



Debra Kaplan. *The Patrons and Their Poor: Jewish Community and Public Charity in Early Modern Germany.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020. 251 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-5239-2.

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Historical research has for many years privileged the study of social, cultural, and political elites, obscuring the history of the marginalized and less well-off. This has often been attributed to the fact that the poor were unable to produce documentation and thus rarely left evidence of themselves in the historical record. However, in recent decades, a shift in historiographical interest toward marginalized groups has led to new approaches revolutionizing understandings of how society was structured and stratified in the past. It is now considered that the status of the poor depends on the definition of poverty itself, a definition that varies from place to place.[1] Moreover, we have learned that during the early modern period, the poor made up the vast majority of urban populations. Illiterate, lacking income, and living in challenging conditions, most survived thanks to the philanthropy of individuals and organizations.

Jews, in particular, were often forced to live in overcrowded ghettos or particular neighborhoods. Communities felt the need to assist their own people, creating special funds or brotherhoods in order to collect money to support their impoverished coreligionists. Their history aligns with the

phenomenon, described by Bronislaw Geremek, that charity has two aspects: a high form, which comprises its distribution by the wealthy, and a low, which considers how the poor took care of their own.[2] While the poor rarely left behind their own evidence of daily life, communal institutions often recorded every detail of their activities in particular registers. Thus, different types of historical sources remain that deal with this topic, such as statutes, minutes books, and registers. From these documents, it is possible to reconstruct some interesting aspects of lives of the poor. Debra Kaplan's *The Patrons and Their Poor: Jewish Community and Public Charity in Early Modern Germany*, fits within these new methodological directions, analyzing the registers of Jewish communities and philanthropic organizations compiled in Germany during the seventeenth century.

The first of the book's six chapters traces the history of three German communities: Frankfurt am Main, Worms, and Hamburg. It points to demographic changes, a growth in administration, and record-keeping to show the ways in which these early modern Jewish communities were distinctive. However, registering communal leader-

ship activities and expanding communities' taxation systems are developments that were not peculiar to Ashkenazi communities. Rather, these changes occurred beginning in the sixteenth century among other European Jewish communities, including those in Italy. For example, in Italy, the oldest community register to date is that of Verona, dating back to 1539, and the oldest statute of a brotherhood is probably that of Ferrara, from 1515.[3] Therefore, Kaplan uses the term "European" improperly when she states that "the first set of bylaws are from Krakow in 1595. The earliest comprehensive bylaws from western European communities were issued in the mid-seventeenth century," while the statute of the Jewish community of Rome was compiled in 1524 (p. 177).[4]

The second chapter discusses the expansion and regulation of public institutions of charity in Germany during the early modern period. Here, Kaplan examines poverty in the medieval and early modern eras, the ways communities raised funds, and the bylaws established to regulate poor behavior. She shows that during this period in Germany—as was the case elsewhere—Jewish communities started to appoint several official administrators and to fix the procedures that undergirded the collection of funds. This important phenomenon reflects an advancement in poor relief and sheds lights on the class of communal officials who managed these funds. What is more, it also underscores a development in political and institutional Jewish thought against a broader backdrop of the regulation of public charity during the early modern period.

Chapter 3 focuses on the conceptions of charity, honor, and discipline that drove communal leaders to develop policies and expand efforts to raise money, both through taxes and loans. It describes how the financial system worked and how communal leaders imposed their discipline, not only through bestowing public recognition such as honors and seats in synagogue but also via means

of public punishment of transgressive behavior through the levying of fines or synagogue shaming. In fact, in order to ensure that community members paid what they owed to a charity fund, strict disciplinary measures were enacted for enforcing payment. Permission to marry or participate in religious rituals was conditioned upon the payment of debts owed to the community.

Shifting the focus to look at charity from the bottom up, chapters 4 and 5 shift distinguish between different types of poor: those who were residents of a community and as such held *hezkat ha-Kahal* (the formal status of resident and community member, which extended the right to assistance and alms), and those who were transient and therefore subject to special restrictions. Residents were granted the right to be buried in the communal cemetery, guaranteed individual communal aid, and offered protection in the case of an accusation or libel. In exchange they were responsible for paying communal taxes. On the other hand, transient poor, who typically wandered from place to place, lacked official membership in any single Jewish community, with some even turning to crime. Here, Kaplan illustrates how the poor were not a homogeneous social group but were rather composed of different categories of people. This fits well with what we understand from scholarship on other non-German communities, where there were also distinctions between different types of poor, sometimes based on diverse economic parameters.

The sixth and final chapter analyzes the official records of communal donation, which acknowledged and preserved donors' largesse for posterity. This is an important and often underestimated feature, which demonstrates that those who gave alms often did so without having philanthropic goals. Rather, donors aimed to immortalize their name and raise their family's honor. As a consequence, the lists of names reported in community documents must be interpreted as memorial efforts. The resulting conclusion is that the

offering of gifts by a highly specific community of donors, documented in the many registers, enhanced familiar prestige and therefore created a new elite socioeconomic class.

On the one hand, Kaplan's analysis shows that Jewish authorities' attitudes toward the needy—including their suspicion of the poor, and especially foreigners—were deployed as a strategy to maintain order through social hierarchy. On the other hand, as others have shown, the poor often and willingly formed a different subculture from that of the upper classes. This remains a difficult aspect to investigate for the lack of documents.[5] However, since many of these phenomena were typical of the early modern era, a comparative approach might help to expand our understanding of the development of different attitudes toward the poor, philanthropic Jewish thinking and institutions, and impact relative to contemporary Christian society. In conclusion, Kaplan's study is an important book that adds to our knowledge of the complexity of early modern social structures.

Notes

[1]. Bronislaw Geremek, *Litość i szubienica. Dzieje nędzy i miłosierdzia w Europie* [in Italian: *La Pietà e la forca, Storia della miseria e della carità in Europa*] (Rome: Bari, 1995), vii.

[2]. See Bronislaw Geremek, *Truands et misérables dan l'Europe moderne, 1350-1600* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980).

[3]. Yacov Boksenboim, Pinkas Kahal Verona, eds., *Minutes Book of the Jewish Community of Verona* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies/Tel Aviv University, 1989); Yaacov Andres Lattes, "The Type of Community Minutes Books – Some Preliminary Conclusions," in *Italia Judaica Jubilee Conference (Tel Aviv University, January 3-5, 2010)*, ed. Shlomo Simonsohn and Joseph Shatzmiller (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 85-95; David B. Ruderman, "The Founding of a Gemilut Hasadim Society in Ferrara in 1515," *AJS Review* 1 (1976): 233-66.

[4]. See, for example, Bernard D. Cooperman, "Ethnicity and Institutions Building among Jews in Early Modern Rome," *AJS Review* 30, no. 1 (2006): 119-45, esp. 121-22.

[5]. Jean Claude Schmitt, "L'histoire des marginaux," in *La Nouvelle Histoire*, ed. Jacques Le Goff (Paris: CEPL, 1978).

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