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Rethinking Rabbinical Leadership in Ottoman Jewish Communities

YARON AYALON

ONE DAY IN THE EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, Shmu'el Laniado (d. ca. 1750), a prominent rabbi and judge (*dayyan*) in Aleppo, ordered his community to refrain from eating vine leaves. Tiny worms were discovered in the leaves some women had bought to prepare the Shabbat meal, and their presence rendered the leaves nonkosher, and hence inedible. As a precaution, Laniado also ruled out the possibility of killing the worms by boiling the leaves. The order, signed by several rabbis, came at an inopportune time: on a Friday morning, when cooking for Shabbat had already been mostly completed. Throwing or giving away pots full of food meant that some families would have none for the weekend. Yet the insistence of the rabbis and a threat of excommunication convinced many to comply with the directive. Discontent within the community grew, however, as weeks went by and the rabbis were reluctant to lift the ban. At some point, a group of young Jews decided to rebel: they announced publicly that consuming vine leaves was permissible. Despite the threat of excommunication and being summoned to the *beit din* (the rabbinical court), the dissenters managed to garner the support of a few scholars and continued to challenge the authority of Laniado and the other rabbis, an act that carried no apparent adverse consequences for them. The controversy ended with the lifting of the ban several months later.¹

Shmu'el Laniado hailed from a family of Sephardic scholars who had arrived in Aleppo in the early sixteenth century. According to one historian, members of this family served as chief rabbis of the Aleppo community continuously until the early nineteenth century. What the title of chief rabbi actually meant, however, is not clear.² More broadly, histori-

1. Hayim Abul'afyah, *Hanan elobim* (Jerusalem, 1993), 261–77. This work was originally published in Izmir in 1726.

2. Yaron Har'el understands the title to mean a functionary who was responsible for communal affairs to the Ottoman authorities, and the head of the rabbinical court. In Aleppo, he claims, the rabbinate was bequeathed from one Laniado to another until 1805. Yaron Har'el, *Bein tkhakkim le-mabapekhab: Minui rabanim*

ans have struggled to define what roles rabbis fulfilled in Ottoman communities, whether some towns had a central rabbinate and what authority such a body might have had, and how scholars worked vis-à-vis lay leaders.³ This essay revisits communal leadership in Ottoman communities, and especially the roles of rabbis and lay leaders, prior to the nineteenth century. If it is not the case that one or a few rabbis served as undisputed leaders of a community, as the vine leaves story implies, and if Ottoman Jewry at the local or imperial level was not organized hierarchically, how shall we then understand rabbinical leadership, the makeup of Jewish communities, and Jews' commitments to their community's institutions and ordinances?

Addressing these questions requires differentiating among three levels of the Ottoman Jewish experience: the first involves the ability of rabbis to enforce a communal culture that placed Jewish law (*halakha*) at the center of individual and collective life. The second focuses on communal institutions and the role rabbis and lay leaders played in them. And the third links Jewish communal organization with that of the Ottoman state and its institutions. Before the nineteenth century, rabbinical leadership was loose, lacked a clear hierarchical structure, and failed to impose Jewish law broadly, as a principle guiding the lives of individuals and congregations. Beyond offering advice on personal, financial, and communal matters, rabbis were deeply involved in shaping the role and influence of communal services, such as charitable organizations and education. It was through such institutions that rabbis, alongside lay leaders, achieved high status and prestige among their followers, just as sultans and other Ottoman officials became patrons of their subjects by sustaining certain services or establishing foundations.⁴ On both the state and community level, relationships between leaders and commoners were by definition pious, shaped by tradition, and grounded in religious practices and rites;

rashiyim ve-hadavatam be-Bagdad, Damesek ve-Halab (Jerusalem, 2007), 39–58. See also Leah Bornstein-Makovetzky, *Ir shel hakhamim ve-soharim: Ha-kehillat yehudit be-aram tova, 1492–1800* (Ariel, Israel, 2012), 175–87, who uses the terms “chief rabbi” (*ba-rav ba-rashi*) and “rabbi of the city” (*rav ba-'ir*) interchangeably.

3. See a good summary of this question in Yaron Ben-Na'eh, *Yehudim be-mamleket ha-sultanim* (Jerusalem, 2006), 234–36. For a representation of the traditional approach that recognized tensions between scholars and lay leaders and placed rabbis at the helm of communities, see Leah Bornstein-Makovetzky, “Cooperation and Conflict between the Religious and Political Leadership: Relations between Parnasim and Rabbis in the Communities of the Ottoman Empire during the 16th and 17th Centuries,” in *Conflict and Consensus in Jewish Political Life*, ed. Eliezer Don-Yehiya and Stuart Cohen (Ramat Gan, 1986), 15–30.

4. Amy Singer, *Charity in Islamic Societies* (New York, 2008), 69–72, 90–113.

eminence was often a product of religious legal and scholastic erudition. Spiritual and lay leaders alike held positions of influence, but the latter were usually more politically powerful than the former. This was true in the empire as a whole, where even the chief Muslim justices were subordinates of sultans, leaders who sought to appear pious but were not trained as scholars; and in the Ottoman Jewish world, where in most communities rabbis were effectively subordinate to the lay leaders and congregations who had hired them.

The organization of Jewish communities in the empire also mimicked the state in the lack of consensus about the role of religious law in everyday life: while rabbis wanted to mold public and private life around halak-hah, common sense and precedent often prevailed. Many Jews were deeply committed to their community as an institution, but not necessarily to following the lifestyle rabbis expected or demanded. And in a world with fluid religious boundaries, Jews and other Ottoman subjects crossed religious lines regularly—in living quarters, business partnerships, personal associations in public and private, and in the *shar'i* court. Such a setting was hardly conducive to maintaining strict, centralized rabbinical authority.

RABBIS IN EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP

In a recent book on the Greek Orthodox Church in the Ottoman Empire, Tom Papademetriou finally put to rest the *millet* system explanation for Ottoman governance of non-Muslims. Rejecting the assumption that the Ottomans governed the Greek Orthodox via the patriarchs, Papademetriou shows the Ottomans saw Greek patriarchs primarily as tax farmers, while they negotiated with various elements of the community at the same time. The image that emerges is thus one of a fractured society, not a centralized one. The patriarch's control of his flock was, according to Papademetriou, fiscal rather than political. The state, for its part, treated non-Muslim subjects as individuals, not as corporate entities; membership in communities was simply a convenient mechanism for raising revenue, as "fiscal concerns were at the heart of the relationship between the Ottoman state" and its Christian communities.⁵ Aside from monetary concerns, the religious leadership was simply too loose, and patriarchs and bishops had "little control over members of the community."⁶

5. Tom Papademetriou, *Render unto the Sultan: Power, Authority, and the Greek Orthodox Church in the Early Ottoman Centuries* (Oxford, 2015), 11–12, 52, quotation from 101.

6. *Ibid.*, 59.

Papademetriou's conclusions apply to the Jewish community as well. Although lacking a parallel position to that of the patriarch or a hierarchical organization, fiscal issues were still the primary factor tying Jews to their communities, whether via taxation or charitable contributions. In the Jewish context, Benjamin Braude tore the *millet* system narrative apart and rejected the idea of centralized Jewish leadership already in 1979.⁷ Since the mid-1980s, historians have mostly followed Joseph Hacker's analysis, which argued that no chief rabbi ruled over Ottoman Jewry from Istanbul and largely rejected hierarchical leadership for the Ottoman Jewish world overall.⁸ There is, so far, no evidence for formal regional or empire-wide leadership structures before 1835.⁹

In light of Braude, Hacker, and, most recently, Papademetriou's studies, another discussion of the role of rabbis among Ottoman Jews would seem unnecessary. Yet researchers in the past three decades have not given up completely on old assumptions about rabbinical leadership, at

7. Benjamin Braude, "Foundation Myths of the *Millet* System," in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society*, ed. B. Braude and B. Lewis (New York, 1982), 1:69–88.

8. Yosef Hacker, "'Ha-Rabanut ha-rashit' ba-imperyah ha-'Othmanit ba-me'ot ha-15 ve-ha-16," *Zion* 49.3 (1984): 225–55. For an earlier version of this essay, see Hacker, "Ottoman Policies toward the Jews and Jewish Attitudes toward the Ottomans during the Fifteenth Century," in Braude and Lewis, *Christians and Jews*, 1:117–26. For the older narrative, see Salomon Rosanes, *Korot ha-Yehudim be-Turkiyah ve-artot ha-kedem* (Sofya, 1934–38), 1:23–25, 44–45, 65, 70–75; and Mark Epstein, "The Leadership of the Ottoman Jews in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries," in Braude and Lewis, *Christians and Jews*, 1:101–16. For interpretations similar to Hacker's, see Aryeh Shmuelevitz, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire in the Late Fifteenth and the Sixteenth Centuries* (Leiden, 1984), 17–30; Avigdor Levy, "Hakamat mosad ha-hakham bashi ba-imperyah ha-'Othmanit bi-shnot 1835–1865," *Pe'amim* 55 (1993): 38–43; *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. A. Levy (Princeton, N.J., 1994), 53–59; Minna Rozen, *A History of the Jewish Community in Istanbul: The Formative Years, 1453–1566* (Leiden, 2002), 70.

9. Bornstein-Makovetsky suggested that a pattern of regional organization and leadership existed in Egypt but did not provide any evidence for this. Leah Bornstein-Makovetzky, "Ha-kehilah u-mosdotelah," in *Toldot Yehude Mitsrayim ba-teku'afah ha-'Othmanit (1517–1914)*, ed. J. Landau (Jerusalem, 1988), 132–33. In Syria, there seem to have been no regional Jewish centers either (Yaron Har'el, *Be-sfinot shel esh la-ma'arav: Temurot be-Yabadut Suryah be-tekufat ha-reformot ha-Othmaniyot, 1840–1880* [Jerusalem, 2003], 83), nor were there any in Palestine (Amnon Cohen, *Yehudim be-vet ha-mishpat ha-Muslemi: hevrah, kalkalah ve-irgun kebilati be-Yerushalayim ha-'Othmanit, ha-me'ab ha-shmoneh 'esreh* [Jerusalem, 1996], 30). For other parts of the empire, see Ben Na'eh, *Yehudim*, 234–36.

least at the local level.¹⁰ The issue thus calls for a brief reexamination. Historians of the Ottoman Jewish world have described communal institutions with different degrees of formality, as well as a process of appointing officials to leadership positions. Functionaries included rabbis who served on the rabbinical court or otherwise bore various titles, such as chief rabbi (*rav rasbi*), teacher of Torah (*marbits torab*), or sage of the congregation (*hakham ba-kabal*); and lay leaders (*parnasim*, *memunim*, *tovei ba-'ur*, or the *ma'amad*), who were in charge of day-to-day affairs of each congregation and whose actions relied on the decisions of a convention of all tax-paying adult males in a community (*yehidim* or *por'ei ba-mas*). There was no general agreement, however, on the hierarchy within each community or the distribution of duties between scholars and laymen.

In a short book published in 1953, Meir Benayahu attempted to address these questions. Benayahu opened his book by stating that

every [Sephardi] congregation [in the Ottoman Empire] had elected officials and independent ordinances. The rabbi (*hakham ba-kabal*) had the authority to preside over his congregation's members' legal matters, to administer the congregation on the one hand, and to deliver sermons on Shabbat [at the synagogue] and head the *yeshivab* on the other . . . and the main title used to describe that rabbi was *marbits torab*, a title based on the fact that the rabbi's primary concerns all derived from the principles of the Torah.¹¹

This statement suggests the rabbi led his congregation and had broad authority on a range of issues that his followers respected and adhered to. Delving deeper into the evidence Benayahu provided, however, reveals a more nuanced picture: it was congregations that appointed, or effectively hired, rabbis to administer various functions for them, from teaching children and advising on halakhic matters to serving on the rabbinical court and even administering the congregation's financials.

10. E.g., Mark Mazower, *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews, 1450–1950* (New York, 2006); Rozen, *Istanbul*; Minna Rozen, *Ha-kebilab ba-Yehudit bi-Yerushalayim ba-me'ab ha-17* (Tel Aviv, 1984); Ya'akov Barna'i, *Hamar'ab shel Eüropa: Perakim be toldot ba-kebilab ba-Yehudit be-Izmir ba-me'ot ha-17 ve-ha-18* (Jerusalem, 2014). Notable exceptions are Ben Na'eh, *Yehudim*; and the section about the Ottoman Empire in David Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton, N.J., 2010), 27–29, 81–85.

11. Meir Benayahu, *Marbits torab: Samkbuyotav, tafkidav, ve-helko be-mosdot ba-kebilab bi-Sefarad, be-Turkiyah, u-ve-artot ba-mizrah* (Jerusalem, 1953), 11.

The decision to appoint a rabbi was taken by either the *parnasim* or *por'e'i ha-mas*, depending on the place and time. An appointed rabbi's authority usually stemmed from a written commitment he received and his ability to form bonds with members of a community and assert his wishes. In other words, despite the existence of written agreements between rabbis and congregations, rabbinical positions were rather informal, and challenges to rabbis' authority occurred frequently, and often successfully. When one scholar thought the person appointed to the rabbinate was unqualified or less qualified, he could mount resistance by rallying his supporters to depose the appointee, regardless of whatever commitment the latter had received. Similarly, we hear of stories of scholars who did not openly challenge the appointed rabbi but took steps to limit his influence, such as teaching competing classes and attracting a large group of followers.¹² Benayahu's discussion of rabbinical positions reveals an employer-employee relationship between appointed rabbis and their congregations, in which the employees (scholars) were generally weaker politically than their employers (specifically, lay leaders).¹³

Despite evidence suggesting that appointed rabbis were not all-powerful, Benayahu trusted reports such as that of Ḥayim Benveniste of Izmir (d. 1673), who argued that "the custom of Israel and of this town is not to take any action, small or large, without the consent of the *hakham ha-marbits torah* or that has not been done in consultation with" him.¹⁴ He thus claimed the *marbits torah* fulfilled the most important position in the community: he was the spiritual leader, the teacher of halakhah, the one delivering weekly sermons, and the adjudicator of religious, personal, and even monetary matters. To Benayahu, he was the supervisor of all matters of the *kahal* and the one validating the actions of the *parnasim*. As such, the rabbi had the authority to draft regulations, impose fines, assert his opinions on religious and public matters, and excommunicate offenders. Lay leaders executed his ordinances, their actions considered invalid without his consent. No one was allowed to challenge the *marbits's*

12. *Ibid.*, 15–24.

13. Hacker demonstrated that such weakness was apparent in the responsa; but he was wrong on attributing rabbinical weakness to the lack of rabbinical courts' official authority from the Ottoman state. See Yosef Hacker, "Gevulotehah shel ha-oṭonomyah ha-Yehudit: Ha-shiput ha-'atsmi ha-Yehudi ba-Imperyah ha-'Othmanit ba-me'ot ha-16—ha-18," in *Temurot ba-historiesh ba-Yehudit ba-ḥadasah: kovets ma'amarim shay le-Shmu'el Etinger*, ed. Shmu'el Almog et al. (Jerusalem, 1987), 368–73, 386–87.

14. Ḥayim Benveniste, *Ba'ey ḥayye* (Thessaloniki, 1788), ḥoshen mishpat, siman 244, 299d.

authority. Once a congregation appointed him—often for life and without the possibility to remove him from office—his verdict on all issues was final.¹⁵ Further, in Izmir and Salonica superior rabbinical offices existed, and those heading them, known as *ba-rav ba-kolel*, wielded absolute authority over Jewish affairs in their city.¹⁶ That Benayahu himself provided ample evidence to the contrary apparently did not matter.

Later historians have largely built on Benayahu's conclusion about the central role of rabbis in Ottoman communities. Jacob Barna'i, for example, has claimed that by the seventeenth century, Jewish communities had spiritual leaders who occupied official positions within the general rabbinate (*rabanut kolelet*). Every city had a chief rabbi, though in cities such as Istanbul, Salonica, and Izmir more than one rabbi shared the position. Barna'i has not explained what the actual duties of this institution were, or how it functioned vis-à-vis the public leadership (*banbagab tsiburit*, his collective title for lay functionaries).¹⁷ In Izmir, the community Barna'i had studied most, there was a central rabbinate from the early seventeenth century. It was sometimes led by one rabbi and at other times shared by two or more. The practice of bequeathing the position of chief rabbi was quite common there, as it was—so Barna'i argued—in other Ottoman communities. The rabbis were the primary leaders of the community in Izmir, while the *parnasim* seemed to have played a marginal role there.¹⁸

Leah Bornstein-Makovetzky's scholarship is replete with references to chief rabbis.¹⁹ There was one in Cairo throughout the Ottoman period, she claims, and in Alexandria and other smaller Egyptian communities from the seventeenth century on. The lay leaders appointed rabbis, who then served on the *beit din* and were in charge of personal and marital issues. The *parnasim* handled all administrative affairs, but the division of labor between them and the rabbis was, again, not entirely clear: rabbis

15. Benayahu, *Marbits Torah*, 41, 48.

16. *Ibid.*, 94–99.

17. Barna'i, "Yahadut ha-Imperyah ha-'Othmanit ba-me'ot ha-17 ve ha-18," in *Morshbet Sepharad*, ed. H. Beinart (Jerusalem, 1992), 496–98.

18. Barna'i, *Ha-mar'ab*, 135–264. Barna'i acknowledges the existence of a public leadership in Izmir made up of nonscholars, but aside from a brief mention (136), this group is completely absent from his account of the Izmir community. See also Levy, *Jews*, 67–68.

19. See below, as well as her many entries in the *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, ed. Norman Stillman (Leiden, 2010), e.g., "Alba, Isaac de"; "Alfandari, Aaron ben Moses"; "Algazi, Solomon ben Abraham"; "Chios"; "Covo family"; "Geron (Gueron) family"; "Peraḥya, Ḥasday ben Samuel ha-Kohen"; and "Peraḥya, Aaron ben Ḥayyim Abraham ha-Kohen."

had to agree to all communal decisions and at times enacted laws on their own.²⁰ A similar structure appears in Bornstein-Makovetzky's recent study of the Jews of Aleppo. Even before the Ottomans, ultimate leadership of the entire community lay in the hands of rabbis. There, too, lay leaders played some role, but the community had a chief rabbi from the Sephardic Laniado family to whom all adhered. The rabbi "usually administered . . . the city's matters unchallenged." They thus took center stage in Aleppo, while the *parnasim* and other functionaries were their subordinates.²¹

In Salonica and Edirne too, historians had placed the rabbis at the top of the community's hierarchy, in charge of all matters. In the former, a rabbinical council, or chief rabbinate, existed from the end of the seventeenth century. In the latter, two rabbis—Avraham Geron and Menaḥem Ashkenazi—shared the position of chief rabbi from 1722, and their descendants continued to dominate the city's community until the nineteenth century.²² Only in Jerusalem, thanks to the extensive works of Minna Rozen and Amnon Cohen, can we speak comfortably about a circumscribed rabbinical authority and lay leaders who, in practice, administered all ordinary communal matters and institutions. Two formal positions seem to have existed there: a chief rabbi, or sage of the congregation (*ḥakham ha-kabal*), and an elder of the Jews (*sheykh al-Yahud*). The community selected both, and the judge at the Islamic court (the *qadī*) also approved the latter's appointment. In principle, the *ḥakham* was in charge of spiritual guidance and teaching and served on the *beit din*. The *sheykh* was responsible for mundane affairs, the functioning of communal services, and representing the community to the authorities. At times there was overlap between the two positions, when a rabbi would also serve as the *sheykh*. And the *sheykh* was often one of several *parnasim* who were equally responsible for communal affairs.²³

According to existing scholarship, then, it would seem that rabbis throughout the Ottoman Empire bore official positions in their communities, ruled by the power of appointments, and were at times also recog-

20. Bornstein-Makovetzky, "Ha-kehilah," 134–43.

21. Bornstein-Makovetzky, *Ir shel ḥakhamim*, 169–87, quotation from 180. For Aleppo (and Damascus, which operated by a similar model), see also Har'el, *Bein tkhakhim le-mabapekbah*, 14–16, 39–40; Har'el, *Sfinot shel esb*, 83–84; and Eli'ezer Rivlin and Yosef Rivlin, *Le-korot ha-Yehudim be-Damesek ba-me'ab ha-revi'it la-efef ha-shibi* (Jerusalem, 1926), 12–14.

22. Levy, *Jews*, 68.

23. Rozen, *Ha-kehilah ha-Yehudit*, 139–45; Amnon Cohen, *Yehudim be-vet ha-mishpat*, 1:3–4; Cohen, *Yehudim, 18th Century*, 25, 30.

nized by state authorities. So far, historians have left questions such as what exactly these positions entailed; how much clout their bearers had within their communities; and what was the distribution of power between rabbis and lay leaders, unanswered.²⁴ The scholarship has awarded titles such as “chief rabbi” or “general rabbi” to rabbis who held official appointments, without offering proper qualification for such terms.²⁵ So far, historians have also avoided a distinction between the nature of rabbinical authority and the functioning of communal institutions. Hacker has gone as far as distinguishing between the synagogue as a place for prayer and celebrations, and the synagogue as a place for administration of communal matters, from collecting charitable donations and taxes to disseminating information. But he stopped short of outlining the limits of rabbis to set a halakhic, social, or economic agenda for their people.²⁶ It is the latter point that is significant here: while rabbis helped lead, guide, and sustain institutions, their involvement did not entail enforcement of religious standards on all communal members. Was it possible for one to disobey a rabbi’s orders, disassociate oneself from communal ordinances, and still take part in a congregation’s charitable activities? Would some Jews regard rabbis as communal leaders without feeling bound to halakhic principles in their day-to-day activities? The existing literature implicitly treats the community as one cohesive unit where strong rabbinical leadership equaled a healthy functioning of institutions, and vice versa. But these two aspects of communal life were hardly interdependent.

A terminological confusion further complicates understanding rabbinical leadership. The modern term for chief rabbi, *rav rashi*, does not, as far as I can tell, appear in Jewish sources before the nineteenth century. Historians have understood several other terms to mean a leading, or “chief” rabbi. These included *ba-rav ba-kolel* (the general rabbi), *ba-rav ha-mushlam* (the complete or perfect rabbi), *ba-rav ha-muvhak* (the bold

24. Ben Na’eh, *Yehudim*, 234–36, acknowledges the ambiguity of rabbinical titles and positions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. See also Yosef Hacker, “Ha-ḥevrah ha-Yehudit be-Saloniki ve-agapehah ba-me’ot ha-15 ve-ha-16: Perek be-toldot ha-ḥevrah ha-Yehudit ba-Imperyah ha-’Othmanit ve-yaha-sehah ‘im ha-shiltonot” (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1978), 260–64.

25. A good summary of this question (but with no resolution) appears in Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry: A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 14th–20th Centuries* (Berkeley, Calif., 2000), 19–24; and in Ben Na’eh, *Yehudim*, 146–63.

26. Hacker, “Ha-ḥevrah ha-Yehudit be-Saloniki,” 228–31.

rabbi), *ba-ḥakham ba-metsuyan* (the excellent scholar), *ba-dayan ba-metsuyan* (the excellent judge), *ḥakham ba-kabal* (sage of the congregation), *resh mata* (head of the city), *mara* (or *mari*) *de-atra* (rabbinic authority of the locale), and *resh metivta* (head of the yeshivah). While some of these, like *resh metivta* or *ba-dayyan ba-metsuyan*, imply the rabbi in question indeed held a tangible position, in general they only convey eminence of some sort without revealing much about the function of the person bearing them.

Absence of evidence is not, of course, evidence of absence. The rare appearance of the Turkish title for chief rabbi, *babam baḡı*, in Ottoman sources from before the nineteenth century can help clarify some of the mystery. Surveying about one thousand Ottoman archival documents dealing with Jews, I found the term *babam baḡı* mentioned only in three. In the first, it refers to an individual who had recently died, had an unspecified leadership role in Galata (part of Istanbul), and was involved in the financial administration of his community.²⁷ In the second, the *babam baḡı* is described as the supervisor of the *kethüda*, the representative of Jewish communities to the authorities on tax issues.²⁸ The third document quotes the text of a petition Jews had submitted, in which the term *babam baḡı* is mentioned three times to refer to a communal functionary who tried to prevent individuals from entering Jewish homes and committing indecent acts of fornication when the men were not present. This is the only pre-nineteenth century text I've found in which Jews refer to an individual by that title.²⁹ The three documents suggest that *babam baḡı* was used to denote a person who might have been a scholar but who appears to have held other leadership roles in his congregation, related to some administrative or institutional aspect of the Jewish community or to its relations with the Ottoman authorities. In any event, the usage of "chief rabbi" was extremely rare even in Ottoman sources, suggesting that such an official position vis-à-vis the state did not exist.

Confusion of rabbinical titles appears even in places where according to historical literature a hierarchy of scholars existed, and where one family had dominated the social and political life of Jews for centuries, as in Damascus and Aleppo. The *frankos* dispute, which tore the Aleppo community apart beginning around the 1770s, and which I discuss below in greater detail, demonstrates this well. Rabbi Yehudah Katsin, who

27. Istanbul, Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivleri (Prime Minister's Archives; hereafter BOA), D.BŞM.MHF. 53/9, from 1768.

28. BOA, C.DRB 438, from 1773.

29. BOA, C.ADL 1533, from 1785.

openly challenged a ruling by Raphael Shlomo Laniado, turned to Mordekhai Galante, whose family allegedly led the Damascus community in the eighteenth century. Katsin described Galante as *resh mata ve resh met-ivta*. But that title tells us little about the actual functions Galante fulfilled. In his reply, quoted in Katsin's book, Galante referred to Katsin as the bold rabbi, the head and officer (*ba-rav ba-muvbak le-rosh ule-Katsin*, the latter being a pun on the rabbi's last name). He then calls Katsin's rival, Laniado, *ba-rav ba-muvbak mari de-atra*.³⁰ Laniado, like Galante, hailed from a family of scholars that dominated his city and was supposedly Aleppo's chief rabbi in the second half of the eighteenth century.³¹ Still, Galante, who in his role as a leading rabbi in nearby Damascus should have been aware of rabbinical hierarchy had one existed, treated Katsin and Laniado as equally eminent. Furthermore, Laniado himself described Katsin as *ba-rav ba-kolel*, and his brother Eliyahu Laniado called Katsin *ba-rav ba-muvbak*.³²

Titles can be misleading. They appear to tell us very little on the official or practical position of a scholar beyond revealing that the individual in question was reasonably educated. The few vague rabbinical appointment letters Benayahu quoted in his study suggest a range of responsibilities that varied across different communities,³³ and it is very likely that other learned individuals who did not obtain an official appointment fulfilled some of those functions as well. Furthermore, there was at least some overlap between the functions of rabbis and those of lay leaders, as both groups shared an interest in maintaining the community as a socially cohesive unit whose institutions served observant and less-observant Jews. In the balance between scholars and *parnasim*, the former seldom had the final say on ordinary communal matters. More often than not, they failed to enforce a social order based on halakhah and respect for the rulings of scholars. To understand why this was so, we need to take a short detour and examine the landscape within which Jews in the Ottoman Empire operated more broadly, what limitations the state imposed on them, and what opportunities existed for Jews to interact with non-Jews.

30. Yehudah Katsin, *Sefer mahaneh Yehudab* (Jerusalem, 1989), 1:178. For more on the role of the Galante and Laniado families in Damascus and Aleppo, see Har'el, *Bein tkhakhim le-mahapekhab*, 39–42, 57–58.

31. Har'el, *Bein tkhakhim le-mahapekhab*, 40–42; Bornstein-Makovetzky, *Ir shel hakhamim*, 176–77. For a general perspective on the Laniado family, see Yaron Ayalon, "Laniado Family," in *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, 3:208–10.

32. Raphael Shlomoh Laniado, *Beit dino shel Shlomoh: She'elot u-teshuvot be-arba'ab helke Shulhan 'Arukh* (Jerusalem, 1981), 264 and p. 15 of the introduction.

33. Benayahu, *Marbits torah*, 22–28.

JEWS IN OTTOMAN SOCIETY

Historians have generally characterized Ottoman society as one in which religion was “the primary organizing principle.”³⁴ The scholarship on Jews and Christians under Islam, for both the pre-Ottoman and Ottoman periods, has largely accepted this assumption. Such an understanding of the Islamic state implies that interreligious divisions actually molded people’s life-realities: their social status, residential locales, occupations, and even how they behaved and reacted to changes around them. It assumes that communities were formed primarily along religious lines. They were autonomous in the sense that they served as a separate, perhaps even the sole source of authority for their members, who by and large kept apart from the other religious communities. According to this approach, for Jews and Christians the religious community was congruent with religious authority and lifestyle; it formed the framework within which most social interactions occurred and disputes were settled, without interference of state authorities.³⁵

A recent study of Jews and Christians under early Islam has questioned this reading of *dhimmi* (non-Muslim) communal autonomy.³⁶ A measure of autonomy indeed characterized the functioning of a community within its own jurisdiction, something most Muslim jurists agreed to as a matter of convenience. Yet neither jurists nor the state wished to force non-Muslims to settle their legal matters (within the boundaries of their own communities or to prevent them from initiating litigation in a Muslim court. Rather, the idea of judicial autonomy was promoted by

34. M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, N.J., 2008), 25. For standard overviews of the status of non-Muslims under the Ottomans, see Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism* (New York, 2001), 16–40; Abraham Marcus, *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity: Aleppo in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1989), 39–48; and Gül Akyılmaz, “Osmanlı devletinde reaya kavramı ve devlet-reaya ilişkileri,” in *Osmanlı*, ed. G. Eren (Ankara, 1999), 4:40–54.

35. See, for example, S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (Berkeley, Calif., 1967–88), 2:1–170, 273–407; Rozen, *Ha-kebilah ba-Yehudit*, 64–92. For an extensive list of works representing this approach, see Uriel Simonsohn, “Overlapping Jurisdictions: Confessional Boundaries and Judicial Choice among Christians and Jews under Early Muslim Rule” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2008), 9–10, nn. 14–18. For a contrary view, see Najwa al-Qattan, “Litigants and Neighbors: The Communal Topography of Ottoman Damascus,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44 (2002), 3:511–33.

36. Uriel Simonsohn, *A Common Justice: The Legal Allegiances of Christians and Jews under Early Islam* (Philadelphia, 2011).

communal leaders, who strove to achieve exclusive sway over their followers' affairs by narrowing alternative options. Non-Muslim communities were thus molded using a "discourse of resistance" intended to evoke fear and rage toward "the other," the *goyim* (gentiles) in the Jewish case. Religious leaders preached against interconfessional contacts and voiced separatist aspirations time and again in their writings. In reality, however, such rigid religious divisions did not hold. In Middle Eastern cities, one can talk about a "murkiness of confessional boundaries," and a "plurality of authorities" that included business partnerships, friendships, and familiar bonds—all among members of different faiths. On the whole, there were common features in the Middle Eastern urban culture that brought Muslims, Christians, and Jews together more than they pushed them apart.³⁷

This critical outlook applies to Jewish communities in the Ottoman Empire. Segregation and autonomy were necessary for establishing a hierarchical, rabbinical leadership that could dictate a day-to-day halakhic agenda; but in an Ottoman Jewish world so integrated with the state and connected to non-Jewish and non-Ottoman elements, it was impossible to sustain. Bearing in mind a distinction between spiritual rabbinical leadership and the community as a purveyor of social services, it is easy to see that a strict autonomous model might have been necessary to maintain the former, but not the latter. Decentralized leadership did not necessarily entail weak communities. Historians of Ottoman Jews have largely avoided a differentiation of communal functions and paid little attention to the layers of Jewish experience.³⁸ This resulted in confusing assessments of the status of Jews in the empire. Consider Jacob Barn'ai, who has argued that there was

complete separation between the different societies . . . Jews and Christians could not integrate into the closed Muslim society, just as much as they could not become involved in its spiritual life . . . it was customary in the empire that different social and religious groups

37. *Ibid.*, 7–9. See also Al-Qattan, "Litigants and Neighbors"; Abraham Udovitch, "The Jews and Islam in the High Middle Ages: A Case of the Muslim View of Differences," *Settimane di Studi del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo* 26 (1980): 655–84; Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, 1:70–74.

38. Hacker has alluded to the dual function of the synagogue as a place of spiritual support and worship on the one hand, and a locus of financial transactions on the other. Accordingly, in Salonica in the sixteenth century, many Jews divided their lives between two congregations, one for the former functions, the other for the latter; see Hacker, "Ha-ḥevrah ha-Yehudit be-Saloniki," 229–31.

reside in separate neighborhoods, though this rule was not always followed. Because of the relatively high level of the Jews . . . it was especially difficult for Turkish society to absorb the Jews and accept them socially and culturally. Such separation [between Jews and Muslims] had helped Jews preserve their uniqueness, including their linguistic uniqueness.³⁹

And then, on the following page, he claimed that in fact Jews *were* integrated into the Ottoman economy and society and that, unlike what he had argued several paragraphs earlier, “these [Jewish and Muslim communities] were not entirely closed off and separated from one another.”⁴⁰

Similarly, Yaron Ben Na’eh has first argued that Jews

suffered from a degraded public image and a low social class . . . The primary characteristic of personal relations between Muslims and *dhimmis* in general, and Jews in particular, was the loathing and repugnance Muslims demonstrated toward all protected people.⁴¹

He then supplies ample evidence for the harsh treatment of Jews under Ottoman rule, which included forced labor, rape, blood libels, expulsions from Jewish-dominated areas and destruction of communities, and the frequent usage of a plethora of derogatory nicknames. The Ottomans overall, he concluded, had “a sense of superiority . . . toward all other nations that was shared by people of all walks of life.”⁴² Much of the evidence Ben Na’eh uses to support these claims comes from the mid-seventeenth century, during the reigns of Sultans Murad IV (r. 1623–40) and Mehmet IV (r. 1648–87), when the Kadızadelis, a pious, puritan movement promoting religious revival and forced conversions of peoples and spaces, dominated the empire and the palace. The Kadızadelis were notorious for their harsh treatment of non-Muslims (and Muslims who were not devout enough by their standards), and their period in power does not well represent Ottoman treatment of Jews overall, which

39. Barna’i, “Yahadut ha-Imperyah,” 488.

40. *Ibid.*, 489–90, quotation from 490.

41. Ben Na’eh, *Yebudim*, 90, my translation from the original Hebrew edition. For an English version of this text, see Ben Na’eh, *Jews in the Realm of the Sultans: Ottoman Jewish Society in the Seventeenth Century* (Tübingen, Germany, 2008), 124–28.

42. Ben Na’eh, *Yebudim*, 90–96, quotation from 96.

appeared to be markedly better in earlier and later times.⁴⁵ Eventually, without mentioning the Kadızadelis, Ben Na'eh admits that Jews were, after all, integrated into society at large:

Physical proximity led to social relations, even friendships between Jews and Muslims . . . Hebrew sources have preserved many testimonies of friendships among men: encounters during and as part of work . . . in guilds, and in places of entertainment, such as coffee and drinking houses, at public baths, and at times in mixed parties in private homes . . . There are also testimonies of romantic encounters and intimate relations between Jewish and Muslim men and women . . . sources from different cities all over the empire relate the arrival and the active participation of gentiles in family celebrations.⁴⁴

By such accounts and others, Jews were hardly segregated from greater Ottoman society, rendering a model of a closed-autonomous community untenable.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the relative openness to non-Jewish society the Sephardim had brought with them from Iberia gradually changed the character of many Ottoman communities. As ties with non-Jews on all levels—economic, neighborly, personal, even familial—became more common, so did the ability of communal leaders, and especially the scholars, to dictate a particular lifestyle diminish.

43. Marc Baer, *Honored by the Glory of Islam: Conversion and Conquest in Ottoman Europe* (New York, 2008), 65–80, 93–104, 109–19; Yaron Ayalon, *Natural Disasters in the Ottoman Empire: Plague, Famine, and Other Misfortunes* (New York, 2014), 95–96, 169–70. The mid-seventeenth century, in general, was a bad period for Jews and other groups all over the world, as a global crisis, triggered mostly by environmental and political factors, ensued. Neither Ben Na'eh nor other historians of Ottoman Jewry have taken that global perspective into consideration. On Jews and the global crisis of the seventeenth century, see Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, Conn., 2013), 167–73, 198–208, 555–57, 581–84.

44. Ben Na'eh, *Yehudim*, 97–98. Ben Na'eh's other scholarship highlights both Jews' integration into Ottoman society, and the many hardships they suffered at the hands of Muslims; e.g., "Bein gildah le-kahal: Ha-hevrot ha-Yehudiyot ba-Imperyah ha-'Othmanit ba-me'ot ha-17–18," *Zion* 63.3 (1998): 277–318, and especially 300–302; "Kvura, hevrot kvura ve-ketovot mi-beit ha-kevarot shel kehilat yehude kahir be-mifneh ha-me'ot ha-17 vaha-18," *Pe'amim* 98–99 (2005): 187–224, and especially 194–97. His scholarship quoted here, however, does not address the tension between those two elements—hardships and integration—and why such patterns might have coexisted.

45. E.g., Minna Rozen, "The Ottoman Jews," in *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, volume 3, *The Later Ottoman Empire, 1605–1839*, ed. S. Faroqhi (Cambridge, 2006), 259–63; Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry*, 27–29.

How integrated were Jews into Ottoman society? A brief discussion will suffice here given existing literature on this topic.⁴⁶ While non-Muslims were legally inferior, Ottoman rule over them was quite fluid, redefined periodically by officials on all levels from sultans to local *qadīs*. The pronouncements of the chief religious authorities of the empire, the *şeyhülislâms*, who discussed in their *fatwas* (religious rulings) various problems of Jewish and Christian life, show a great measure of toleration. While at times limiting non-Muslim religious ceremonies, wine drinking in public, construction or renovation of places of worship, and the acceptance of a *dhimmi*'s testimony against a Muslim in court,⁴⁷ they often adopted a lax approach that did not always correspond to *dhimmi* law, sometimes resulting in contradictory rulings on a matter by the very same scholar.⁴⁸ This legal reality reflected two facets of Ottoman society: first, the mixed attitudes to non-Muslims locally. Requests to expand or rebuild houses of worship were at times denied;⁴⁹ Jews and Christians were required to dress in a manner that distinguished them from Muslims;⁵⁰ and *dhimmis* appearing in the Muslim court (*mahkama*) were disadvantaged, both in practice—a Muslim's testimony was considered more credible—and in nomenclature, as court scribes would deliberately misspell their names and indicate they were of a different religion.⁵¹ And yet,

46. It includes Mark Epstein, *The Ottoman Jewish Communities and their Role in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Freiburg, 1980), 19–47; Shmuelevitz, *The Jews*, 30–34; Marcus, *Eve of Modernity*, 39–48; and Rozen, *Istanbul*, 18–34; for a contrary view, see Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton, N.J., 1984), 136–39.

47. For public demonstration of religion, see Mehmet Ertuğrul Düzdağ, *Şeyhülislam Ebussuud Efendi fetvaları ışığında 16. asır Türk hayatı* (Istanbul, 1972), 96: *fatwas* 410–11; Abdürrahim Menteşizade, *Fetâva-yi Abdürrahim* (Istanbul, 1827), 1:78–80. For wine drinking and the justification of Muslims entering Christian drinking-houses (*meyhâne*) and shattering wine barrels, see Düzdağ, *Ebussuud Efendi*, 96:409, 412, 97:413; Menteşizâde, *Fetâvâ*, 80. For evidence in the *şar'î* court, see Düzdağ, *Ebussuud Efendi*, 98:419–24.

48. E.g., Düzdağ, *Ebussuud Efendi*, 89:358; Menteşizade, *Fetâva*, 1:79–80. Sultan Süleyman I's *şeyhülislam* Ebussuud Efendi (d. 1574) ordered in one case that a church destroyed in a fire not be rebuilt, whereas in another he permitted such reconstruction (Düzdağ, *Ebussuud Efendi*, compare 105:463 to 106:465).

49. Ferdinan Tawtal, *Watba'îq tarikhiya 'an Ḥalab* (Beirut, 1958–63), 1:41–43.

50. Jean de Thévenot, *L'Empire du Grand Turc, vu par un sujet de Louis XIV* (Paris, 1965), 220–25; Alexander Russell, *The Natural History of Aleppo* (London, 1794), 1:366.

51. Masters, *Christians and Jews*, 31–37; Judith E. Tucker, *In the House of the Law: Gender and Islamic Law in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (Berkeley, Calif., 1998), 86–87, 129–30. Jews were registered in court records as *yahudi*, Catholics as *nağrani*, Greek Orthodox as *rum*, Armenians as *armani*, and all Christians in gen-

many churches and synagogues were rebuilt or expanded;⁵² the ban on loud prayer was not tightly enforced;⁵³ restrictions on clothing were not always imposed; and wine was drunk publicly.⁵⁴ Second, there was a discrepancy between the world that *seyhülislâms* and *qaḏis*—and hence also rabbis and patriarchs—portrayed in their writings and the daily experiences of their followers, which did not always match the expectations of the clergy.

The Ottoman insistence on mostly terminological discrimination of non-Muslims was once understood as reflecting the state's firm belief in the supremacy of Islamic religious identity.⁵⁵ Recent evidence, however, calls for a more critical interpretation of Ottoman policies. The conquest of the Arab parts of the Middle East in 1516–17 marked the first time the Ottoman Empire had a Muslim majority. In the following decades, its bureaucracy began to resemble that of other Islamic states, in part a result of ongoing intellectual and legal exchanges between Arab and Turkish scholars. The Ottomans were able to rule in the name of Islam while encouraging other religious groups to assimilate into Muslim society as part of the heritage of tolerance and inclusiveness they had developed in earlier centuries, while still a Muslim minority governing a majority of Christians. Islamic identity, as reflected in the bureaucracy, did not necessitate systematic discrimination against non-Muslims. It was rather the desire of the state to assert its authority and sense of patronage toward its subjects that, at times, led to such discrimination. The very same concern motivated rabbis to assert authority over their Jewish followers. The symbols of Islam were the common language the Ottomans shared with their subjects, as halakhah was, at least in the eyes of rabbis, the common language that bound all Jews, even those who did not fully adhere to rabbinical authority. Ruling over different ethnic groups, the

eral as *ḏbinmi*. Non-Muslim names were deliberately misspelled (e.g., Musa, with a *sin*, for Muslims, and Muṣa, with a *sad*, for non-Muslims).

52. See examples in Hrand D. Andreasyan, *Polonyalı Simeon'un seyabatnamesi, 1608–1619* (Istanbul, 1964), 153; Tawtal, *Watba'iq*, 1:15, 35–36; Burayk, *Ta'rikk*, 26; Tsadkah Ḥutsin, *Sefer tvedakab u-mishpat: She'elot u-teshuvot le-ḥelek even ba-'ezer* (Tel Aviv, 1974), 156, 256; Avraham 'Antebi, *Sefer yoshev obalim* (Jerusalem, 1981), author's introduction.

53. Due to lack of space at the synagogue in Aleppo, some Jews were convening at an adjacent house from which they could clearly hear the person leading the prayer. This indicates that the sound of prayer was audible outside the synagogue; Raphael Shlomoh Laniado, *She'elot u-teshuvot maharash Laniado ba-ḥadasbot* (Jerusalem, 1997), 76.

54. Burayk, *Ta'rikk*, 73–76.

55. Marcus, *Eve of Modernity*, 40; Al-Qattan, "Litigants and Neighbors."

Ottomans used the symbols of Islam—in architecture, legal procedures, and the bureaucracy—as the language all understood, whether they were Muslim or not. Occasional attempts to separate Muslims from non-Muslims and underscore the status of the former over the latter were part of that Islamic discourse. Mostly, though, stressing boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims did not prevent Ottoman Muslim subjects from interacting with Jews and Christians daily.⁵⁶ Accordingly, attempts by Jewish leaders to enhance segregation were met with little success.

Ample evidence corroborates this alternative explanation and suggests the Ottomans had a fairly open attitude toward Jews (and Christians), one that facilitated integration rather than segregation. This is seen in Jews' housing arrangements and occupational pursuits. Middle Eastern cities consisted of quarters, among them those traditionally designated as Jewish or Christian.⁵⁷ Urban historians of the Ottoman Empire, such as Antoine Abdel Nour and André Raymond, noted that segregation by quarters had hardly ever been complete and was definitely not dictated by the state. While ease of access to services and products such as the synagogue, kosher food, and wine might have prompted Jews to congregate in one area, commercial concerns and personal wealth often led community members to live in different neighborhoods.⁵⁸ Assuming that residential patterns documented in medieval Cairo are indicative of later, Ottoman developments, spatial segregation was first and foremost the interest of rabbis; houses whose tenants were exclusively Jewish were rare and pricy, whereas scholars repeatedly protested against the selling of house sections to Muslims, suggesting that this was a widespread phenomenon, and that rabbinical advice had limited efficacy.⁵⁹ Jews also formed an integral part of the urban economy, as tax registers have often

56. Bruce Masters, *The Arabs of the Ottoman Empire, 1516–1918: A Social and Cultural History* (New York, 2013), 48–49; Helen Pfeifer, “Encounter after the Conquest: Literary Salons in Sixteenth-Century Ottoman Damascus,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47.2 (2015): 219–39; Elyse Semerdjian, “Naked Anxiety: Bathhouses, Nudity, and the Dhimmī Woman in 18th-Century Aleppo,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45.4 (2013): 664–69; and Ayalon, *Natural Disasters*, 62–64.

57. André Raymond, *Grandes villes Arabes à l'époque Ottomane* (Paris, 1985), 296–97, 333–40; Rozen, *Istanbul*, 55–61; Abraham Galante, *Histoire des Juifs de Turquie* (Istanbul, 1984), 2:257–58; Joseph Nehama, *Histoire des Israélites de Salonique* (Paris, 1935), 2:36–37.

58. Raymond, *Grandes villes*, 168–72, 174–79, 296–97; Antoine Abdel Nour, *Introduction à l'histoire urbaine de la Syrie Ottomane (XVIe–XVIIIe siècle)* (Beirut, 1982), 173–80.

59. Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 4:13, 20–21.

demonstrated: they held positions in the production, sales, real estate, and services sectors and were active members of guilds, sometimes in positions superior to Muslims—trends that continued throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁶⁰ Jews formed business partnerships with Muslims, seeking to raise capital or to reach potential customers more readily accessible to the latter.⁶¹ Such partnerships appear in Ottoman documents, especially when one of the parties complained about another.⁶² If Jews were inferior to Muslims in principle, their lesser status hardly affected Jews' day-to-day affairs.⁶³ Jews could have abundant

60. BOA, MMD 1292, 15–17, is an example of such a tax register from Damascus from 1695–96, where Jews are mentioned as jewelers, processors of silk, dyers of cloth, peddlers, day laborers, brokers, agents, moneychangers, bankers, providers of merchandise or credit, clerks, transcribers, butchers, sellers of poultry, vendors of liver, millers, greengrocers, druggist-grocers, itinerant buyers and sellers of junk, couriers, and physicians. Najwa al-Qattan extracted a similar list of Jewish occupations in Damascus from the *shar'ī* court records; see Najwa al-Qattan, "The Damascene Jewish Community in the Later Decades of the Eighteenth Century: Aspects of Socio-Economic Life Based on the Registers of the *Shar'ā* Courts," in *The Syrian Land in the 18th and 19th Century: The Common and the Specific in the Historical Experience*, ed. T. Philipp (Stuttgart, 1992), 202. This list strikingly resembles the one Mark Cohen compiled for the Jews of medieval Cairo; Mark Cohen, *Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt* (Princeton, N.J., 2005), 56–66. For Jews dealing in real estate, see Najwa al-Qattan, "Across the Courtyard: Residential Space and Sectarian Boundaries in Ottoman Damascus," in *Minorities in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. M. Greene (Princeton, N.J., 2005), 20–26. For the eighteenth century, see Marcus, *Eve of Modernity*, 157–62; Gabriel Baer, "The Administrative, Economic and Social Functions of Turkish Guilds," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 1.1 (1970): 28–50; Suraiya Faroqhi et al., *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire*, volume 2, 1600–1914 (Cambridge, 1994), 589–95.

61. Marcus, *Eve of Modernity*, 183–84; business partnerships between Jews and non-Jews were hardly a novelty of the Ottoman period; Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 1:72, 85, 172–73.

62. For example, Isaac, a Jew, started a business in Aleppo with one Mustafa Pasha and Gavri'el, another Jew, in 1737–38. When Isaac died after six years, owing money to his two partners, they came to his son demanding their share; BOA, Haleb Ahkâm, 1:47. In Damascus, Avram the Jew formed a partnership with a Muslim named Sulayman in 1747 but became sick and moved to Jerusalem before he managed to pay his share. His partner then had to face demands from others, who claimed the two owed them money; BOA, Şam Ahkâm, 2:5.

63. Halil İnalcık summarized the situation: "The urban population of the empire . . . was divided into the two categories of Muslim and non-Muslim, but this was a classification which the *şer'at* [Islamic law] imposed, and did not correspond to the real social and economic divisions in society. Muslim and non-Muslim merchants and craftsmen, in fact, belonged to the same class and enjoyed the same rights . . . From time to time the sultans sought to fulfill the provisions

interactions outside their community and be affiliated with diverse social and economic circles. Such spatial and occupational circumstances were hardly conducive to an effective enforcing of rabbinical authority.

The coherence of the religious community; its functioning as an autonomous unit that settles all its disputes internally, in the *beit din* and according to halakhah; and people's adherence to the advice of rabbis on most matters together constituted an aspirational ideal more than a reality. Despite the obvious interest of scholars in portraying themselves as communal leaders who wielded undisputed authority, one does not have to work too hard to notice the constant struggle between lay leaders and commoners, and rabbis: the responsa reveal it time and again. A weakened rabbinical establishment did not mean that communal institutions were less effective or that dependency on them diminished. At least in some areas the community had little outside competition before the nineteenth century: services at the synagogue, education for children, and the collection and dispensation of charity were all performed exclusively within the framework of the religious community.⁶⁴ In the context of those operations, even those who in their daily lives did not strictly follow halakhic principles tended to respect communal ordinances that the rabbis sanctioned. Understandably, many Jews, who already had to belong to a congregation for tax purposes, sought to participate in or benefit from various services the community provided without ultimately accepting rabbinical authority as a guiding principle in their lives. One must wonder, then, what power rabbis did have in such settings, where people had alternatives to the community and depended on it to some degree at the same time? The *frankos* dispute, which demonstrates the limits of rabbinical authority, provides some clues.

THE FRANKO DISPUTE

What began as a minor disagreement soon escalated to a split in the Aleppo community between rival camps and a question of regional importance, drawing scholars from Damascus and Jerusalem into the debate. The *frankos* were European (mostly Italian) Jews who had settled in Aleppo and other Ottoman cities in the seventeenth century. Initially

of the *şeriat* by issuing laws forbidding non-Muslims to wear the same clothes as Muslims, to own slaves or to ride horses, but these decrees were ineffective." Halil İnalcık, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age, 1500–1600* (New Rochelle, N.Y., 1973), 150–51.

64. Yaron Ayalon, "Poor Relief in Ottoman Jewish Communities," in *Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Medieval and Early Modern Times*, ed. A. Franklin et al. (Leiden, 2014), 67–82.

arriving with Christian merchants to trade in the region, many stayed for the long term and married local Jewish women. As they were European citizens, the capitulations that the Ottoman Empire had granted to their countries exempted them from Ottoman laws. This, and their ties to their respective nations' representatives in the area, led many of them to maintain a limited relationship with the local (by then mostly) Sephardi communities.⁶⁵ Aleppo, as a commercial hub, had a sizeable *franko* community by the mid-eighteenth century. As in Salonica and elsewhere in the empire,⁶⁶ the *frankos* in Aleppo were able to separate themselves from the larger Sephardi community thanks to an understanding with the city's rabbis and lay leaders reached in the seventeenth century, according to which communal ordinances (*takanot* and *haskamot*) and local practices (*minbagim*) would not apply to them. Such an agreement was not achieved easily. Shlomoh "the Elder" (d. ca. 1700) of the prominent Laniado family, who as far as we know served as the *av beit din* (president of the rabbinical court), explicitly demanded that the *frankos* follow the *haskamot* of the congregation, but when most of the other rabbis and the *parnasim* did not support him, he backed off. A few years later, Laniado brought the issue up again, but a *franko* delegation managed to convince him that it was not in the community's interest to enforce its regulations on them. The rabbi again withdrew his demand but refused to supply the *frankos* with a writ confirming their exemption from communal decisions: "It is enough that you ask me to maintain my silence," he exclaimed.⁶⁷ Based on these understandings, which remained in place for nearly a century despite some rabbinical opposition, the *frankos* of Aleppo refused to pay their taxes with the local Jews and were not obliged or expected to contribute to communal charity, even though many of them did so. As one tax register suggests, the Ottomans recognized the division between local Jews and the *frankos*, and collected taxes from the two groups separately.⁶⁸ The *frankos* were thus a good example of a group that rejected

65. Despite the *frankos'* dual commitment to their European nation and to the local Jewish community, and their quasi-outsider status, the dispute around their communal obligations demonstrates the weakness of rabbinical authority in the empire overall, as it drew in the local Sephardic community and scholars from neighboring towns.

66. Aron Rodrigue, *French Jews, Turkish Jews: The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Politics of Jewish Schooling in Turkey, 1860–1925* (Bloomington, Ind., 1990), 39–40.

67. Katsin, *Maḥaneh Yehudab*, 6.

68. BOA, MMD 9849, 127. Dated January 27, 1673, the document mentions two groups of Jewish poll tax payers: "Arab Aleppo Jews residing in Aleppo" (*Haleb'de sâkin 'urbân haleb yabudileri*), and a smaller group of "Frankish Jews

attempts to impose rabbinical conventions, while still wishing to maintain connections with the Jewish community and participate in certain activities.

The origins of the *franko* crisis lie in the emergence of new elites among local Sephardi merchants, many of whom obtained positions with the *frankos* throughout the eighteenth century.⁶⁹ For the Sephardim, a job with the *frankos* not only assured one of a nice income but also paved the way for obtaining European consular protection. By the second half of the eighteenth century, a nouveau riche class had emerged among the local Jews. Its members enjoyed a legal status equivalent to that of Europeans, hardly paid taxes, and mostly rejected the community's rabbinical authority to determine day-to-day practices, just like the *frankos*. Displeased with the growing number of tax-evading subjects, the Ottoman authorities periodically increased the tax burden on the Jews. And since the community paid its taxes as a whole, the less fortunate had to make up for those who were now exempt.⁷⁰

Against the privileges of the *frankos* and their associates another Shlomo Laniado (d. 1794) protested time and again. His language suggests an expectation of unequivocal acceptance of his authority. Yet the dispute that unfolded between Laniado, the *frankos*, their supporters in the community, and other scholars suggests that the image of rabbinical leadership Laniado portrayed was a far cry from reality. The story begins with one stock-keeper, likely a local Sephardi who aligned himself with the *frankos* and who worked for a European, non-Jewish employer. The stock-keeper procured a decree from Istanbul exempting him from taxation. Accordingly, when community agents, acting as tax-farmers on behalf of the Ottoman government, asked him to pay his share, the stock-keeper refused. Laniado intervened, contending that the document the stock-keeper had obtained was invalid. The latter then approached three rabbis outside Aleppo, who ruled in his favor. Laniado rejected their

residing in Aleppo" (*Haleb'de sâkin ifrenci yabudîleri*). The first group numbered 377 tax-paying households, while the latter had 73. *Ifrenci* in this document refers to the *frankos* and not to the Sephardim, as Masters has argued, as by 1673 the Sephardim were already the majority in Aleppo. They likely comprised more than 73 households, and because they spoke Arabic, the Ottomans considered them (and the original Jewish inhabitants of the city, the *musta'ribun*) Arab; Masters, *Christians and Jews*, 55–56.

69. For a detailed account of the *franko* crisis, see Har'el, *Bein tkhakhim le-mahapekhab*, 42–49. For the two competing, contemporary narratives of the dispute, also cited below, see Laniado, *Beit dino*, 459–81, 501–28; and Katsin, *Maḥaneh Yehudab*, 31, 78–114.

70. Har'el, *Bein tkhakhim le-mahapekhab*, 42–45.

findings, as did all the other rabbis of Aleppo, who in this case sided with Laniado. But the stock-keeper did not cooperate, and when he was summoned to the *beit din* to clarify the matter, he refused to show up. Such behavior should have led to a public announcement at the synagogue of the repudiator's excommunication, but there is no indication this ever happened.⁷¹

Shortly after this, the Sephardic community promulgated a *baskamab*, with Laniado's encouragement, that women should not walk by themselves in the city's gardens and orchards—a decision that originally had little to do with the *frankos*.⁷² One *franko* man, who wished to obey the decision, then had an argument with his wife about going out on her own. When she insisted that the *frankos* were never obliged to follow the community's ordinances, and that she should not be sitting at home when all her friends go out, the man approached Laniado, who as expected ruled that the *frankos* ought to follow the *baskamab*. When the matter was brought to the attention of the wife's father, he convened the leaders of the *frankos*, who protested against the attempt to change a long-standing convention. Laniado provided a lengthy response, in which he openly sought to incorporate the *frankos* into the local community and subjugate them to his authority.⁷³ But Laniado's leadership was not to remain unchallenged. His main rival in the community, Yehudah Katsin, wrote a long tract covering all the possible reasons for including the *frankos* in the *baskamot*, only to reject them one by one. As he explained, the *frankos* were traditionally excluded from communal decisions not only in Aleppo but everywhere else in the empire. Katsin dismissed Laniado's claim that the *frankos* had been in Aleppo long enough to fall under the community's jurisdiction, arguing that the community itself still saw them as temporary settlers.⁷⁴ He asserted that the potential damage from requiring the *frankos* to follow communal ordinances would be too great to endure. The *frankos*, despite paying their taxes to the state separately, contributed to communal charity: they supported the community's needy members, paid for their education, helped widows and orphans, and sustained the sick; in exchange, they only asked to maintain the old agreement their forefa-

71. *Ibid.*, 46–49.

72. For the background of this communal decision, see Katsin, *Maḥaneh Yehudab*, 31. Here and below, I refer to the indigenous Aleppo Jewish community, which in the eighteenth century was made up of descendants of the expellees from Iberia and the Musta'ribun, as the Sephardic community.

73. Laniado, *Beit Dino*, 459–81, 501–28.

74. Katsin, *Maḥaneh Yehudab*, 78–81, 114.

thers had reached with Laniado's ancestors.⁷⁵ Attempting to change the status quo, claimed Katsin, would inevitably lead to a severe economic crisis.⁷⁶ The century-old compromise over the *frankos*, concluded Katsin, was not ideal; however, it was better than the alternative.⁷⁷ Katsin's fears were not unfounded. Laniado's insistence led the *frankos* to gradually distance themselves from the community in the following years.⁷⁸

At its core, this was a monetary dispute: the *frankos*, and those affiliated with them commercially from the Sephardic community, did not adhere to communal decisions or pay their share of taxes. Laniado sought to impose rabbinical-communal authority on them, which from his perspective was one and the same: the community was him, he governed it, and all others had to comply with his rulings. Katsin argued this would lead to financial disaster. Yet the question of the *frankos* was also a matter of power and authority: it opened the way for wider debate about issues such as the number of judges serving in the Jewish court (one, as Laniado claimed was the established custom, or three, as Katsin wanted and the Talmud stipulated⁷⁹), whether the *av beit din* could excommunicate a rebellious member, if he had the right to appoint other judges, or whether he had the authority to change communal ordinances without the approval of the congregation. This open debate, documented in detail in Laniado's and Katsin's responsa, revealed the diffuse nature of the Aleppo rabbinical establishment, whereby in lieu of central leadership one finds competing authorities who were supported by different elements in the community and scholars from neighboring towns.

The debate over the *frankos* occurred in a small Jewish community, but it revealed a political structure and a weakness of the rabbinate that typified Jewish communities throughout the Ottoman Empire. A close reading of the history of Ottoman Jewish communities suggests that rabbinical authority to set a daily agenda for communities, and rabbis' ability to enforce a lifestyle that closely followed halakhah, had always been somewhat precarious. This did not change until formal, hierarchical rabbinical structures emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. The arrival of the *frankos* and Christian Europeans in the empire opened many doors for Jews and encouraged integration into the surrounding society. By the mid-eighteenth century, it would be more accurate to describe Ottoman

75. Ibid., 96–97.

76. Ibid., 104, 107.

77. Ibid., 78.

78. Raphael Shlomoh Laniado et al., *Ro'ei Yivra'el* (Jerusalem: Sh. Katsin, 1897), 2:25–26.

79. bSan, 1.2a–3b.

Jewry as largely made up of a loose network of cosmopolitan communities, whose members were well connected with individuals of different faiths and spoke several languages, than as a top-down hierarchical religious organization.

We learn about this structure of Jewish life through such crises as this one involving the *frankos*. Laniado and Katsin might have found themselves on opposing sides of a particular legal question, but in practice they were arguing not about the liberties of the *frankos* but about the best way to keep their community under rabbinical leadership, knowing that only by doing so they—and scholars in general—would continue to exert authority effectively. As it turned out, the deterioration of rabbinical influence was not a process either Laniado or Katsin could stop. As nineteenth-century rabbis saw it, weakening morals and little respect for halakhah characterized their era.⁸⁰ Although their view may have been subjective, the nineteenth century saw the decline of old rabbinical establishments whose status was determined by intellectual eminence; the proliferation of extracommunal institutions competing with those of the community, and at times run by the same *parnasim* who led the community; and eventually, in the second half of the century, the rise of a new rabbinical elite that governed Jews in the empire through official appointments and hierarchical bodies that resembled modern rabbinical institutions.⁸¹

TOWARD A MODEL OF COMMUNAL LEADERSHIP

The evidence thus far suggests that Ottoman Jewish communities did not operate as a top-down leadership structure with a chief rabbi at the head, and that in general the power of prominent rabbis, even those holding official appointments, was limited to specific arenas. This conclusion

80. Avraham 'Antebi (d. 1848) of Aleppo lamented his community's situation in one of his books: women no longer covered their faces when among strangers and walked around freely without their husbands; men and women sat together at weddings and other parties; people no longer came to the synagogue at midnight to study and pray; and when they did show up, they passed their time gossiping, doing business, and drinking alcohol; Avraham 'Antebi, *Sefer hokhmab u-musar* (Jerusalem, 2000), 22–24, 31–33, 191–93. Rabbi Ḥayim Labaton (d. 1869), also of Aleppo, criticized the foreign influences on the community, reflected in the invitation of gentile musicians to Jewish events and the playing of loud and secular music in Jewish homes; Ḥayim Mordekhai Labaton, *Nokhah ba-shulḥan: Tesbuvot ve-ḥidushim be-Arba'ab Turim ve-Shulḥan 'Aruk* (Jerusalem, 2000), 5, 7.

81. For more on these developments, see Har'el, *Bein tkhakhim le-mabapekhab*, 17–23.

fits in with the Jewish tradition of debating and consulting, whereby scholars discussed matters and eventually deferred to the majority opinion, or to that of an especially eminent scholar, who was influential thanks to his learnedness and charisma rather than an official position. This had been the Jewish way of doing things at least since talmudic times. Even in periods where historical evidence clearly suggests the existence of hierarchical structures, such as under the geonim and exilarchs of Babylonia or the nagids of Egypt, there was still much room for dissent.⁸² Similarly, in the Ottoman period we see a plurality of views, within communities and across the empire, and scholars who were not wary of attacking the position of others, even those considered more prominent. The *franko* dispute was one example of this, but even in Izmir, where in the seventeenth century an institutionalized rabbinate of some sort existed, disagreements among scholars were frequent. The only notable exception to this setting was the short rule of the false messiah Shabbetai Tsevi over the Jewish community there in 1665–66, when his opponents were persecuted and rabbis who publicly rejected him, such as Shlomo Elghazi and Aharon Lapapa, had to seek asylum elsewhere.⁸³ In the end, it was the relative openness to diverse ideas and traditions that characterized Ottoman society at large, and the Sephardic integrative rather than isolationist tradition, that won the day.⁸⁴ In a top-down setting, one might have expected members of any community to seek only the opinion of the chief rabbi or

82. Moshe Gil, *Jews in Islamic Countries in the Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2004), 125–41, and 208–39 for challenges to the authority of the geonim that erupted from time to time during the ninth and tenth centuries. For eleventh- and twelfth-century Egypt, see Mark Cohen, *Jewish Self-Government in Medieval Egypt: The Origins of the Office of Head of the Jews, ca. 1065–1126* (Princeton, N.J., 1980), 163–71; and Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 2:55–61.

83. The Izmir community experienced turmoil in the mid-seventeenth century. Attempts to settle disputes between rabbis and their factions by establishing a rabbinate actually revealed the precariousness of rabbinical authority. See Bar-na'i, *Ha-mar'ab*, 199–245. For an account of Shabbetai Tsevi's brief rule in Izmir, see Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Şevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676* (London, 1973), 389–433.

84. The Sephardim brought with them a spirit of social and economic integration into the surrounding society that had characterized Jewish life in Iberia before the expulsion. Even the organization of poor relief, a matter handled solely within the Jewish community, was inspired by Catholic models of charitable societies; Jonathan Ray, *After Expulsion: 1492 and the Making of Sephardic Jewry* (New York, 2013), 23–27; Yom Tov 'Asis, "'Ezrah hadadit ve-sa'ad be-kehilot Yisra'el be-Sefarad," in *Moresbet Sefarad*, ed. H. Beinart (Jerusalem, 1992), 259–79.

those scholars who were known to agree with him. Yet time and again questions were sent to opponents of the leading scholar.

Further indications of the diffuse nature of Jewish leadership are found in connection with the excommunication of transgressors. Since Jewish leaders in the empire could not use capital punishment or imprisonment, the only meaningful tool to enforce normative behavior within the Jewish community was excommunication (*herem*, or its lighter version, *niḏui*).⁸⁵ And indeed, the sources reveal instances of rabbis threatening disobedient coreligionists with *herem*, as in the affair with the vine leaves with which this essay begins.⁸⁶ The many regulations passed by communities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, prohibiting Jews from taking cases to the Muslim court on pain of *herem*, suggest that rabbis had meant to use excommunication against violators of communal ordinances. Yet Jews still often turned to state courts to resolve their disputes, and excommunication was rarely imposed. These centuries were characterized by constant tensions between rabbis and their followers, many of whom wished to be active members of a congregation but maintain some individual freedom. An indication of the inefficiency of the threat of *herem* was the need felt by rabbis in Istanbul and Salonica, already in the sixteenth century, to renew regulations the violation of which was supposed to trigger excommunication. In some communities, as in Izmir, rabbis gave up the fight by the mid-seventeenth century, annulling such communal ordinances that the greater share of the community could not realistically be expected to fulfill.⁸⁷ Transgressions of religious law far more often than not resulted in no apparent consequences for the offenders. Such a conclusion hardly correlates with a strong, centralized model of rabbinical leadership, though it does not preclude rabbinical dominance in other aspects of communal life that did not require obedience to halakhah.

Finally, we must account for the nature of the evidence on Ottoman Jewish communities, and how it has helped create a hierarchical model that, as I have argued here, is not sustainable. Although historians have relied on a broad range of sources to study the Ottoman Empire and its

85. Hacker has shown that Jewish courts in the Empire had virtually no authority outside purely halakhic matters. See Joseph Hacker, "Ha-shiput ha-'atsmi ha-Yehudi ba-Imperyah ha-'Othmanit ba-me'ot ha-17 vaha-18—gevulotehah shel ha-otonomyah," in *Temurut ba-historyah ba-Yehudit ba-ḥadashah*, ed. S. Almog et al. (Jerusalem, 1987), 349–88.

86. Rosanes has documented several such cases. See Rosanes, *Korot*, 3:329–30, 4:58–83, 255–56, 5:299, 392, 6:23–24.

87. Ben-Na'eh, *Yehudim*, 132–33, 184–85; Rosanes, *Korot*, 3:259–66, 4:32.

Jewish subjects, most of what we know about internal communal matters has come from rabbinical responsa, as they have constituted the majority of the primary sources relied upon by historians of Ottoman Jewry.⁸⁸ Turning to rabbinical sources made sense, given that outside observers, be they Arabs, Turks, or Europeans, could not be expected to be familiar enough with the inner workings of Jewish communities to provide reliable reports. Nevertheless, rabbinical sources also present a significant disadvantage that historians have hitherto confronted only marginally, namely, that they were written by the very same people whose ideas of communal leadership fitted a top-down hierarchical model. Thus one cannot ignore the possibility that rabbis portrayed themselves, or their peers, as enjoying unquestionable authority, because they believed this was the ideal structure of Jewish communities. After all, rabbis wrote their responsa as legal rather than historical texts.⁸⁹ It is likely that members of prominent scholarly families would have wanted to demonstrate their status by claiming to have leadership roles that had passed from father to son or that received overwhelming communal support. At the very least, one must account for the possibility that the rabbinical world within which those scholars operated led them to resort to unintentional, subconscious distortions of history.

Lamentably, it is nearly impossible to penetrate the Jewish experience with evidence that is nonrabbinical by nature. Accounts of Jewish chroniclers, such as those of Eliyahu Capsali and Yosef Sambari, are far and

88. As attested by the bibliographies of those studies; e.g., Rozen, *Istanbul*, 376–81; Ben-Na'eh, *Yehudim*, 357–64; Har'el, *Bein tkbakhim le-mabapekhab*, 341–59; Barna'i, *Ha-mar'ab*, 377–406. A notable exception is the studies of Amnon Cohen on the Jews of Ottoman Jerusalem, based almost exclusively on the *shar'i* court records; *Yehudim be-vet ha-mishpat*; *Yehudim, 17th century*; *Yehudim, 18th century*.

89. Simcha Fishbane argued that responsa are a problematic source for the study of history because “they are not disinterested historical witnesses” but rather reflect Jewish legal maxims. Rabbis did not have future historians in mind when writing them, and thus “to suggest a social reality based upon . . . [the] responsa is problematic”; Simcha Fishbane, “Is It a Crime to Be Interdisciplinary? A Different Approach to the Study of Modern Jewish Law,” in *Religion in History: The Word, the Idea, the Reality*, ed. M. Despland and G. Vallée (Waterloo, 1992), 146–47. Historians of Ottoman Jews have noted some problems with the responsa, but none has so far argued that the rabbinical perspective in itself was problematic. See, e.g., Matt Goldish, *Jewish Questions: Responsa on Sephardic Life in the Early Modern Period* (Princeton, N.J., 2008), xlvi–liii; Jacob Barna'i, *The Jews in Palestine in the Eighteenth Century: Under the Patronage of the Istanbul Committee of Officials for Palestine* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1992), 5; Shmuelevitz, *The Jews*, 4–5.

few between and suffer from numerous historiographical problems.⁹⁰ As far as we know, registries (*pinkasim*) and similar archival documents of Jewish communities, administered by lay leaders and preserved for some European communities, have not survived for the Ottoman Empire.⁹¹ The historian must therefore read rabbinical texts carefully and critically. Given the evidence of the fluidity of religious boundaries, one would expect to find some indications that the power of rabbis and their ability to enforce halakhah were rather limited; and that the honorifics bestowed on scholars meant very little in practice. And indeed, subtle clues are hidden in the texts here and there. Writing in the early nineteenth century, Rabbi Avraham 'Antebi of Aleppo laments what he saw as the moral decline of his community: people no longer spent whole nights or extensive parts of their day in the synagogue. Most preferred to pray at home, and when they did come, they showed no respect, discussing mundane issues during prayer. At their homes, people would listen to gentile music, gamble, and engage in other illicit behaviors. Antebi's musings about earlier decades, however, probably reflected wishful thinking more than an accurate historical observation. Two generations earlier, Raphael Shlomo Laniado, too, complained about the lack of respect for tradition among people in the same community.⁹² Some dissonance apparently existed between the ideal that scholars portrayed in their writings, and rabbis' actual ability to enforce behavior.

This does not mean Jewish communities were chaotic organizations. While scholars may not have been able to strictly enforce Jewish law, the community as an institution mattered to its members, who were inextricably tied to it and the services it provided. Being involved in communal affairs, even when one did not adhere to all aspects of halakhah or rabbinical advice, delivered prestige and a social standing one could not achieve elsewhere. Communal activities like education, the collection and dispensation of charity, and the convention of members at the synagogue to discuss various issues, always took place within a pious context, even when there was nothing particularly religious about them. In this, Jewish practices mirrored Muslim ones at the state level, where anything from

90. Elijah Capsali et al., *Seder Eliyahu zuta: Toldot ha-'Othmanim u-Venetsyab ve-korot 'am Yisra'el be-mamlekhoh Turkiyah, Sefarad, u-Venetsyab* (Jerusalem, 1975–83); Yosef Sambari, *Sefer divrei Yosef* (Jerusalem, 1981); For a discussion of historians' uncritical usage of these sources and their many historiographical problems, see Hacker, "Ha-rabanut ha-rashit," 226–36.

91. Ben-Na'eh, *Yehudim*, 131, argued that no such documents have survived. In my research, I have so far not been able to find any.

92. 'Antebi, *Hokhmah u-musar*, 22–24, 31–33; Laniado, *Beit dino*, 11.

endowing property to sending provisions to disaster-hit areas was performed within a religious framework despite having little to do with, or at times even directly violating, Islamic law. As the late Shehab Ahmed argued, such actions were still part of the Muslim experience—of the religion itself—even when they stood in violation of its orthodox forms, and despite the complaints of Muslim scholars throughout the generations.⁹³ Similarly, for many Jews involvement in the community did not necessitate adherence to rabbinical advice; challenging scholars' authority, disrespecting them, turning to state courts instead of the *beit din*, breaking congregations into competing factions, or leading a lifestyle antithetical to Jewish law were all still parts of the Jewish experience.

Although scholars participated in the administration of communal services and advised on proper conduct, lay leaders (*parnasim*) were often those effectively in charge of all matters communal, from adjudicating cases at the *beit din* to administering communal functions: charity, synagogue maintenance, and tax collection. The *parnasim* or *tovei ha-ir* were in charge of all appointments, directly or indirectly: rabbis, synagogue officers (*gaba'im*), and the assessors of taxes (*ma'arikhim*), among others. The *parnasim* typically had the authority to make commitments on behalf of the community, negotiate with the Ottoman authorities, and make financial arrangements for the benefit of the community. Hardly any evidence produced by the *parnasim*, such as communal registries or personal accounts, has survived, and we learn of them either through the responsa that typically described them as subordinates of the rabbis,⁹⁴ or by non-Jewish sources, such as *shar'i* court records.⁹⁵ People serving in such positions, whether by official appointment or by some natural evolution into a leadership role, were typically wealthy, influential, and well-connected members of their communities, but not necessarily devout followers of Jewish Orthodox practices. It was the *parnasim* who appointed the rabbis to serve as spiritual leaders, teachers, and judges. To the extent that the evidence Amnon Cohen has gathered for Jerusalem might apply elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire, we may assume that it was the *par-*

93. Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, N.J., 2015), 5–97.

94. Some examples: Hayim Yitshak Musafya, *Sefer hayim ve-ḥesed* (Livorno, 1844), 1:10a; Nisim Hayim Mizrahi, *Sefer admat kodesh* (Istanbul, 1742), 133b; Hayim Palagi, *Sefer lev hayim* (Jerusalem, 1996), 3:72; Ephraim Navon, *Sefer maḥane Ephraim* (Warsaw, 1878), 1:34, 147; Moshe Mordekhai Meyuḥas, *Sefer berakhot mayim* (Thessaloniki, 1789), 157a–158b; Benveniste, *Ba'ey hayye*, 1:1b–3a.

95. Cohen, *Yehudim, 17th century*, 1:7–19, 28–47, 50–53; Cohen, *Yehudim, 18th century*, 9–28.

navim who set the daily agenda of the community, administered it financially, and facilitated contact with the Ottoman authorities.

How then shall we define the role of rabbis, and especially those scholars historians have understood to be chief rabbis? Beyond serving as spiritual guides, leaders of prayers at the synagogue, deliverers of sermons, and teachers of Torah and religious law in general, rabbis did not typically become political leaders of entire congregations. Naturally, some rabbis exerted more authority over their followers than others, at times even superseding that of the lay leaders; this, however, was more a result of personal charisma and local political circumstances than of official appointments. Likewise, in some locales rabbis benefitted from established customs that combined their position with that of a *dayyan*, a *parnas*, or all three.⁹⁶ Historians rightly noted that in larger towns citywide rabbinical institutions evolved; but such arrangements hardly encroached on congregational matters, and they lacked a clear leadership structure. The one exception was seventeenth-century Izmir, where a central rabinate led by one or two rabbis evolved, but there are few indications it managed to mold Jewish society around Jewish law, or that its decisions were binding. Rather than becoming absolute rulers of their congregations, rabbis were part of the leadership stratum of every community, and one may assume their rulings as judges at the *beit din* were largely respected; but they were not typically at the head of a hierarchical pyramid, if one ever existed.

Ottoman Jews before the nineteenth century lived in communities with different leadership arrangements. And yet some common conclusions emerge. Since the Ottomans regarded Jewish communities primarily as tax-farm units, all Jews had to be members of a congregation in the city in which they lived, at least formally. Many, if not most, wanted a communal affiliation that exceeded the basic function of tax payments. People led a lifestyle that worked for them, some strictly following *mitsvot* and the directives of rabbis, others caring little for halakhah; however, they sought affiliation with a community that provided them a social framework—even if it was not the only network with which they affiliated. The religious community had competitors in many areas, such as in the administration of justice. But it also offered Jews benefits no other organization could, including charitable support and education. The monopoly that communities had over such services incentivized or even coerced members to accept communal, but not necessarily rabbinical or halakhic, authority.

96. On rabbis serving on the *beit din* alongside lay leaders, see Benayahu, *Marbits torah*, 55–67.