the nascent society and social imagination shows that the lay expellees chose to address their predicament rather than to turn their backs on the harsh reality and to yearn for the end of time and the unfolding of a messianic age. In this context the proliferation of kabbalistic production in the aftermath of the expulsion must be understood as an active attempt to address life’s difficult realities.

The resultant egalitarian social structure and imagination, however, was not long lasting and disappeared by the middle of the sixteenth century. The next section examines the developments that brought this early formative period to an end.
Social Context and Imagination in the Second Half of the Sixteenth Century

The Ottoman Sephardic social structure and imagination established in the aftermath of the expulsion changed dramatically in the second half of the sixteenth century. This period witnessed a polarized social hierarchy and a decline in communal solidarity. In addition, it witnessed a dramatic change in the nature of the *kahalim*, the building blocks of the social structure. From an ethnic group, the *kahal* turned into a unit that reflected the socioeconomic status of its members and served the interests of the lay oligarchy. In this period the lay oligarchy overpowered the rabbinic elite. Consequently, in time the social imagination that was reflected in rabbinic discourses supported a hierarchical social structure directed by their benefactors in the lay oligarchy.

External and internal factors drove these developments. Externally, the immigration of a considerable number of propertied Portuguese conversos dramatically changed the Ottoman Sephardic social fabric. In addition, the Ottoman authorities increased their intervention in the affairs of the Jewish communities as the Empire experienced a worsening monetary crisis and a rising intolerance toward minorities.

Internally, the recuperated Ottoman Sephardic elite joined the incoming conversos to create a thin layer of lay oligarchy that led the community in a centralizing and polarizing fashion. Consequently, socioeconomic status replaced ethnic identity as the dominant organizing principle of a socially polarized, centralized, and hierarchical community. The rabbinic elite fell under the control of the lay elite and developed discourses that reflected the new social order.

This process continued well into the seventeenth century, further polarizing the community and exacerbating the condition of the lower classes. In the second half of the
seventeenth century, this process reached its peak with an extreme social crisis that found its expression in the Sabbatian movement. Dominating the language of this crisis—its discourses—was the egalitarian social imagination produced by the expellees in the aftermath of the expulsion and manifested in their kabbalistic discourses.\textsuperscript{817}

**New Social Structure and Imagination**

Large numbers of Portuguese conversos reached the Ottoman Empire between 1536 and 1560.\textsuperscript{818} These Sephardim had fled to Portugal in 1492 where they then suffered the forced mass conversion of 1497 and the riots of 1506. In 1536 these veteran crypto-Jews encountered a newly founded Portuguese national inquisition that persecuted them on racial as well as religious grounds.\textsuperscript{819} Leaving Portugal, therefore, was the only choice for many that were unable to escape their Jewish roots.

The converso immigrants were significantly better connected, familiar, and comfortable with the new and old Christian worlds than the existing Ottoman Sephardic community. In addition, and unlike the expellees of 1492, these propertied and skilled merchants, bankers, and professionals managed to leave their Iberian homes with a significant portion of their funds and material possessions.\textsuperscript{820} The result was the establishment of what Rozen called a “new class of Jews with great fortunes, partly

\textsuperscript{817} This process is directly related to and in tune with the larger contemporary sociopolitical crisis experienced by the Ottoman Empire and the Christian West. Geoffrey Parker’s *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) not only paints this picture clearly but also identifies Sabbatianism as a significant manifestation of the phenomenon in its survey of the crisis in the Ottoman Empire.

\textsuperscript{818} Rozen, “Individual and Community,” 146, 153.

\textsuperscript{819} On the socioeconomic status and mentality of the converso immigrants, see Minna Rozen, “Collective Memories and Group Boundaries: The Judeo-Spanish Diaspora between the Lands of Christendom and the World of Islam,” in *Michael*, 14 (Tel Aviv: Diaspora Research Institute, 1997): 35–52.

\textsuperscript{820} E.g., see Rozen, *Jewish Community in Istanbul*, ch. 5.
brought from Europe and partly acquired in Istanbul.”

The property, professional knowledge, and global contacts of the Portuguese conversos enabled them to form a propertied Ottoman Sephardic lay oligarchy. This oligarchy, together with the elite that grew out of the ranks of the veteran expellees, led the communities.

In the second half of the sixteenth century, therefore, Ottoman Jewry became an extremely polarized society, comprised of a thin layer of propertied elite and a majority that lived constantly on the cusp of pauperization. A new type of kahal comprised the building block of the emerging new Sephardic social structure. The new kahalim were more numerous than previously, allowed the affluent members greater ease in choosing their kahal membership, and reflected their members’ socioeconomic status rather than their ethnic identity. These phenomena weakened the ethno-cultural homogeneity that had tied the kahal members since the aftermath of the expulsion. Consequently, social status replaced ethnicity as the element that bound together the members of both the kahal and the kehillah.

An important element that drove the change in communal organization and identity was the gathering of rich Sephardim from different kahalim in the newly established kahalim with their characteristic socioeconomic profiles. These men wished to live in better neighborhoods and decrease their tax burden by cutting communal ties with poor members of their original kahalim. A related development was the association of beinonim (middle-class tax payers) in their own kahalim. As the growing influence of the propertied classes manifested in increased indirect taxes, the beinonim

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821 Rozen, Jewish Community in Istanbul, 61.
did not see any point in financing both the elite and the poor members of their kahal. The result was a constellation of kahalim comprised of rich or middle-class members and a highly polarized third kind of kahal comprised of rich and poor and lacking the beinonim.

The new kahalim, in addition to giving structural expression to a hierarchical and polarized society, were a source of authority and legitimacy for the lay oligarchy. First, these new kahalim served to regulate the tax payments of the lower classes. This authority gave the elite the means to directly affect the financial well-being of the lower classes. In addition, it enabled the elite to brand themselves as an effective middleman between the Ottoman authorities and the Jewish community. This, in turn, gave the elite the legitimacy to lead, both from their Ottoman superiors and from their lower class “inferiors.” Second, the new social organization enabled the elite to effectively control the rabbinic establishment by managing their appointment through the establishment of the kahalim. By doing so, the lay oligarchy ensured the exclusivity of its leadership as it eliminated potential rabbinic competition or challenges to the elite’s legitimacy.

In fact, some affluent families went further than simply congregating in particular kahalim and founded brand new kahalim with their own synagogues, welfare confraternities, educational organizations, and religious authorities. In this way the lay oligarchy assumed communal leadership and became the dominant middle men with the Ottoman authorities.

Together with the subduing of the rabbinic establishment, these developments

824 Ibid., 129.
825 Ibid., 121–23.
created a semblance of homogeneity among the hierarchy of the powerful agents that connected the Ottoman authorities and Jewish tax payers. However, we should not mistake this uniformity among the ranks of the elite as representative of a homogenous Ottoman Jewry. The new social structure removed from the public sphere the lower classes and the rabbinic voices that were critical of the lay oligarchy.

However, this development did not signify the eradication of criticism and the dawn of homogeneity. The new residences of the critics were at the bottom of the social barrel and in esoteric kabbalistic circles. The critics and the discourses that conveyed their social imagination did not disappear. Rather, they were marginalized and placed at the fringes of Ottoman Jewry until the middle of the seventeenth century when they erupted in the Sabbatian movement.

The period therefore witnessed a transferal of a varied social stratification from the local sphere of the kahalim to the supra-communal sphere of the kehillah. In addition, it witnessed a greater responsibility of the kehillah for coordinating tax payments with the Ottoman authorities. As a result there came to be a greater importance of, and emphasis on, central organization at the expense of the local kahalim.

This structural trend resulted in an increased devotion of the individual to the supra-communal kehillah. Some argue that a greater religious and cultural homogeneity among Ottoman Jewry caused this development. By the end of the sixteenth century, so the argument goes, the differences between the Sephardic ethnic groups, by then the most dominant among Ottoman Jewry, faded away. They came to form an Ottoman Sephardic body that was powerful enough to gradually assimilate other ethnic groups. Scholars identify two factors that drove the homogenous trend in addition to the growing influence
of the Sephardim: (1) the codification of Jewish law by Joseph Caro established a common religious and legal basis, and (2) generations of Ottoman Jews, for whom the Iberian place of origin or the ethnicity of one’s ancestors was of minor importance, emerged.\footnote{Shmuelevitz, \textit{Jews of the Ottoman Empire}, 14–15. Rozen, “Individual and Community.”}

There is no doubt that these developments encouraged the emergence of a hierarchical and centralized social structure by blurring the ethnic and horizontal lines that defined the early \textit{kahalim}. However, it does not explain the nature of the emerging new social structure. My argument here is that it was the new communal, socioeconomic make-up (as manifested in the changes to the traditional \textit{kahalim} and the subduing of the rabbinic establishment mentioned above) and the intervention of the Ottoman authorities (mentioned at the end of this section) that shaped a new social structure that chose social status rather than ethnicity as its organizational principal.

Thus, the heterogeneous, horizontal, and ethnic-based network of \textit{kahalim} of the expulsion generation turned into a hierarchical, vertical, and socially polarized one. The \textit{kahalim} turned from ethnic to socioeconomic communities manifesting and serving a hierarchical society and its lay oligarchy. This trend manifested in the ethos of the \textit{kahalim} as well as in their structure and purpose. Rozen, for example, shows that in the second half of the sixteenth century, the leadership of the \textit{kahalim} used different means to convince a member, who was contemplating leaving, to stay with his original \textit{kahal}. Whereas earlier attempts at persuasion emphasized shared history and culture, later attempts stressed the economic benefits the tax policy of the \textit{kahal} offered to its
members. Material gain, therefore, replaced paternal heritage, cultural tradition, and ethnic affiliation as the logic of kahal membership.

Declining communal solidarity accompanied the emergence of new kahalim and communal organizations. Scholars identified several manifestations of this phenomenon. I already noted above that the rationale guiding kahal membership had changed from ethno-cultural to socioeconomic and that individuals moved from one kahal to another with greater ease than ever before.

Another manifestation of this phenomenon was an increasing number of Ottoman Jews who chose to turn to the Ottoman authorities for legal aid. This trend also is apparent in changes in the way the kahalim treated zarim (foreigners, i.e., non-members of the kahal).828 The matter of foreigners became more regulated in a period that witnessed increasing inter-kahal mobility and a rising number of impoverished Jews seeking aid outside of their original kahal (and occasionally outside of the Jewish community). The kahalim sought to prevent the integration of individuals seeking refuge.

The regulations achieved their purpose by keeping impoverished, uprooted individuals on financial life support and finally driving them away from the kahal. Toughening the requirements for accepting new members was another strategy for rejecting foreigners seeking to join a kahal. In fact, it was often the case that membership in a kahal became hereditary and, therefore, by definition closed to the public.

Previously, I mentioned that, in fact, inter-kahal mobility increased during this period, a fact that is not compatible with the demanding regulations for the acceptance of incoming foreigners. However, the willingness to admit new members was greater in the

case of rich applicants. The greater mobility of elite members and the infrequent admission of poor members were two sides of the same coin.

The logic binding these seemingly contradictory phenomena was meant to prevent a breach in the socioeconomic lines that came to define the Ottoman Sephardic society. This rationale was very different from its equivalent that existed in the aftermath of the expulsion. The expellees themselves displayed the same socioeconomic profile that the later communal regulations sought to exclude, namely, that of uprooted and impoverished individuals. However, the expellees were able to construct an egalitarian community and social imagination because at that time there was no dominant, indigenous Ottoman Jewish community to enforce exclusionary regulations in the aftermath of the expulsion. The Ottoman Jewish society of the late sixteenth century, however, was comprised of closed kahalim with clear, polarizing socioeconomic agendas and low levels of solidarity and social mobility.

Scholars show that this new sense of communal identity emphasized the place of the individual in a larger, amorphous communal organization rather than in the smaller kahal. This development of a larger Ottoman supra-communal scale, however, was not a natural consequence of the sociocultural cohesion that was characteristic of the early, post-expulsion kahalim. Rather, this process removed such ethnic identity and replaced it with a hierarchical yet amorphous one, lacking what Rozen considered a “national”

829 According to Rozen in “Individual and Community,” 166: “Cultural distinctions—especially in traditional forms of prayer and language—and common historical memory, all of which led to the formation of separate kehalim in Salonica, lost much of their importance during the first half of the sixteenth century. In the 1560s, the goals of these associations had merged and become indistinguishable from one another. The kehalim continued to exist because that is what such associations normally do, regardless of the goals that brought about their existence in the first place. They proliferated because, among other reasons, their members had no ideological incentive to support, or remain within, an existing kahal.”
quality, that is, a sense of belonging and close association with the group that goes beyond immediate material interests. This was a polarized society and a weakened community rather than one defined by a quasi-national attachment to a nation.⁸³⁰

Rozen points toward two particular phenomena that demonstrate this emerging commitment to the kehilla at the expense of the kahalim. First, we hear of an interpretation of the custom according to which one must make the groom happy on his wedding day.⁸³¹ Rozen found that whereas early post-expulsion interpretations of this custom emphasized the survival of the Jewish people, later sixteenth-century interpretations revolved around the survival of the groom’s particular line:

[P]reachers who had been born in the Ottoman lands also sermonized on why marriage . . . should be celebrated . . . at the same time their rationalizations regarding the commandment to make the groom happy no longer mentioned the national theme. What remained was the idea that marriage was meant for reproduction and continuation of the line.⁸³²

Therefore, although a continuous lineage remained extremely important, its significance changed. It came to represent a continuous, atomistic family line rather than communal survival.

The attitude toward conversos is the second phenomenon Rozen points toward as an indicator of a hierarchical and individual sense of communal identity.⁸³³ Rozen identifies a willingness among the rabbis of the expulsion generation to consider the conversos as essentially Jewish in spite of their conversion.

Rozen argues that the reason for the lenient approach of the rabbis was twofold. First, many expellees were single and anxiously sought to build new family lines.

⁸³⁰ Rozen, Jewish Community in Istanbul, 108.
⁸³¹ Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot, 6b.
⁸³² Rozen, Jewish Community in Istanbul, 108.
⁸³³ Rozen “Collective Memories and Group Boundaries,” 42–44.
Therefore, divorce, marriage, levirate marriage, or levirate divorce involving conversos was a common occurrence that required a creative and flexible interpretation of Jewish law. Rozen argues that, in addition to the practical need, a sense of shared fate, history, and ethnicity guided the lenient rabbis for whom the conversos were not an abstract concept but real people with names, faces, and shared history.

Later in the century, however, Rozen finds little willingness among the expellees’ second generation to readmit the conversos to their fold. The reason for this development, Rozen argues, is that with the passage of time, the emotional connection with those left behind diminished significantly. The Ottoman Sephardic community of the mid-sixteenth century therefore metamorphosed from a collection of uprooted, fragmented remains of various Iberian communities to a new and uniquely Ottoman community. Ethnic affiliations that formed the basis for the clear division into Sephardic *kahalim* were replaced with an amorphous, hierarchical, and centralized Ottoman Jewish community.

The second half of the sixteenth century introduced new external pressures in addition to the internal developments described above. During this period the Ottoman Empire experienced a severe revenue crisis to which it responded with a gradual increase in taxes. In addition to the increased tax burden, the Jewish community and the general Ottoman population suffered a prolonged period of economic stagnation and then decline. In addition to, or perhaps as a result of, the financial crisis, minority communities—and the Jews were the most vulnerable of them—became the target of an increasingly violent

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834 Ibid., 45–48.
protest by the Muslim majority. The lack of funds and the general unrest negatively affected the ability of the Ottoman Sephardim to take advantage of the few commercial opportunities still available to them.

In addition to passive, external Ottoman interventions, the second half of the sixteenth century saw the direct intervention of the Ottoman authorities in the affairs of the Jewish communities. Hacker, for example, found that in the second half of the sixteenth century, the Ottoman authorities were involved in the activities and decisions of the rabbinic courts as well as the tax management of the Jewish communities more often than in the first half of the century. The growing needs of the Ottoman authorities required stable, recognizable, unified, effective, and continuous Jewish leadership and a centralized communal organization. Therefore, this direct external intervention accelerated the trends toward centralization and polarization in the Ottoman Jewish community.

The New Social Context in Historiographical Perspective

How do the developments presented above shed light on the significance of the second half of the sixteenth century vis-à-vis the history of Ottoman Sephardic society and social imagination? In the historiographical survey presented in Chapter 3, I introduced a dominant trend in scholarship that considers the second half of the century as a time of recuperation or a return to the preexilic social context.

In Chapter 9, I mention Ben Sasson’s assertion that the courtier elite reassumed its leadership position during this period. Ben Sasson’s thesis is echoed in Hacker’s

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argument that pedigree “quickly” regained its importance after an initial fall from grace in the aftermath of the expulsion:

[Life quickly returned to normal and the famous Spanish and Portuguese families . . . took over the leadership in various communities. . . . Their descendants . . . pointed] towards their origin as the central factor in their appointments [to leadership positions]. . . . Only at the turn of the 17th [sic] century did significant changes take place in the composition of the leading families.  

The sources that support Hacker’s assertion originate from the second half of the sixteenth century. It is therefore safe to assume that this was the pivotal time when the recuperation of pedigree occurred.

The question is, of course, whether a complete return to the pre-expulsion, “normal” social context ended the alleged abnormal period that followed 1492? Did this period have no effects whatsoever? Was this period simply a result of historical developments or, rather, did the period drive the developments? To answer these questions we must state the obvious, that a potent comparison requires a consistent comparative category. In other words, similarities between the preexilic social structure and that of the late sixteenth century do not necessarily imply a return to a preexilic social structure unless the similarities are the essential qualities of the periods. Indeed, I argue that the first half of the century left deep and long lasting traditions, discourses, and a collective memory, rendering impossible a reconstitution of an Iberian Sephardic preexilic social structure.

It is useful to read the words of the expellees themselves if we are to discern the essence of their social structure and imagination. As scholars have noted, the writers of

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837 See also Rozen, *Jewish Community in Istanbul*, 307: “[T]his value, which was abandoned in the first decades after the expulsion, was enthusiastically readopted when the second generation of expellees reached the age of marriage.”
the expulsion generation portrayed the Ottoman Sephardic community as newly founded rather than as a traditional Iberian community in crisis. Their mission was to create something new rather than patch the broken pieces of the old.

The expellees clearly thought of themselves as a unique and organic group. Consider, for example, the following quotation from a sermon Garson gave in 1516: “We are all one body . . . and as the entire body feels a beating of one member, so do all the Jews feel when something is done to one Jew. This is why [the Torah] said ‘not to ignore your own kin’ [Isaiah 58:7].” Garson identifies the essence of this new organic group in a eulogy given in 1515 when he refers to the expellees as “we the expelled Jews,” identifying the essential quality of the group as having been expelled rather than as Iberian, Ottoman, elite, or lower class. It may be argued that Garson was simply stating the obvious as his audience was, after all, comprised of expellees. However, Garson’s statement was more than a simple description of an objective condition. Being an expellee meant to become anew, to be (re)molded or reshaped, to change fundamentally. And it was the expulsion from Spain that unified the community, defined its shared experience, and molded a new and organic community.

This sentiment is apparent in the quotations above and is reinforced by the following quotation taken form a eulogy Garson gave in 1506: “we [the Sephardic expellees] assembled and united together by the expulsion.” The Ottoman Sephardic community, therefore, was perceived by its writers as newly established, organic, and fashioned by the shared experience of the expulsion and the diasporic predicament that

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838 Garson, Ben porat yosef, 220b.
839 Ibid.
840 Ibid., 68a.
followed. The evidence above is compatible with recent scholarship that suggests that only after the expulsion from Spain did the expellees develop a Sephardic, rather than an Iberian, local identity. If this is the case, then a more centralized and hierarchical version of the nascent Sephardic identity does not constitute a return to a preexilic, medieval Iberian, local social context.

Another significant difference from the preexilic Iberian context is the low social and political status of the rabbinic elite and its complete dependency on the lay elite in the second half of the sixteenth century. This was a far cry from the constant preexilic struggles over communal leadership between the lay and rabbinic elite. As I show in Chapter 8 above, the fifteenth century to the middle of the sixteenth century was a period of struggle between the rabbinic and lay leadership. Therefore, the fact that in the second half of the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Sephardic society assumed a hegemonic hierarchical structure cannot constitute a return to the Iberian social context.

This assertion is reinforced by the period’s social imagination conveyed in rabbinic discourses. This social imagination changed in accordance with the changing social structure and communal organization. As we saw above, the rabbis of the expulsion generation constructed an egalitarian social imagination. However, as they came to depend on the elite families for sustenance, social standing, and any significant measure of influence on communal affairs, the rabbis’ interpretation of religious texts and social realities changed to accommodate the interests of their benefactors. As scholars

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841 For more on the development of a Sephardic, rather than an Iberian, local identity only after the expulsion from Spain, see Ray, “New Approaches,” 10–31. Ray and others claim that Iberian Jews increasingly adopted the rabbinic category of “Sephardi” as a central marker of communal identity only after 1492. Ray, “Jewish Community in Medieval Iberia,” 206.
show, the majority of these rabbis produced discourses that supported the elite’s claim of leadership.\(^{843}\)

One such discourse perceived the elite and the masses as if they were of a different essence. The Sephardic rabbi Samuel de Medina (Rashdam, 1505–89) of Salonika, for example, wrote the following in one of his responsa: “[F]ive or ten important men are a thousand times better [than members of the lower classes], whether in their wisdom or riches, as riches are close to wisdom.”\(^{844}\)

The elite’s superiority, it seems, was not limited to their wealth but rather was defined by their intellectual contribution as well. The same notion is apparent in the following quotation from another of Rashdam’s responsa: “[S]ome of the poor are ungrateful and do not know their value. Not only do they not pay [i.e., taxes] . . . but they also put themselves in places where they are not welcome and wish to harm and speak arrogantly to the rich.”\(^{845}\)

The quotation concluding the previous paragraph reveals several important qualities of the rabbis’ social imagination in addition to their opinion regarding the essential differences between the elite and the lower classes. First, the quotation confirms that the most significant basis for social status and membership in the ranks of the elite was the payment of tax, that is, financial means rather than intellectual capabilities, religious knowledge, or a prestigious family line.

The same notion is apparent in a sermon by the Salonika rabbi Moshe Almosnino

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\(^{845}\) Ibid., \textit{Responsa}, #601.
“[T]he small ones [i.e., the poor] must obey the big ones, and give them due respect. . . . And the big ones should . . . ease the poor[’s] tax burden . . . and provide and support them . . . [by doing this] the people will be truly happy.”

Second, we learn that according to this social vision, members of an ideal community, one that is “truly happy,” are urged to “make peace among yourselves.” However, it seems that in Salonika of the late sixteenth century, such a peaceful, organic, harmonious, and serene community did not exist and was perceived as a sought-after ideal.

The sources identify the main obstacle preventing the Ottoman Sephardim achieving such an ideal community as social disorder and, more specifically, a decompartmentalization of the social sphere. For example, in another sermon by Almosnino, we learn that the “key for the people’s happiness . . . [is] . . . that each one will know his rank, and the small ones will obey the big ones.”

According to the rabbis, therefore, the behavior of the unruly lower classes that refused to accept the current social hierarchy was the root cause for this state of social disturbance and lack of respect for social boundaries rather than the extreme social polarization that the poor protested against. According to the rabbis, the poor should never seek to “harm” or disagree with the rich. Rather, the former should be respectful of their benefactors. However, being respectful in this context is the equivalent of being complacent, servile, and devoid of true agency because the latter was the exclusive property of the elite, bought from the community through the payment of communal taxes.

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846 Moses Almosnino, *Sefer me’amets koah* (Venice: G. de Gara, 1588), 177b.
847 Ibid., 15b.
A related discourse that further exemplifies this social imagination identified Jewish society with a human body and the different social classes with different body parts. This imagery might suggest that this ideal community was organic. However, it is clear that the rabbis’ emphasis was on the extremely hierarchical, rather than the organic, nature of this social imagination. For example, the commanding head or leading face was associated with the elite, whereas the passively operated legs represented the lower classes. The latter propelled the Jewish people, while the former handled the steering. The rabbis argued that for this organic community to succeed, it was absolutely necessary that the lower classes accept their place in the social hierarchy and follow their leaders with the utmost submission.  

Although the elected leadership ran the daily affairs of the community, some matters required the support of the majority. One such matter was regulating communal tax payments. As Ben-Naeh notes, scholars have demonstrated that for centuries it was customary in Sephardic communities for the majority of tax payers to produce, enforce, and manage communal regulations. However, what constituted a majority in this context was debatable.

The rabbis’ treatment of this matter presents two general interpretations and exposes the effect of the relationship between the rabbinic and the lay elite on the contemporary social imagination. According to the first interpretation, those who pay the majority of communal expenses (i.e., the rich) constitute the community’s majority and

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are therefore charged with (or granted) communal leadership. According to the second model, it was the numerical majority of tax payers (i.e., the lower classes) that constituted the majority and who, therefore, should lead the community. According to Ben-Naeh, the second half of the sixteenth century witnessed a dominance of the former.850

The social imagination in the second half of the sixteenth century as it is revealed through an examination of the Ottoman Sephardic rabbinic sources is clear. It was a vision of an organic yet extremely hierarchical society led by the lay elite. Indeed, this social imagination is reminiscent of the preexilic one and therefore might support a thesis that this was a period of recuperation of older customs and habits. However, this interpretation is misleading because during the latter sixteenth century, this hierarchical social imagination was dominant, whereas during the preexilic period it was one out of several competing visions.

In the second half of the century, competing theories disappeared from the political realm. Some of these were segregated in the closed circles of Lurianic kabbala. In any case, this similarity alone is not sufficient to support a thesis that argues for a return to a preexilic social context during the second half of the sixteenth century. Rather, it is a manifestation of a new social context and imagination that was a product of its time and space and therefore liberated from its Iberian past.

The family is another sphere in which scholars identify a return of the Ottoman Sephardic society to its preexilic roots. This scholarly discourse is particularly relevant to the current research as it directly evaluates changes in the Ottoman Sephardic perception of lineage, kinship, marriage, and reproduction. Writing about Sephardic family life in

850 Ben-Naeh, “Poverty, Paupers and Poor Relief,” 168; “The Jewish Society in the Urban Centers”, 145.
the Ottoman Empire, Lieberman argues that:

Spanish and Portuguese families soon became prominent [i.e., dominated the Ottoman Jewish culture], so that lineage, wealth, and the extended family again became a central factor in arranging marriages, as it had been in Spain before the expulsion. The type of family that emerged by the mid-sixteenth century was one with values from the old Iberian social order, patriarchal and hierarchical.\textsuperscript{851}

Once again the middle of the sixteenth century is perceived as a pivotal point in which the victorious Sephardic culture overcomes the trauma of 1492 and returns to its preexilic roots.\textsuperscript{852} Once more the Iberian past is identified with its elite version, as the family type in the second half of the sixteenth century emphasized “lineage, wealth[, and] . . . social order [and was] patriarchal and hierarchical.”

I presented the weaknesses of this thesis in Chapter 2, and therefore I offer no additional iteration. However, some scholars acknowledge that the recuperation was not complete. These scholars offer two nuanced versions of the reversal thesis by pointing toward several differences between the preexilic and Ottoman Sephardic family structure and marriage practices. The first revised thesis argues that the Ottoman host culture influenced the Ottoman Sephardic family structure. The second thesis argues that the influence was not Ottoman or Muslim but rather of a characteristic patriarchal and hierarchical eastern Mediterranean family type that preceded the establishment of the monotheistic religions.

As for the Ottoman influence on the Sephardim, Lieberman suggests that the reestablished Iberian social order was “readapted by subscribing to new values

\textsuperscript{851} Lieberman, \textit{Sephardi Family Life}, 10.
\textsuperscript{852} As the reference here is to the work of Hacker, I assume that the middle of the century was the turning point.
compatible with the Muslim environment they encountered." In a different context Lieberman elaborates on the nature of the Ottoman influence:

The exiles of 1492 . . . had been influenced by Muslim and Christian medieval social attitudes, for example, toward bigamy and child marriage, as well as ways to deal with their patrimony when parents died. Indeed, Ottoman Sephardim married off their children at a relatively young age, accepted polygamy more readily than their European brethren, and differed with regard to their practices of inheritance.

Ottoman influence may have contributed to these phenomena. However, in Chapter 7 I examined the particular phenomena of polygamy, young age of betrothal, and inheritance practices among Ottoman Sephardim and showed that ensuring a continuous demographic structure through marriage and procreation was the shared quality or guiding logic of these phenomena. Therefore, I suggested that they should be understood in the unique context of the expellees’ significant loss of family members and of children in particular. There is no need, therefore, to reiterate this assertion.

A second thesis considers the developments in the sixteenth-century Ottoman

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853 Lieberman, Sephardi Family Life, 10.
854 Ibid., 15.
855 The evidence to support Lieberman’s argument that the “new values” were “compatible with the Muslim environment” is problematic in itself. Lieberman refers the reader to an article by Hacker. His assertion regarding the influence of the Ottoman majority is not as clear and forceful as Lieberman’s assertion may suggest. Hacker argues the following:

Their attitude towards their fellow Jews [i.e., the Sephardim’s], the Romaniots in the west and the Mustarabs (Arabized Oriental Jews) in the east, was frequently haughty. . . . The usages and customs of the Mustarabs were considered appropriate by the Maghrebs (North African Jews) who adopted them in the Maghrebi communities in Safed and in the entire Holy Land. However, none of this sufficed to convince the Sephardim to adopt local Jewish customs. Gradually and systematically, the pluralism of customs engendered by the separate organization and differing origin of the various communities of the empire evolved into Sephardi-Castilian usage which was imposed by majority pressure on the minority groups. (Hacker, “The Sephardim in the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth Century”, 115)

Hacker, then, suggests the expellees forced their “Sephardi-Castilian” ways on the local Romaniote and Mustarab Jews—not quite the victory of the local Muslim traditions on the Castilian-Sephardic customs.
Sephardic family as a monumental turn—back to a time preceding the establishment of the monotheistic religions. Rozen, for example, argues that the developments in the Ottoman Sephardim’s practices with regard to the age of betrothal, polygamy, and inheritance transpired because they “were part of an eastern Mediterranean family type.”

This endogamous family type is what the anthropologist Germaine Tillion called “the republic of cousins.” Rozen explains: “This [the republic of cousins] is the Mediterranean culture, based on pillars older than both Judaism and Islam. Tillion coined the term because its male members believed that their main allegiance was to their relatives on the paternal side, the side which preserves the family line, above any other social framework.” Endogamy, so the argument goes, is the essential quality defining Mediterranean culture from time immemorial. Therefore, for the Sephardic expellees, endogamy was the price of admission into this culture.

However, the thesis Rozen and others present is more complicated than a simple influence of an indigenous family type on the newly arrived expellees. By joining the republic of cousins, the expellees did not simply join a foreign culture but rather returned to their ancestral ways. Rozen explains: “This [i.e., the assertion that the Sephardim belonged to the eastern Mediterranean family type] is true not because they were

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857 Ibid., 110. See similar comments on pp. 7 and 10. This approach joins the other historiographical traditions that consider the masses of expellees as passive and devoid of agency. For example, for Scholem they were in despair and escaping the worldly for the messianic and eschatological. For Idel the important story is that of the elite kabbalah sages and their encounters with new intellectual traditions.
influenced by the surrounding Muslim society, but because the Mediterranean family as an institution derives from traditions preceding Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.\textsuperscript{858}

Although Rozen does not elaborate on the mechanics of this influence, Tillion’s thesis might clarify the matter. Tillion argues that endogamy was the response of an agricultural tribal society to the introduction of the Koranic law that gave daughters half the portion of the sons’ inheritance. Therefore, women were married off to paternal first cousins to avoid a loss of inheritance and ensure tribal continuity and integrity.\textsuperscript{859}

Consequently daughters were secluded, and their social contacts mediated by males from the immediate family and close cousins. The Jewish people originated from the agricultural societies that came to form the republic of cousins. In this context, it seems that Rozen’s argument is that the expulsion brought the Sephardim back into their natural endogamous fold. Once again the Sephardim belonged to the republic of cousins.

This thesis is problematic in two ways. First, to a certain degree this theory is ahistorical because it considers the history of eastern Mediterranean kinship as a static struggle between the Koranic and agrarian models of kinship. This thesis therefore does not seem to acknowledge changes over time. However, such changes did occur in the Jewish world. Consider, for example, the changes in the interpretation of \textit{yibbum} in the biblical, rabbinic, medieval, and early modern periods examined in Chapter 3.

The rabbinic interpretation clearly serves a new, urban Jewish culture that found the agrarian, biblical traditions unsatisfactory. However, this theory is not completely ahistorical because it envisions one particular change over time in the act that started the

\textsuperscript{858} Rozen, \textit{Jewish Community in Istanbul}, 307.

conflict and brought about the republic of cousins, namely, the introduction of the Koranic law to an agrarian world. So, second, if we accept one particular change over time, why not consider that such change may happen again? Why is it that after the initial development the nature of the eastern Mediterranean family type is set into a classic form?

I do not doubt that the later sixteenth century presents a social context very similar to the preexilic one. I do not seek to cancel any of the arguments explaining this phenomenon. Indeed, there is no doubt that pedigree, social status, and elite lineages mattered again and took the place of the egalitarian communal identity of the expulsion generation.

However, even if the Ottoman host culture did affect the Sephardic traditions, either as a Muslim or an eastern Mediterranean family type from time immemorial, these characteristics do not constitute a full return to the Iberian social structure. As I mentioned above, the latter half of the sixteenth century witnessed dramatic differences from the preexilic social context. The expellees thought of their community as new rather than as an Iberian community in crisis. The lay elite subdued the rabbinic elite; the Ottoman authorities encouraged the foundation of a more hierarchical and centralized Jewish community and communal organization; and an amorphous communal identity replaced the local medieval ethnic sociocultural units. Yet the most significant difference is that the Ottoman Sephardim of the late sixteenth century were equipped with discourses of an egalitarian social imagination produced during the expulsion generation and carried by the kabbala sages.
Conclusion

Through an exploration of the expellees’ yibbum discourse, the dissertation tells the story of their efforts to rebuild a communal identity in the Ottoman Empire. In the chapters above I examined the interpretation of yibbum within the social context that couched it. I demonstrated that unlike their Ashkenazic brethren, Ottoman Sephardim saw yibbum as a way to recreate an embodied link in an interrupted bloodline through physical reproduction. They sought to reconstitute an embodied lineage and through it, to recreate a lost demographic structure and safeguard the integrity of the social fabric of the Jewish people.

The expellees’ yibbum discourse manifested their emerging social structure and communal identity. In the absence of external influences, Jewish and otherwise, the expellees constructed a more egalitarian community to address their social predicament. They constructed communities that emphasized the extreme importance of procreation and the continuation of the lineage at the expense of older social arrangements. The nascent Ottoman Sephardic community manifested the new communal identity in the social imagination underlying its religious production and practices. This formative period of Ottoman Sephardic history stretched from the expulsion from Spain in 1492 to the middle of the sixteenth century. It was then that changes in the social make up of Ottoman Jewry led to a less egalitarian and exceedingly polarized social structure and imagination.

Rather than with a strong, definitive assertion, it is appropriate to end the dissertation by mentioning the roads it opens toward an examination of related
developments. This choice points to the true and at times frustrating nature of academic research, a phenomenon so eloquently noted by Caroline Bynum:

“Scholarship,” “research,” “work” are open-ended activities; they are something one is, almost by definition, always in the middle of. When one does research or engages in scholarship, one meanders, following the sources where they lead, expecting that one will sometimes find oneself in strange byways, even blind alleys. One plunges ahead, open to new directions, expecting the questions one is asking to mutate as materials, their context, and the scholarship of others make new issues and points of view imperative.

In the pages above I mention a number of avenues for further research that were revealed to me as the dissertation unfolded in the “strange byways” that I could not foresee when I first set out to examine the postexilic hybrid offspring beliefs. Among the paths I examine at length are the relevance of the dissertation to the study of the turn to kabbala among the expellees in the aftermath of the expulsion from Spain, and the contemporary Ottoman Sephardic beliefs in hybrid offspring.

The gate to these paths is social imagination, a useful methodological tool to explore the intersection between the cultural and the social by exposing the imagined social constructs underlying religious discourses. This methodology is necessary for examining such intersections in a period in Jewish history that otherwise lacks the hard evidence that is traditionally used by scholars of social history. Social imagination is an effective tool for the historian examining sociocultural trends, especially so when considering the literary nature of the available evidence. The scarcity and literary nature of the available evidence are the main reasons for the relative scholarly neglect of the

early sixteenth century and one that permitted a biased treatment of this formative period in Ottoman Sephardic history.

Opening the gates and taking the aforementioned paths may facilitate an examination of Jewish early modernity through a social lens. As mentioned previously, an inclination to identify early modernity as a unique period in Jewish history is apparent in recent scholarly work. Scholars identified certain developments as the core of Jewish early modernity. These developments are: increased mobility, the crisis in rabbinic authority, increased communal cohesiveness, the printing revolution and consequent knowledge explosion, and the blurring of religious identities. This approach greatly advanced scholarship in recognizing that Jewish early modernity was a unique period regardless of its ties to past literary or theological traditions, contemporary trends among host cultures, or to later movements that are perceived as the core of Jewish modernity.

What the dissertation claims is that our understanding of the period can grow if we examine it from a sociocultural perspective as well. To do so, I argue, we must examine the place of popular culture in constructing early modern Jewish identity and study the way in which contemporary social structures and institutions affect or communicate with religious and cultural production.
Appendices

Appendix A

Primary Sources by Genres

Chronicles

Commentaries on the Purpose of the Commandments

Conduct Literature (Regimen Vitae)
di Bushal, Ovadyah Hayim [Bozzolo], *Sefer Beer Mayim Hayim*. Warsaw, 1546.
Diaries, Mystical

Encyclopedias

Eulogies

Halacha
Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot*.

Kabbalah
———. *Pardes rimonim*. Korets: Bi-defus ha-meshutafim Tsevi Hirsh ben Aryeh Leb va-hatano Shemuel ben Yisakhar Ber Segal, 1780.

Letters
Philosophy
Crescas, Hasdai. *Or ha-shem*. Vienna, 1859.

Polemics
Yaavets, Yosef. *Or ha-hayim*. Lublin, Poland, 1911.

Principals of Faith

Responsa


**Sermons**


Garson, Yosef ben Meir. *Ben porat yosef*. The British Museum, Gaster Collection, Ms. Or. 10726.

Hallawa, Judah. *Zafnat paaneah*, ms. Dublin, Trinity College B. 5. 27. Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts #16958.


**Torah Commentaries**


———. *Sefer rav peninim: Be’ur mishle shelomoh*. Warsaw: Goldman, 1876.


———. *Mili de avot*. Venice, 1600.


———. *Tseror ha-mor*. Venice: s.n., 1523.

Appendix B

Primary Sources for Chapter 2: Belief in Hybrid Offspring

1250–1310  Menahem Recanati  Perush al ha-torah (commentary on the Torah)  Italy
b. 1440  Abraham Saba  Tseror ha-mor  Torah commentary  Portugal,
         Morocco, Adrianople
c. 1458–1535  Isaac ben Joseph Caro  Sefer toldot yitshak  Torah commentary
             Toledo, Portugal, Land of Israel
1488–1575  Joseph Caro  Sefer maggid mesharim (mystical diary)  Toledo, Lisbon, Istanbul,
             Adrianople, Safed
1488–1575  Joseph Caro  She’elot u-teshuvot bet Yosef  responsa  Toledo, Lisbon,
             Istanbul, Adrianople, Safed
Turn of 16th century  Judah Hallawa  Tsañnat paneah  sermons  Spain, Land of
             Israel
16th century  Elijah di Vidas  Reshit hokhma  conduct literature  Safed and
             Hebron
16th century  Mordecai Ha-Cohen  Siftei cohen  Torah commentary  Safed
1st half of 16th century  Menahem ben Moshe Bavli  Sefer ta’amei ha-mitsvot  Purpose of the
                   Commandments  Trikala, Hebron, Safed
1st half of 16th century  Ovadyah Hayim [Bozzolo] di Bushal  Sefer Beer Mayim Hayim
                   conduct literature  Salonika
1534–1572  Isaac Luria  Shaar ha-kavvanot  Kabbalah  Egypt, Safed
**Appendix C**

**Primary Sources for Chapter 5: The Logic of Yibbum**

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<td>Sefer ta’amei ha-mitsvot</td>
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<td>16th century</td>
<td>STM [Sefer Ta’amey ha-Mitzwoth]</td>
<td>The author is wrongly identified by Ottoman Sephardic scholars, namely, Solomon Alkabets, Cordovero, and di Vidas as Isaac ibn-Farhi, a sixteenth-century Sephardic rabbi from Salonika.</td>
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### Appendix D

**Primary Sources for Chapter 6: The Logic of Halitsa**

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<td>b. 1440</td>
<td>Abraham Saba</td>
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<td>Sefer maggid mesharim (mystical diary)</td>
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<td>1488–1575</td>
<td>Joseph Caro</td>
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<td>responsa Toledo, Lisbon, Istanbul, Adrianople, Safed</td>
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<td>Moses Alshekh</td>
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<td>1507–1600</td>
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<td>She’elot u-teshuvot maharam alshekh (Responsa)</td>
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<td>1522–1570</td>
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<td>Pardes rimonim</td>
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<td>Moses ben Mordecai Galante</td>
<td>Sefer she’elot u-teshuvot (Responsa)</td>
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Turn of 16th century: Judah Hallawa. Tsafnat paneah sermons Spain, Land of Israel.

16th century: STM [Sefer Ta’amey ha-Mitzvot]. The author is wrongly identified by Ottoman Sephardic scholars, namely, Solomon Alkabets, Cordovero, and di Vidas as Isaac ibn-Farhi, a sixteenth-century Sephardic rabbi from Salonika.

1st half of 16th century: Menahem ben Moshe Bavli. Sefer ta’amei ha-mitsvot Purpose of the Commandments Trikala, Hebron, Safed.
### Appendix E

**Primary Sources for Chapter 8: The Originality of the Ottoman Sephardic Yibbum Discourse**

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<td>Moses Nahmanides</td>
<td>Torah commentary</td>
<td>Girona, Land of Israel</td>
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<td>1240–1291</td>
<td>Abraham Abulafia</td>
<td>Ve-zot li-yehudah</td>
<td>Zaragoza</td>
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<td>1250–1310</td>
<td>Menahem Recanati</td>
<td>Ta’amei ha-mitsvot (purpose of the commandments)</td>
<td>Italy</td>
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<td>1260–1335</td>
<td>Meir ibn Solomon Sahula</td>
<td>Exgesis on the Commentary of Nahmanides on the Torah</td>
<td>Kabbalah Guadalajara</td>
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<td>Abraham Abulafia</td>
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<td>1288–1344</td>
<td>Levi ben Gershon</td>
<td>Beur al ha-torah</td>
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<td>Turn of the 14th century</td>
<td>Isaac ben Samuel of Acre</td>
<td>Me’irat einayim Torah commentary</td>
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<td>1340–1411</td>
<td>Hasdai Crescas</td>
<td>Or ha-shem Philosophy</td>
<td>Barcelona</td>
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<td>1405–1508</td>
<td>Judah ben Eliezer ha-Levi Minz</td>
<td>Shut Maharam Padua resposna</td>
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<td>1420–1480</td>
<td>Joseph Colon ben Solomon Trabotto</td>
<td>Sefer sheelot u-teshuvot maharik resposna</td>
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<td>1445–1515</td>
<td>Obadiah ben Abraham of Bertinoro</td>
<td>Parshanut al mishnayot Torah commentary</td>
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<td>1455–1525</td>
<td>Elijah Mizrahi</td>
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<td>c. 1479–1573</td>
<td>David ibn Zimra</td>
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<td>Joseph Caro</td>
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<td>Turn of the 16th century</td>
<td>Gershon Bonafazo, quoted in Binyamin Ze’ev</td>
<td>Responsa</td>
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<td>First half of the 16th century</td>
<td>Jacob Rafael Peglione of Modena in David Kaufman, “Une consultation de Jacob Rafael Peglione de Modene”</td>
<td>Responsa</td>
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<td>First half of the 16th century</td>
<td>Jacob Recanati Fanzi in Isaac Lampronti, Pahad yitshak</td>
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<td>Elijah Haim Genazzano</td>
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Appendix F

Primary Sources for Section II “An Egalitarian Community: The Testimonies of the Expellees” in Chapter 11: The End of a Formative Period: A New Social Context

b. 1440  Saba, Abraham  Tseror ha-mor  Torah commentary  Portugal, Morocco, Adrianople
b. 1460  Solomon ibn Verga  Shevet Yehuda  Chronicle  Spain, Portugal, Adrianople

1479–1573  David ibn Zimra  Sheelot u-teshuvot ha-radbaz  Responsa  Spain, Fez, Jerusalem, Cairo, Alexandria, Safed

b. c. 1482  Abraham ben Solomon Torrutiel  Sefer ha-kabbalah  Chronicle  Spain, Fez

Turn of the 16th century  Yosef ben Meir Garson  Ben porat yosef  sermons  Spain, Ottoman Empire

Turn of the 16th century  Abraham Shamsolo  Maamr ve-ha-adam yada  Sermons  Ottoman Empire

Turn of the 16th century  Joseph Ha-Cohen  Vale of Tears  Chronicle  Spain, France, Genoa

First half of the 16th century  Elijah Capsali  Seder eliyahu zuta  Chronicle  Venice and the Ottoman Empire
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