

# H-Net Reviews

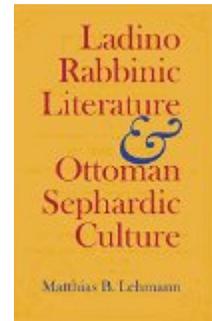
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Matthias B. Lehmann. *Ladino Rabbinic Literature and Ottoman Sephardic Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. 280 pp. 39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34630-8.

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## King Merodakh's Telegraph: Ottoman Jewish Religious Modernity

Writing in the last decades of the nineteenth century, an Ottoman rabbi by the name of Ben-Tsion Roditi turned to the book of Isaiah as proof that the telegraph, the “invention” of which had begun to awe his contemporaries across the globe, had already existed in biblical times. (How else to interpret the lightning-speed communication that had allowed the Babylonian King Merodakh to learn of King Hezekiah’s recovery in the “very hour” it had occurred? ) More important than the details even was the message his conclusion conveyed: there was nothing new under the sun. Through this interpretation, Roditi attempted to craft a worldview that could both respond to his rapidly changing environment and reinforce the symbolic universe of traditional Ottoman Jewish learning. By presenting his thoughts on the matter in the Judeo-Spanish vernacular of Sephardi Jewish communities settled throughout the eastern Mediterranean basin, Roditi made himself part of another tradition as well.

Beginning in the eighteenth century, a number of Ottoman rabbis had undertaken the task of fighting the ignorance they believed was plaguing their communities by producing works of Jewish ethics (*musar*) in Judeo-Spanish (also known as Ladino). This development was inspired in part by a particular strain within Jewish mysticism (Lurianic Kabbalah) which suggested that every Jew would necessarily play a role in the mending of the world required for redemption. The spread of ignorance among their coreligionists thus threatened to undo the proper order of things. It was with this in mind

that these Ottoman rabbis—all capable of publishing in the more highly esteemed Hebrew language of their religious tradition—chose to write in their vernacular instead. While they democratized rabbinic knowledge by translating it for the masses, these “vernacular rabbis” (to use Matthias Lehmann’s term) also attempted to instill in their audiences the sense that their texts required the mediation of individuals with religious training. Thus, they explained that common people should gather together to read their books in *meldados*, or study sessions, always with the guidance of someone trained in the study of Jewish law. Upholding the privileged position of religious scholars in this way, such study sessions were also meant to assure that members of the popular classes spent their time in acceptable ways, rather than enjoying leisure time out in public, drinking and smoking in coffeehouses and taverns, or promenading without a clear destination.

Lehmann’s work offers an insightful and suggestive portrayal of the collective intellectual profile of these rabbis and of their vernacular project. Drawing on sources which have never been systematically analyzed, his work focuses on nine of the most important Judeo-Spanish books of *musar* published throughout the nineteenth century. Lehmann charts their authors’ different positions on topics including appropriate forms of sociability, the maintenance of social order (as divided by class, gender, and degree of learnedness), interpretations of the exile of the Jewish people, and—by the final decades of the century—secular education and direct challenges to rab-

binic authority and tradition. From the outset, this body of literature translated elite, rabbinic knowledge for popular audiences, often reorganizing, omitting, or adding passages and ideas in the process. Because these works aimed to address both the perceived needs and shortcomings of their readership, their authors offered paternalistic rewritings of original sources, providing specific selections of religious knowledge which they believed their popular audiences would understand and benefit from in a direct manner. While eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century rabbinic authors inveighed against the threat of ignorance, however, by the latter half of the nineteenth century they began to direct their energy against a group they called the “epicureans,” referring to the Westernizers among them who openly challenged the legitimacy of the rabbinic stranglehold over Ottoman Jewish leadership.

The rabbis portrayed in Lehmann’s study—like many Ottoman reformers of the nineteenth century—conceded the utility of learning the languages and skills of the “West,” but were threatened by the introduction of European ideas and ideologies. This attitude was echoed by Sultan Mahmud II when he explained that French was to be employed in the imperial medical school not to teach “French literature,” but rather to teach “scientific medicine and little by little to take it into our language” (p. 170). In the rabbis’ estimation, foreign languages could serve specific, pragmatic purposes, but foreign literature was dangerous. This meant that they preferred to broach secular subjects and address the innovations of the modern world in their own works rather than have their coreligionists seek out alternative sources of explanation for their occurrence outside of a rabbinic frame of reference.

In addition to his many incisive close readings, one of Lehmann’s principal contributions is to suggest that these rabbis—commonly portrayed as forces of anti-modern traditionalism—often proved to be flexible and innovative thinkers who responded to the changing world around them by opening their corpus to secular topics with the hope of safeguarding their monopoly on knowledge and spiritual leadership. Here, Lehmann’s work complements the findings of other scholars, such as Harvey Goldberg, Norman Stillman, and Zvi Zohar, who

have studied the religious responses of rabbis elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa to the host of new challenges that came with the experience of modernity.

The rabbis’ Judeo-Spanish books—Lehmann argues—had the unforeseen effect of decentralizing their own authority, as they expanded their reading public to include women and various groups from the popular classes to whom Hebrew reading materials remained largely inaccessible. This trend was exacerbated as individuals began to read by themselves rather than resorting to the reading sessions their rabbis had prescribed. Having made space for secular topics in their writings, the Ottoman rabbis portrayed in Lehmann’s study helped lay the foundation for the secular Judeo-Spanish reading public that emerged in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Decades before western European Jews and their local Ottoman allies announced their intention to reshape the face of Ottoman Jewry according to new models, the authors of Judeo-Spanish *musar* literature—however inadvertently—had helped to set this process into motion. By advancing this argument, Lehmann locates the origins of the modern transformations of Ottoman Jewish communities in an earlier era than has been suggested by previous scholarship. He similarly gives evidence of the internal motors that drove this transformation from within the empire, adding a new dimension to the explanatory framework which has so long focused on the introduction of change into modern Ottoman Jewish communities from the outside, most notably from Europe.

Scholars of the late Ottoman Empire and the modern Middle East more generally will undoubtedly find within this work a number of striking parallels between the responses of other individuals and groups to the growing Western influence in the region and those of the vernacular rabbis portrayed in Lehmann’s study. The unexpected consequences precipitated by these rabbis’ attempts to preserve their religious universe in the face of change similarly offer fruitful points of comparison. *Ladino Rabbinic Literature and Ottoman Sephardic Culture* will therefore also be welcomed by scholars interested in broader debates about the role religion played in the emergence of modernity and about the various ways that religious thinkers became modern, even despite themselves.

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