

Dina Danon. *The Jews of Ottoman Izmir: A Modern History*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020. 272 pp. \$26.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-5036-1091-0.

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Louis Fishman on Dina Danon, *The Jews of Ottoman Izmir: A Modern History*

In her book, *The Jews of Ottoman Izmir: A Modern History*, Dina Danon sets out to tell the story of how the Ottoman Jewish community of Izmir underwent a transitional period in the late nineteenth century, during which new understandings of community emerged. Unlike recent literature on Ottoman non-Muslims that focuses on the relationship between Istanbul's Jewish community and the city's Muslim political elites, Danon's work looks inward to explore the dynamics within Izmir's vibrant Jewish society. What emerges is a comprehensive social history of a community that to a great extent maintained a character unique from those of other Sephardic Ladino-speaking communities, such as in Istanbul and Salonica.

Through her detailed descriptions of issues of poverty, class, and social mobility, Danon exposes a narrative that stands in stark contrast to those of Ashkenazi European Jews, whether in the Russian Empire, where Jews suffered persecution or, in western Europe, such as France and Germany, where they began to assimilate. In fact, Danon shows that, unlike these other Jewish communities, the Jews of Izmir did not face an overarching "Jewish question" during the nineteenth century. Rather, as Danon writes, for the Izmir Jews "there

were no protracted struggles for tolerance or emancipation, no implicit or explicit demands on Jewish particularism, no calls to dismantle the semi-autonomous *kehillah* or even criticism of it as reflective of dual Jewish loyalty" (p. 25).

So, with what changes were Izmir's Jews so preoccupied during the final decades of the nineteenth century until the breakout of World War I? One of the main themes threaded throughout the book is concern about poverty, which Danon clearly states was a question not limited to the Jewish community: "Izmir's Jews grappled with poverty not because it reflected something specific about Jewishness but because their socioeconomic position, which was shared by Ottomans of many faiths, was increasingly at odds with new attitudes towards social stratification. These attitudes were disseminated by both the *kehillah* and the Ottoman state and reinforced by the changing canvas of the eastern Mediterranean port city itself" (p. 26).

As she brings to life the Jewish quarter of Izmir, the "Djuderia," Danon eloquently shows that a new model of the community was taking shape. Leading us through the archives of multiple Ladino newspapers, Danon demonstrates that Izmir's Jews were becoming increasingly

aware of the community's public image. For example, we see concern that the proliferation of Jewish beggars was tarnishing the community's reputation as well as calls to curb Jewish begging on the neighborhood's streets. The same worries were expressed about displays of rowdiness, such as the public drunkenness that occurred during the Jewish festival of Purim. These demonstrate how the community's internal politics were shaped by the judgmental gaze of Izmir's other non-Muslim populations—Greeks and Armenians—as well as of Muslims and government administrators.

With so much value placed on the community's public image, it is not surprising that its social transformation occurred via performative acts, like in the relatively new domains of charity and philanthropy. New philanthropic organizations raised money through balls and banquets, sponsored by the who's who of Izmir's Jewish community and attended by Ottoman administrators. Danon notes that these social events led to a greater mixing of communities: "against the backdrop of this changing environment, affluent Jews in Izmir experienced increased socialization with their non-Jewish neighbors, particularly within the realms of philanthropy" (p. 103). This entailed new interactions between groups strolling on Izmir's prestigious Kordon, as well as involvement in new social clubs. Such performative acts extended to the performance stage itself, as in plays where Jews, still greatly immersed in Ladino off-stage, sought to demonstrate their proficiency in Turkish to Ottoman Muslim audiences.

On some levels, the Jews of Izmir did develop similarly to other Jewish communities in the empire, such as in the cities of Salonica and Istanbul. For example, all three communities were divided over internal taxing by the Jewish community, known as the *gabela*. These taxes, raised mostly from the sale of Kosher meat, hit poorer members particularly hard, and butchers, *shohatim*, had an increasing say in community matters, with so

many dependent on them maintaining their much-needed service. According to Danon, "conflicts surrounding the meat gabela reflect the tensions embedded in the way in which an increasingly impoverished community allocated resources among its members" (p. 127). Debates over the tax played out in the growing number of Ladino newspapers. One satirical journal, *El Soydari*, situated the struggle over meat prices within the Jewish ceremonial Passover narrative (pp. 123, 148). The way these debates unfolded within a relatively new Jewish satirical press mirrored similar developments in the larger Ottoman society, wherein satire was becoming an important venue in which to discuss political and social issues.

Danon's findings are rich and she draws important conclusions from them, showing how despite communal struggles, the Jews of Izmir remained organized within a *kehillah*. In fact, the battle against widespread poverty brought the community together on some issues. For example, the chief rabbi of Izmir had given his support to the secular French Jewish Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) schools since the 1870s. This places the Izmir community in contrast to other Ottoman Jewish communities, where an antagonistic relationship would define attitudes toward the AIU school.

There is no doubt that this impressive historical survey of Izmir is a treasure trove of information and moves the study of Ottoman Jews forward. As a scholar of the late Ottoman period, I would have hoped to see more on how Zionism was engaged with by Izmir's Jews, as well as more on how debates surrounding the future of the Jewish community within the greater Ottoman context unfolded in the city's Jewish press. However, I do not see these as shortcomings in the book, but as avenues for future inquiry to be followed in light of the author's conclusions.

Having read the book, I am left with a sense of loss for this community that would dwindle in the

decades following World War I, with many of Izmir's Jews making their way to Israel after 1948. Danon's portrayal of the community as one that was looking greatly inward might hold the key to understanding their later migration once that insular world was shattered following World War I

and the city's turbulent and violent years leading up to the Turkish Republic. Certainly, this is a story yet to be told, and one can only hope that Dina Danon, or other scholars of Izmir, will take up this question in the future.

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