



Jewish Daily Life in Medieval Europe Encounters Israeli Art

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Misunderstanding of the present is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past. But a person may wear himself out just as fruitlessly in seeking to understand the past, if he is totally ignorant of the present...This faculty of understanding the living is, in very truth, the master quality of the historian.¹

With these words, Marc Bloch, one of the foremost social historians of the twentieth century, captured a foundational paradox of the study of history. The past is "a foreign country,"² but it shares elements with the present. Although historians seek to understand the past on its own terms, they use the tools, sensibilities, and mentalities of the present to do so. Bloch goes on to argue that the "love of life" is what drives the historian to the past, while the connection to the present is what makes this *métier* worth pursuing. It is this complexity that makes the study of history so fascinating.

¹ Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, repr. 1992), p. 43.

² David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and the topic revisited in his *The Past is a Foreign Country – Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

The exhibition *In and Out, Between and Beyond: Jewish Daily Life in Medieval Europe*, physical and virtual, can be seen as an embodiment of Bloch's observation. It aims to establish a link between past and present, displaying the scholarly work of a group of medieval historians that study the Jews of medieval Europe, as well as responses to and interpretations of this work by contemporary Israeli artists. This is one of the culminating projects of the European Research Council-funded research group *Beyond the Elite: Jewish Daily Life in Medieval Europe*. Focusing on the Jews of medieval Ashkenaz from the time of the First Crusade in 1096 until the mid-fourteenth century, the scholars in this study team examine the lives of the Jews of northern and western Europe, concentrating on the Jews of northern France, the Holy German Empire, and, to a lesser extent, those in medieval England, often referred to as the Jews of medieval Ashkenaz.

Since the inception of the project in the fall of 2016, the team has worked to construct a history of everyday Jewish life in medieval Europe which includes those who were not part of the learned elite alongside those who were learned, about whom we know more. Rather than spotlighting the dramatic events of this period, we have trained our sights on its everyday moments. In addition to engaging with as wide a swath of medieval Jewish society as possible in our study, we have sought to shed light on an intriguing historical reality: the integration of Ashkenazic Jews within their Christian surroundings, alongside their maintenance of a distinct ethnic identity and religious practices. Unraveling this complexity meant asking how medieval Jews in northern Europe involved themselves in the surrounding environment, and simultaneously separated themselves from elements of it. The fact that the vast majority of our written sources have been left behind by members of the elite sectors of society made this inquiry particularly difficult. How could we hear the voices of Jews who were neither learned nor powerful? This was our greatest challenge.

The entirety of everyday life is too rich for the reach of even a generously funded project. Thus, we organized our work along four axes: ritual, spaces, objects, and people. The axes, which often intersect, permitted the development of diverse perspectives on medieval Jewish life. They were our gateway into the lives of the medieval Jews, whether in or out of the spotlight of the documentation that survived.

These four organizing categories are evident throughout the exhibition. As the viewer "enters" medieval urban space through the city gate, moving from the house, to communal areas, to the city at large, and finally exiting the city, s/he experiences space within and outside the urban towns and centers in which medieval Jews lived. The displays show rituals practiced daily, weekly, annually, and across the life cycle. Objects in the medieval sources we study inspired the modern creations, which accentuate different aspects of their functions in medieval life. The medieval people, who, of course, cannot be recalled or summoned, nonetheless leave their mark with the words they wrote and their presence; one can imagine them throughout the city, drawing water from the well, singing on the Sabbath, and conducting their business as the local churches chimed their bells. Medieval Jews did not live in ghettos. So, as we envision them, we must also envision their Christian neighbors, with whom they did business and shared daily life. Sometimes these relations were friendly, sometimes less so, but at all times they took place within the confines of a shared urban space. Seeking to present these complex lived realities, we chose three spatial categories for the exhibit: In and out, between, and beyond and have used them to express the fluidity and entangledness of medieval Jewish life.



Fig. 1: Our research team and the artists in conversation.

To complement the medieval basis of this installation, we provided a distinctly modern perspective. Dr. Noy orchestrated what turned out to be an intensely fruitful exchange between the research team and seven Israeli artists, who then produced contemporary expressions of the historic ideas under discussion (fig. 1). The results can be seen in the Max and Iris Stern Gallery and in this catalogue. Collaboration with these artists, and, particularly, with Kalman Gavriel Delmoor, whose calligraphy spans the entire 17-meter wall of the show, opened up new vistas on our own historical work as well as exciting prospects for communication. Above all, dialogue with the artists has stimulated novel questions for further research. Each visitor who visits the gallery or views the online exhibit will experience it from their own perspective and in their own language – in Hebrew, English, or Arabic. We hope that visitors will come away from this encounter, a bridge between past and present, with new insights into what was and new notions about what could be.

In and Out, Between and Beyond: Jewish Daily Life in Medieval Europe was conceived after I was honored with the Michael Bruno Memorial Award by the Israel Institute for Advanced Study in 2016. The prize, I was told, was to be used for a scholarly project unlike any I had ever undertaken before. As part of our work on the *Beyond the Elite* research project, we have consistently dedicated time and thought to bridging the academy and the broader public. Toward this goal, we created a website for Israeli teachers whose curriculum includes the medieval period, held numerous open events, and presented our research in popular forums such as high schools, synagogues, and community centers. These efforts were driven by the desire to demonstrate to a wide audience the relevance of the medieval past to the modern present. The presentations led to the idea of an installation at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem geared towards the general public. This vision has expanded during the past months of pandemic to a virtual exhibit.

Dr. Ido Noy, the curator of *In and Out, Between and Beyond: Jewish Daily Life in Medieval Europe*, was an obvious partner for this endeavor. He was part of the first cohort of the research team and completed his doctorate within its framework in 2018. Our discussions about a

potential exhibition led to the concept at the exhibition's core, suggested by Ido after a series of conversations. The members of the team who contributed to the exhibition are those who belonged to the team during the period the exhibition was planned, from the spring of 2019 to the fall of 2020. Alongside our research as a group, each team member has his or her own research project; these projects have already resulted in original academic research and promise to produce additional innovative scholarship over the years to come. While team members primarily work on their own, they share various areas of interest, and there are multiple ways in which their research intersects. They can be divided geographically, although some work on multiple geographies. The team members also vary according to areas of interest within medieval life: economics, family life, social relations, royal-Jewish interactions, and more. As a team, our sum is greater than our parts, although each element of our work stands on its own merit. I am grateful to the team members who have participated in this exhibition: Dr. Tzafrir Barzilay, Dr. Neta Bodner, Nureet Dermer, Aviya Doron, Miri Fenton, Albert Kohn, Dr. Andreas Lehnertz, Dr. Eyal Levinson, Amit Shafran, and Hannah Teddy Schachter, as well as to Dr. Ido Noy for his guidance and leadership. Together, we wish to thank Audrey Fingherman Zabari, who has enabled all of our collaborative efforts.

We invite those perusing this catalogue or visiting the gallery, whether in real life or online, to enjoy the fruits of our study. Everyday life and its routines differ from place to place and period to period, and yet they share many characteristics over time. It is our hope that, inspired by our interweaving of medieval and modern, you will experience these connections between past and present.