

**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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“In the beginning, we were slaves to the *sho-het* in Izmir,” reads Alexander Benghiat’s satirical riff on the Passover Haggadah published in Ladino in 1909, reflecting a decades-long conflict over the politics of kosher slaughter, taxation, and power in Izmir’s Jewish community. But “God heard our voice and our troubles, and saw how much the *shohatim* were taking advantage of us.” In a play on another famous passage from the Haggadah, Benghiat asks what made “this year different than all other years.” The answer evokes the rhetoric of the Young Turk Revolution of the previous year: “this year, because of liberty (*hürriyet*), all of our hearts are bursting” (p. 146).

Dina Danon cites Benghiat’s parody (there were dozens of such satirical renderings of the Haggadah in Ladino, and many more in Yiddish and other languages, often engaging with the political questions of the times) in her recently published book, *The Jews of Ottoman Izmir: A Modern History*. The example of the *Agada de la karne* (“meat Haggadah”) speaks to the main themes explored in Danon’s book: the importance of social class and growing class consciousness; the centrality of poverty and poor relief; and the changing dynamics created by the Ottoman politics of reform and top-down modernization in the Tanzimat era, during the long reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II, and beyond the dramatic turning

point of the 1908 Young Turk Revolution. What makes Danon’s book so compelling is that she takes strictly localized stories—like that of the controversies surrounding the supply and taxation of kosher meat, which had its parallels, to be sure, in other Jewish communities—and uses them to develop a much larger argument about how to understand Ottoman Jewish modernity.

As Danon observes, the “arc of modern Jewish history as it has been narrated is a shared script,” concerned with the central drama of how Jews negotiated the meaning of Jewishness and Jewish difference (p. 24). Whether historians have explored debates about political emancipation, competing ideas of religious reform and identity, or the emergence of modern Jewish politics, she suggests, the question of Jewish difference has always taken center stage. But how, Danon asks, do we understand Jewish modernity in a context where there was no “Jewish question,” in an “empire of difference” (as Karen Barkey has described the Ottoman Empire), where Jewish alterity was never considered to be a problem that needed to be solved?[1] It is here that social inequality within the Jewish community comes into focus as the pivot of an emerging Jewish public sphere and Jewish politics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Izmirli Jews were thus not consumed by questions of identity and the pages of

the city's burgeoning Judeo-Spanish press not filled with conflicting views about how Jews might fit, as Jews, into society, but by debates over how to alleviate poverty and how to overcome the widely perceived backwardness of the community.

One can exaggerate the distinction between Ottoman Jews and those in other countries, of course. Poverty and class conflict were certainly a crucial factor in the emergence of modern Jewish politics from eastern Europe to North America, as well. Further, Ottoman Jews could not forever escape the question of Jewish difference, whether in the face of rising Turkish nationalism after 1908, or in the nation-states that succeeded imperial rule in the Balkans. However, Danon's point is not so much that Ottoman Jewish history has to be read in a different key because it does not fit the dominant historiographical narratives (though that is certainly often the case), as it is that the particular dynamics of the Ottoman Jewish experience urge us to rethink the meaning of Jewish modernity by decentering the question of identity more generally.

*The Jews of Ottoman Izmir* is an exemplary case of local history, creating a richly textured image of the city's Jewish community but without losing sight of broader historiographical questions. Danon is a keen interpreter of detail, and she teases out the larger significance of the various episodes of political debate and conflict that she recounts in the book with skill. One example is her astute analysis of the protracted discussion of the community's new statutes that were prompted by the Tanzimat's expectation that non-Muslim communities reorganize their governance structures. In 1884, in what Danon describes as a "dramatic rupture with the past," a first draft of the laws was circulated that still favored the wealthy elites but also provided representation of the Jewish working class (p. 153). Even though this first proposal ultimately failed, its downfall was the result of a process of consultation that in and of itself marked a new political dynamic and changing

distribution of power. When the final statutes were adopted in 1897, they stipulated that all male members over age twenty-five, without restrictions based on wealth or status, would elect delegates of their respective synagogue congregations to a community-wide council (the *meclis umumi*), representing something of a culmination in a long struggle to provide non-elites a voice in communal politics.

The chapters of *The Jews of Ottoman Izmir* are organized thematically rather than chronologically. Together, they cover a period that extends approximately from the 1830s to the eve of World War I. The first chapter deals with Jewish leaders' efforts to manage the collective reputation of the community, focusing in particular on their anxiety about public manifestations of poverty. This discussion leads directly into the second chapter, which focuses on new discourses on the "deserving poor" and attempts to "modernize" and "rationalize" poor relief, including a reenvisioning of the city's Talmud Torah, which was seen by many as perpetuating rather than eliminating poverty (p. 77). Efforts at providing vocational training, both through reforming the Talmud Torah and attending the French-based Alliance Israélite Universelle's local schools, ultimately failed, something that Danon attributes to the "persistence of an ethnically fractured marketplace" that "made it difficult for Jews to exit petty trade and unskilled labor" (p. 92). In fact, something that is refreshing about Danon's analysis is the challenge she presents to the conventional image of Jewish middle-class "cosmopolitanism" in the port cities of the Mediterranean (p. 22). In her reading, by the nineteenth century, the early modern "nexus between the port's economic prowess and Jewish settlement there had been almost fully dismantled," and the worldview of many a Jewish dockworker was likely far closer to that of his Muslim counterparts than it was to that of "a Greek or Armenian merchant on Frank Street" (p. 181). In chapter 3, we learn about the emergence of a Jewish middle class, which Danon analyzes

primarily through changing patterns of sociability, gender norms, and the self-conscious construction of bourgeois respectability. Chapter 4 focuses on taxation and the controversies surrounding kosher slaughter and the meat tax (*gabela*), and, finally, the fifth chapter discusses changes in community governance and the role of community institutions, including the chief rabbinate, in promoting an agenda of social and cultural “progress” (p. 169).

Danon taps a rich trove of underused archival sources, as well as the Judeo-Spanish press. Many historians have worked with material from the archives of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Paris, something that has led to a somewhat Gallo-centric perspective of earlier work on Ottoman Jewish modernity. Danon uses Alliance material as well, of course, but she goes well beyond that by exploring indigenous sources produced by Jews in Izmir themselves, such as the depository of claims submitted by the poor to the community (*defter de reklamos*, covering the years 1879-82), a truly invaluable source. Such documents are readily available in the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People in Jerusalem, but they have hardly been used, in part, one suspects, because of the difficulty of reading Judeo-Spanish in the traditional *soletreo* script.

*The Jews of Ottoman Izmir* fills an important gap in the scholarship on modern Ottoman Jewish and Sephardic history by offering a locally focused account of social and political change in one of the most important, yet also understudied, Ladino-speaking communities in the Ottoman Empire. But Danon does more than fill a gap, valuable as it is to have this first monograph on modern Jewish Izmir in English. She also shifts the narrative about Ottoman Jewish history in a new direction by emphasizing social class as a central framework for her analysis, and by looking, in particular, at the city’s Jewish working class, at poverty, and at class conflict. By raising the question of what Jewish modernity looked like in a context in

which Jewish distinctiveness itself was “wholly unremarkable,” she offers an important impulse to move beyond the conventional paradigms of emancipation, assimilation, and shifting patterns of “identity.”

#### Note

[1]. Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

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