



# Beyond the Elite

## Jewish Daily Life in Medieval Europe

Newsletter #5, Autumn 2020

**We are delighted to present the fifth issue of our newsletter.**

Although the Covid-19 crisis forced us to move our activities online as of March, we are happy to report that we have had a busy spring and made tremendous progress on our individual and group projects. In addition, we are excited to share the news that several team members won prestigious fellowships and Dr. Neta Bodner accepted a tenure track position at the Open University. We congratulate all the recipients of fellowships and are extremely proud and happy for Neta. We hope that many members of our group will continue in her footsteps and find positions in the future!

## Weekly Group Meetings with Zoom

Covid-19 has led many countries around the world to institute national quarantines and large-scale restrictions. In March 2020, as part of the effort to fight and stop the spread of the pandemic in Israel, all academic activities were cancelled and entrance to all public facilities, including schools and universities, was prohibited. Unable to meet and work in our offices, attend group meetings, hold conferences and host guests, and realising that we were (and still are) facing a continued period of uncertainty, we moved our weekly group meetings to Zoom.

Following an initial period of adjustment, we quickly adapted to the new circumstances and have since held dozens of virtual consultations on our research and personal progress, shared difficulties and offered solutions, and carried out lively discussions regarding group activities and tasks. Despite the easing of restrictions, we have continued to meet by Zoom, although several team members have returned to work in the office. Meeting in person, even at a distance, was a joyous occasion.

## Latin

Despite the ascendancy of vernacular languages during the Middle Ages, Latin remained a mainstay of academic life. Faced with the task of teaching Latin to their students, medieval Latin teachers developed numerous textbooks and guides. Using several of these methods, Dr. Ayelet Even-Ezra

of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem worked with us throughout the year to further our Latin literacy. We performed medieval plays, and practiced reading and writing charters and official letters according to the *Usus sive practica dictaminis* first developed by Lawrence of Aquileia. Combining both

the content and methods of medieval Latin studies in class provided us with a unique point of view on the language and literacy. We continued by Zoom during the second term and are very grateful to Dr. Even-Ezra for this wonderful experience!

## Grants & Awards

**Congratulations to our Beyond the Elite team members!**

- ✿ **Neta Bodner** accepted the position of lecturer in the Department of Language, Literature, and Arts at the Open University of Israel, Ra'anana
- ✿ **Nureet Dermer** received the Paul Demarais Center for the Study of French Culture Award for excellent doctoral students from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's European Forum
- ✿ **Aviya Doron** was awarded the Aron Menczer Fund research grant from the Center for Austrian Studies (HUJI) and a graduate studies fellowship from the Azrieli Foundation Fellows Program
- ✿ **Andreas Lehnertz** received the 2020 Ephraim Elimelech Urbach Postdoctoral Award from the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture (New York)





### About our Team Members



**Amit Shafran,  
M.A. Student**

Daily life in the 13<sup>th</sup> century was infused with magic and magical rituals. Focusing on a text written by Isaac son of Isaac of Chinon for his own personal use, my research seeks to trace the ways and extent to which magic played a role in the day-to-day world and decision making processes of men and women in the Jewish community of 13<sup>th</sup> century Paris. Isaac's book is itself a fascinating and unique blend of traditions: Jewish, Christian, and French folklore, and covers a wide range of issues: health and the body, the circle of family and home, neighbors, one's livelihood, traveling, and the afterlife. Magical elements that can be defined as "marvelous" were understood as vital to all these realms and part of the natural order. Isaac's book reflects the blurred boundaries between magic and science, the ordinary and the marvelous, in the everyday life of one member of the Jewish community of Paris several years before its expulsion from France.



**Aviya Doron,  
Ph.D. Candidate**

My doctoral dissertation examines how risk and trust shaped economic interactions between Jews and Christians living in the German Empire. By focusing on the question of how risk was conceptualized, experienced, and overcome in these interactions, I hope to highlight how trust, or the lack thereof, shaped personal interreligious contacts, as well as the institutionalized mechanisms governing economic exchange in the German Empire. To do so my focus is on four cities of economic significance in the German Empire: Frankfurt am Main, Cologne, Erfurt and Nürnberg, each city situated in a different institutional setting within the highly decentralized German Empire. I am currently finishing my work on the extensive court records from Frankfurt, looking at social networks and economic contacts in light of the city's legal framework.

The past three years in the ERC group have been invaluable for the development of my own personal research. Beyond the opportunity to learn from the knowledge and experience of each team member, the many conferences, workshops and seminars organized by the group have had a deep impact on my research. Also, being able to collaborate with the other team members has enriched my outlook on my sources and challenged previous conceptions that I held.



**Nureet Dermer,  
Ph.D. Candidate**

After writing my M.A. thesis which concentrated on the Jews in the tax lists from Paris (Le livre de la taille de Paris, 1292-1313), I was inspired to continue looking for further evidence concerning quotidian Jewish-Christian socio-economic relations in administrative documents, as well as in contemporaneous Hebrew sources. My Ph.D. explores the interactions between Jews and Christians in northern France throughout the 14<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, France experienced numerous political, economic, social, and environmental crises, including the Great Famine (1315-1317), the Shepherds' Crusade (1320), the decline of the Capetian dynasty (1328), the beginning of the Hundred Years' war (1337), the Black Death (1348-1351), and more. For France's Jews, it was, in addition, a period of upheaval and displacement, as they coped with three large expulsions. My research has currently led me to examine differing notions of foreignness in the city of Paris, a topic that is quite prescient, given the extent of global immigration and refugee crises of recent years.

My work has benefitted tremendously from the Beyond the Elite research team members and activities.

Daily conversations, group discussions, conferences, and tours, as well as unique opportunities to meet outstanding scholars from across the world have been extremely constructive and valuable to my study.



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## Conference

### Literacy and Everyday Culture among Medieval Jews, Christians, and Muslims

In February 2020 before Covid-19 put a halt to international travel, we hosted a highly successful conference entitled *Literacy and Everyday Culture among Medieval Jews, Christians, and Muslims*. Organized by **Elisheva Baumgarten**, **Judah Galinsky** (Bar Ilan University) and **Eve Krakowski** (Princeton University), the conference brought together scholars from Europe, the U.S., and Israel to discuss medieval literacy in theory and practice.

Lectures and conference papers tackled literacy from a wide range of perspectives, such as: how to define medieval literacy (**Dagmar Riedel**); the use of images and oral literacy in religious engagement (**Christopher Cannon**, **Ephraim Kanarfogel**, **Sara Lipton**); multilingualism and the vernacular (**Ilil Baum**, **Judah Galinsky**, **Micha Perry**); practices of writing and reading (**Miriam Goldstien**, **Eve Krakowski**, **Oded Zinger**); and the various ways in which records were kept and used (**Paul Bertrand**, **Adam Kosto**, **Jessica Goldberg**). Other fascinating papers shed a spotlight on new approaches to history, such as: the role of literacy in documenting economic history (**Judith Olszowy-Schlanger** and **Ingrid Houssaye Michienzi**); women, literacy, and transmission (**Martin Aurell**, **Elisheva Baumgarten**); the importance of visual as well as textual literacy (**Sarit Shalev-Eyni**); the impact of literacy on administration (**Javier Castaño**, **Katalin Szende**); Jewish education and vernacular literacy (**Pinchas Roth**); and the impact of urban space on literacy (**Sabrina Corbellini**).

As part of the conference, a tour to three unique libraries in the Old City of Jerusalem was arranged.

Our first stop was the **Khalidi Library**, where we learned about the books and manuscripts accumulated by the **Khalidi family** over several centuries. We then visited the **Custodia Terrae Sanctae Library** near the New Gate, which is home to numerous medieval manuscripts. We visited the library's preservation workshop, where an international team of experts are digitizing ancient manuscripts and had the privilege of hearing **Fr. Lionel Goh** speak about current ongoing Franciscan efforts throughout the Middle East to preserve and digitize manuscripts.

Our final visit was to the **Greek Orthodox patriarchate**. After a tour of the premises led by **Fr. Isidoros Katsos**, including a spectacular view of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, we visited the library, where **Archbishop Aristarchos** provided a glimpse of the many manuscripts in the collection. This was a true highlight!

The conference problematized contemporary understandings of medieval literacy. In lively and engaging question and answer sessions, a general consensus emerged that a unitary definition of literacy is neither possible nor useful, as it does not enable an appreciation of how literacy functioned in different spaces or places and for different sorts of medieval people. Participants illustrated innovative methodologies for reading 'against the grain' to try to access what people understood and how they engaged with texts. Perhaps the most pervasive consensus of the conference was that while it is unlikely that the majority of medieval people knew how to write, they engaged with texts in some way and had a modicum of literacy, variously defined.

Some speakers are contributing to a forthcoming volume, and we look forward to the debates that will continue and the research that will unfold as a result of the conference.





# Covid-19 Outreach Project

## Plagues in Historical Perspective: The Jews and the Black Death at Beit Avichai

For medieval historians the current Covid-19 outbreak cannot help but call to mind past pandemics, particularly the one known as the Black Death (1348-1350), in medieval Europe. The members of the Beyond the Elite teamed up with Beit Avichai, a cultural center in Jerusalem, to organize a four-part online lecture series to provide historical insight into current events. The series began with an overview of Europe in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, during which **Elisheva Baumgarten** and **Eyal Levinson** discussed pre-plague Jewish life. Moderated by **Neta Bodner**, the second event in the series discussed religious practice, with **Hannah Teddy Schachter** and **Miri Fenton** addressing the ways Jews responded to deadly times of plague by means of dance and burial. The third episode, led by **Nureet Dermer** and **Aviya Doron**, looked at medieval economies and explored the impact of



the pandemic on Jewish-Christian trade in Paris and Frankfurt. The final installment of the series, moderated by **Elisheva Baumgarten**, focused on issues of migration and resettlement, as **Andreas Lehnertz** and **Albert Kohn** examined what life was like for Jewish people who fled and resettled in the wake of the Black Death. Over 200 viewers participated in each lecture in the series, 'tuning in' virtually from countries all over the world, and the lectures were also recorded and uploaded for further views, demonstrating how virtual media can open new doors for academic collaboration, exchange, and broader outreach. The links can be found on our website. We were grateful to take part in this wonderful project and look forward to future collaborations with Beit Avichai.

## Workshop with Prof. Anna Sapir Abulafia

During the last week of January, the group hosted **Prof. Anna Sapir Abulafia** of Oxford University, a world-renown expert on medieval intellectual history and Christian-Jewish relations. Prof. Abulafia ran a workshop on the legal understandings of usury and gave a public lecture about the ways in which the familial relationship between the

Biblical Jacob and Esau informed Jewish-Christian relations in the Middle Ages. After meeting with each group member individually, Prof. Abulafia gave the entire team a crash course on how to access medieval church law and utilize the Latin material for understanding Jewish daily life.

## Transkribus Workshop

Despite the shift to remote communication, we were able to hold a special workshop with **Sinai Rusinek** from Haifa University, which focused on digital humanities. During the three-meeting workshop, which began May 12<sup>th</sup>, we learned about the Transkribus platform, developed by a research team at the University of Innsbruck. Transkribus is a comprehensive platform intended to assist researchers in transcribing and analyzing handwritten documents. Dr. Rusinek instructed us in Optical Character Recognition (OCR) and Handwritten Text Recognition (HTR) while delving into the ins-and-outs of the Transkribus platform.

Through the platform and through examples of several completed projects that used such digital tools, we became cognizant of some of the potential benefits and limitations these tools present. This introduction to the resources available in the digital humanities was thought-provoking and we are exploring ways to continue collaborations over the fall semester with other researchers working with HTR tools, such as **Tikkun Soferim**, headed by **Moshe Lavee** from University of Haifa, and **e-scriptorium**, headed by **Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra** from the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE), Paris.

**As we look towards the upcoming academic year (2020-2021), we hope that we will soon be able to reconvene in person in our offices, healthy and safe.**