H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Minna Rozen. *History of the Jewish Community in Istanbul: The Formative Years, 1453-1566.* Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2002. xix + 414 pages $155.00, cloth, ISBN 978-90-04-12530-8.

Reviewed by Sara Nur Yildiz

Published on H-Mideast-Medieval (March, 2003)

In the 1970s and 1980s the field of Jewish studies began to move beyond the inward-looking traditional paradigms and methodologies of Jewish history and to consider how Jewish communities interacted with the greater non-Jewish society that surrounded them and thus spawned a set of new sub-fields, including Ottoman Jewish studies. Historians such as Joseph Hacker and Benjamin Braude were among the first to rely on Ottoman as well as Jewish sources and to place the Jewish community into an Ottoman context.

Such research has brought to the respective fields a more nuanced understanding of both Ottoman and Jewish society. For instance Hacker dispelled the prevailing stereotype of Jewish peaceful co-existence with Ottoman rule by exploring Mehmed II's s=rg=n (exile and resettlement) policies towards the Romaniot and Karaite Jewish communities.[1] Although Rozen has clearly been influenced by this pioneering scholarship, her study on the Istanbuli Jewish community demonstrates how difficult it is to strike a successful balance between Jewish and Ottoman studies, and integrate Jewish studies as a sub-field into the discipline of Ottoman studies.

Rozen presents a broad social history of the Istanbuli Jewish community under Ottoman rule, beginning with the conquest in 1453 and going up to the early seventeenth century, with emphasis on the sixteenth century. Rozen deals with a dizzy array of topics ranging across questions of legal status, demographics, immigration, settlement patterns, community and congregational organization, inter-ethnic relations, the Sephardization of the Jewish community, as well as family life, household structure and gender issues, social stratification, relations between the Jewish elite (courtiers and merchant families) and the Ottoman elite, economic activity, leisure, scholarship, and elite and popular literature. Although it touches upon Jewish relations with the Ottoman state, the emphasis of Rozen's work is on Jewish community organization and family life.

Rozen opens her work with a short chapter narrating the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, drawing from the well-known eyewitness literature of the time. She produces a fluid

account of the Ottoman conquest, not sparing details on the violence as extracted from Nicolo Barbaro's and Kristovoulos's descriptions of the great slaughter. Rozen then examines the demographic changes resulting from Mehmed II's policy of s=rg=n and how the status of s=rg=n limited their rights to relocate and determined their tax burden to the state.

Chapter 2, "The Ottoman State and the Jews of Istanbul," incorporates much of the previous work of Joseph Hacker, Haim Gerber, Halil Inalcik, Refik Altinay, and Mark Epstein, as well as Rozen's own research on the Jewish trade in slaves in the Mediterranean and the status of Ottoman Jews abroad, in conjunction with a large body of Ottoman Jewish responsa literature. She begins by contrasting the theoretical legal status of Jews as *dhimmi* under Islam with the de facto status of the Jews under Ottoman rule. After enumerating the various manifestions of the legal inferiority imposed on *dhimmis* in Ottoman society, she examines the tax imposed on the Jewish community as a result of their status and the administrative role of the chief rabbi as tax collector. Despite their inferior legal and social status within Ottoman society, Ottoman Jews were granted protection, while abroad in the hostile Christian world, by the Ottoman authorities who had a vested interest in the success of Ottoman Jewish trade in the international market. It was through the pragmatic Ottoman policy of promoting Jewish interests overseas that Jewish merchants emerged as major competitors with the Venetians over Mediterranean trade during the sixteenth century. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the Jews viewed the Ottoman state. She compares the attitudes of the Romaniots who remained bitter over their forced dislocation by the Ottomans with the Sephardim who, having fled to the safety of the Ottoman realm, felt grateful for the home they found there. It is this latter attitude, Rozen points out, that is responsible for the myth that the expellees had actually been invited by the Ottomans to their domains.

Chapters 3 to 7 deal with the demographic, geographical, and ethnic makeup and social organization of the Jewish community in Istanbul. They detail congregational tensions and conflicts and the gradual process of Sephardization of the Romaniot, the Greek-speaking communities dating from the Byzantine period. Some of these chapters are so short, however, that one wonders why the author did not choose to incorporate them into one larger chapter. Can one really justify having four separate chapters of less than four-and-a-half, five, seven, and twelve pages long respectively?

Chapter 8, "Patterns of Social Behavior: The Family," comprises the bulk of Rozen's work with its massive almost hundred-page long exposition of family, household, and gender relations as extracted from the responsa literature. Together with the chapters on settlement and community structure, this section is the most solid part of the work and provides interesting reading on the various marriage and reproduction strategies employed by the diverse Jewish communities. She situates the Ottoman Jewish family as reacting to the expulsion crisis which "led to anxiety about the continuation of the Jewish people" (p. 102). She delves into the myriad details of marriage patterns and their cultural meanings and points out that "marriage at a young age and endogamy among the Jews of Istanbul were not expressions of the influence of Muslim society or culture per se, but rather manifestations of the traditional Mediterranean culture that prevailed throughout the region" (p. 127). Influential Jewish merchant dynasties such as the Nasi and de Segura families who comprised the Jewish elite are treated in chapter 9. After pointing out that the three main criteria of one's social status were related not only to wealth and pedigree, but also to connections at the Ottoman court, Rozen discusses the parallel roles of the *kira*, a close associate of the powerful

mother or consort of the sultan, and the Jewish court doctor. Chapter 10 surveys economic life, beginning with a summary of Halil Inalcik's work on the Ottoman economy, and followed by an overview of the diverse trades practised by Jews. One of the most important economic roles of the Ottoman Sephardim was in the sphere of international trade in the Mediterranean. Rozen identifies "the activities of the Iberian Jews in the Ottoman-Italian arena" as a good case of the "trade diaspora" (p. 242). It was in this trade diaspora that "Iberians were able to build an economic bridge to Christian Europe where they operated as Ottoman citizens" (p. 242). Without actually showing us how, Rozen concludes that the Ottoman capitulations system enhanced and expanded the possibilities of this diaspora.

Chapter 11 deals with elite and popular culture, in which Rozen rather superficially touches upon religious and mystical scholarship, Hebrew printing, the role of the scholar in Jewish society, and what she refers to as elite literature as well as literature for entertainment and the performing arts. The book ends with a brief treatment of the interrelations between the Jews and the "other," that is, Ottoman society, pointing out that these diverse groups were able to live in harmony due to both Ottoman tolerance as well as the stratification of each group in its appointed place. An unremarkable conclusion of five pages is followed by an appendix of eighteen responsa documents translated into English spanning family, economic, and community issues. By making this fascinating source available in English, the author allows those outside the discipline of Jewish studies to get a first-hand glimpse of the concerns of the Jewish community. (It should be added that these documents make a potentially great teaching resource for students.)

Yet this monograph, full of detail and touching upon every possible aspect regarding the life and times of the early Jewish community of Istanbul, is not without its problems. Rozen frequently refers to the Jewish community as a "traumatized" society, emphasizing the historical memory of loss, trauma, and oppression among the Jewish community, an approach not much different from the "lachrymose" tradition in Jewish historiography.[2] The paradigm of trauma however obstructs meaningful analysis. For example, the author is content to explain the popularity of literature produced for entertainment within this paradigm: "Despite the trauma, the sense of loss and the grief associated with the destruction of their world, the expellees needed this kind of literature" (p. 270). What is Rozen trying to say here? That it is surprising that traumatized people would be interested in entertainment? For lack of a better analytical framework for evaluating popular/elite culture, the discussion in this chapter never goes beyond the merely descriptive.

Yet the most troubling aspect of this work is Rozen's approach to things Ottoman. The Ottoman state here is an unnuanced monolithic entity, whose absolute and centrist nature is taken for granted (p. 199). Rozen is only selectively concerned with how some Ottoman institutions related to the Jewish community. The author adopts a Jewish-centered approach embedded in the paradigm of oppression and trauma, thus making it difficult at times to see the Jewish community as one of many communities in interaction with each other operating under the social, cultural, economic, and legal structures of the Ottoman state and society. Even the wording and structure of her presentation of topics points to an exclusive Jewish perspective, colored by the paradigm of oppression. For instance, when Rozen discusses *avariz* taxes and the *corvee*, she states "the most oppressive tax burden on the Jews and others were irregular taxes, especially the corvees" (p. 33). The "others," of course being the majority of Ottoman subjects! Without reading Rozen carefully, one could mistake the Jews as being targeted with oppressive tax policies. Fortunately, Rozen makes it clear at the end of the paragraph that the Jews weren not alone: "Muslims and Christians

also were arbitrarily subjected to such corvees" (p. 33).

This highly descriptive social history lacks theoretical sophistication on every level. Rozen ignores the problematics of many issues relevant to Ottoman social history, such as the role of difference among Ottoman communities, the interpretation of the spheres of private and public, or even how power was structured and exerted (or not), not to mention the numerous unresolved questions regarding the religious and legal structures of the Ottoman state.[3] For instance, Rozen prefaces her discussion of the de facto legal status of Jews under the Ottomans by first launching into a superficial, ahistorical, and essentializing treatment of Islamic law. By doing so Rozen assumes the relevance of the category of *dhimmi* (the pact of toleration of non-Muslims living under Islam) within an undistinguished, unhistorical theoretical "Islam." Her strategy is to show that since the de facto status of Jews under the Ottomans presented contradictions to the category of *dhimmi* as defined by "classic" Islam, the Ottomans conveniently ignored the dictates of their religion for pragmatic reasons. It should be pointed out that the de facto status of Jews under the Ottomans is just another example of how useless and irrelevant the so-called classic Islamic framework is; Islamic law was never static nor uniform, and not just only under the Ottomans, but also in various other Muslim polities.

In conclusion, for a book published in the Brill series The Ottoman Empire and its Heritage, one expects the author to better contextualize her immense knowledge of the Istanbuli Jewish community within the field of Ottoman studies. Not only does Rozen unquestionably accept outdated paradigms, such as the centrist and absolute model of the Ottoman state, she makes no attempt to deal with theoretical issues. One expects a higher level of theoretical sophistication in a work concerned with cultural and social history. The paradigm of a traumatized society remains insufficient as a framework for meaningful analysis.

Notes

[1]. Joseph Hacker first presented these views in "Ottoman Policy toward the Jews and Jewish Attitudes towards the Ottomans during the Fifteenth Century," in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, vol. 1, *The Central Lands*, ed. E. Etkes and B. Lewis (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982), pp. 117-125. A more recent and expanded restatement of his views on the s=rg=n appear in "The S=rg=n System and Jewish Society in the Ottoman Empire During the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Centuries," in *Ottoman and Turkish Jewry: Community and Leadership*, ed. Aron Rodrigue (Bloomington: Indiana University Turkish Studies, 1992), pp. 1-66.

[2]. A term used by Daniel J. Schroeter in his review of Yehuda Nini's *The Jews of the Yemen, 1800-1914* in the *Yemen Update* 35 (1994), p. 29. According to Schroeter, the "veil of tears" approach to the Jewish history of the Diaspora "is a reflection of Jewish literature and religious thinking from time immemorial."

[3]. Aron Rodrigue argues that the public-private distinction was entirely alien to the Ottoman system. See, Nancy Reynolds, "Difference and Tolerance in the Ottoman Empire. Interview with Aron Rodrigue," *Stanford Electronics Humanities Review* 5:1 (1996).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-mideast-medieval

Citation: Sara Nur Yildiz. Review of Rozen, Minna. *History of the Jewish Community in Istanbul: The Formative Years, 1453-1566.* H-Mideast-Medieval, H-Net Reviews. March, 2003.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7354