



CULTURES OF THE JEWS

VOLUME 1

Mediterranean Origins

Edited by DAVID BIALE



CULTURES OF THE JEWS

Volume I
Mediterranean Origins

A NEW HISTORY

EDITED BY
David Biale

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Volume I:
Mediterranean Origins

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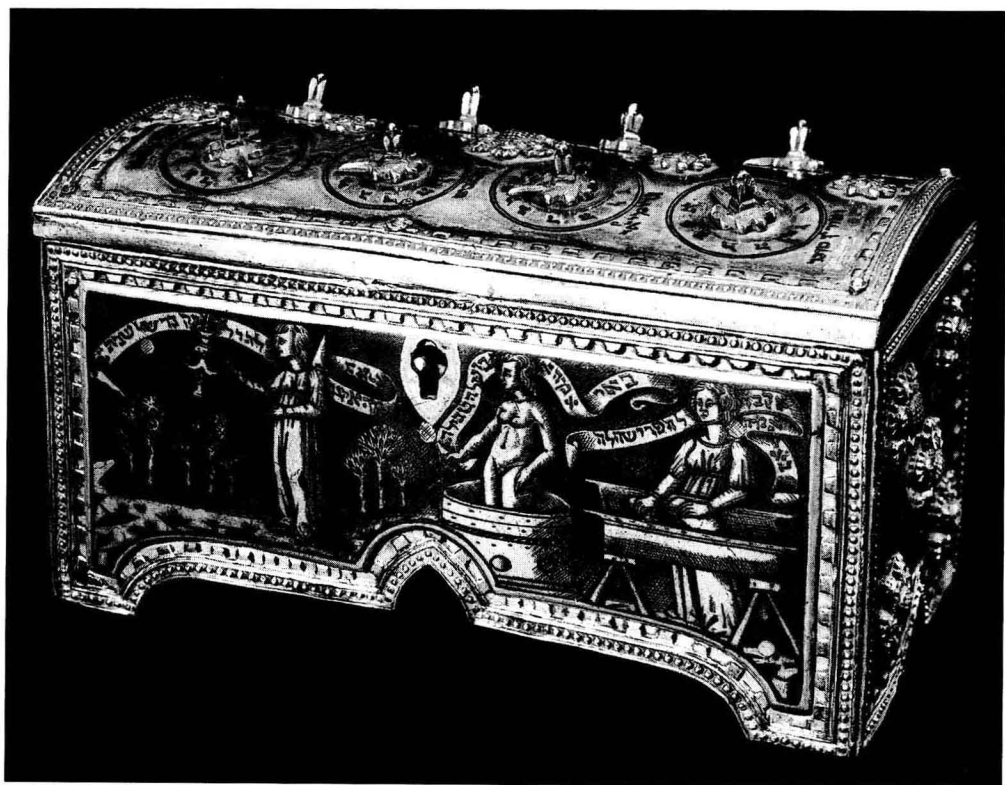
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—DAVID BIALE

January 2002



Cofanetto (small casket or box), Ferrara (?), second half of the fifteenth century. Silver.
(The Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

PREFACE: TOWARD A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE JEWS

DAVID BIALE

Sometime in the fifteenth century, a small silver casket was fashioned by an Italian Jewish craftsman known to us from his embossed signature on the lid as Jeshurun Tovar. The casket was intended as a wedding gift for a bride in northern Italy, probably to hold the keys to her linen closets.¹ On the lid of the casket are small dials indicating, in Hebrew numerals, quantities of different kinds of linen and clothing noted by their Italian names written in Hebrew characters: tablecloths, towels, men's shirts, women's chemises, handkerchiefs, knickers, and aprons or cloths for menstruation. It has been suggested that the purpose of this accounting system was to keep track of the items in characters unknown to the woman's Christian servants, although the Hebrew alphabet may also have been the only one that the woman or her Jewish servants could read. The nielloed front panel of the casket depicts three scenes of a Jewish wife fulfilling her cardinal religious duties: separating the *hallah* from the dough, lighting the Sabbath candles, and immersing herself in the ritual bath, which symbolized the separation of husband and wife during her menstrual period.²

What meaning does this intricate piece of craftwork have for understanding Jewish culture? Culture is an elastic term that can be stretched in many directions: indeed, the authors of the chapters in these volumes have each followed his or her own definitions. One way to define culture is as the manifold expressions—written or oral, visual or textual, material or spiritual—with which human beings represent their lived experiences in order to give them meaning.³ But culture is more than just the literary or aesthetic products of a society. As one witty adage goes: “Culture is how we do things around here.” From this point of view, culture is the practice of everyday life.⁴ It is what people do, what they *say* about what they do, and, finally, how they understand both of these activities. If Jewish culture is broadly conceived along these lines, objects like the silver casket are as precious repositories of meaning as learned texts: the keys contained in it may unlock more doors than just those of linen closets. For example, the dresses worn by the three female figures on the casket are clearly

similar to those worn in a somewhat earlier period in Italy by Christians as well as Jews. Yet the artistic themes themselves suggest a specifically Jewish culture. What, then, was the relationship between Jewish culture in that particular epoch and the culture of the non-Jews among whom the Jews lived? What can we learn from theasket about Jewish culture internally—especially, in this case, about the lives of Jewish women? Finally, can we speak of one Jewish culture across the ages or only Jewish cultures in the plural, each unique to its time and place? These are some of the questions that *Cultures of the Jews* will raise and attempt to answer.

The *Mekhilta*, one of the oldest rabbinic midrashim, tells us that the ancient Israelites were preserved as a distinct people in Egypt for four reasons: they kept their names; they maintained their language; they resisted violating the biblical sexual prohibitions (by which the midrash means that they did not intermarry); and they did not engage in “idle gossip” (*leshon ha-ra*, which the midrash understands as collaborating with the gentile government).⁵ The *Mekhilta* nostalgically portrays the biblical Jews in Egypt as an “ideal” nation in exile. But from what we know of biblical times (and the Bible says nothing about the 430-year period in Egypt to which the midrash refers), this is an unhistorical portrait. Did the biblical Jews—or, more precisely, the Israelites, as they called themselves—resist foreign names, languages, and intermarriages? Quite the opposite. The name Moses itself is almost certainly of Egyptian origin; the Hebrew language borrowed its alphabet from the Phoenicians and is closely related to Ugaritic, the language of an earlier Canaanite culture (perhaps the earliest Hebrew ought to be called—tongue-in-cheek—“Judeo-Canaanite”); and the Bible is replete with intermarriages, from Joseph’s marriage to the Egyptian Asnat to Bathsheba’s marriage to Uriah the Hittite (not to speak of Solomon’s many foreign wives). All the earmarks of “assimilation” can be found in the Bible itself.

Although it is not possible to date this rabbinic midrash precisely—it is probably from the late second or third century C.E.—the *Mekhilta*’s cultural context was the Greco-Roman period, a period when all of these “prohibitions” were manifestly violated: Jews did adopt Greek names and the Greek language, intermarriage was not unknown, and some Jews did act as agents of or informers to the non-Jewish authorities. A stunning example of such interaction between Jewish and Greek culture was revealed in the excavations at Bet She’arim in the lower Galilee. An enormous third-century C.E. Jewish burial chamber at the site contains many sarcophagi decorated with a variety of mythological motifs, such as Leda and the swan, a favorite artistic theme from Greek mythology. Inscriptions in Greek are mixed with those in Hebrew. The Bet She’arim necropolis also contains the graves of rabbis contemporary with Judah the Prince, the compiler of the Mishnah, demonstrating that the cultural syncretism

of the site was not alien to the rabbis themselves, despite the statements to the contrary in the *Mekhilta*. Did these Jews who shared a burial space—rabbis and others clearly of a wealthy class—believe in some fashion in the Greek myths portrayed on their tombs? Or, as seems more likely, were they adopting Greek motifs for their own purposes? What meaning did such images have for them, if not what they meant in Greek culture? Were they purely ornamental, or did the Jews graft onto them symbolic meanings consonant with their understanding of Jewish tradition?⁶

In the light of such findings as Bet She'arim, it is impossible to maintain the popular conception of rabbinic Judaism flourishing in splendid isolation from its Greco-Roman surroundings. We now know that the development of rabbinic culture involved the adaptation of legal principles and language from the Hellenistic and Roman worlds.⁷ Although concerned with inoculating the Jews against contamination by pagan idolatry, the rabbis also made a clear distinction between images and idols. An image such as a statue of Aphrodite might be acceptable in a bathhouse but not in a pagan temple, where it functioned as an idol and was thus forbidden.⁸ Similarly, Greek images might be incorporated into Jewish funerary practices, as at Bet She'arim, without this necessarily constituting adoption of their Greek meaning.

How should we label such adoption of non-Jewish culture? Does it suggest “assimilation” or, to use a less loaded term, “acculturation”? The Italian Jewish culture that produced our casket has frequently been described as one of the most assimilated or acculturated in all of pre-modern Jewish history. But perhaps the contemporary model of assimilation is misleading when applied to the Jews of Renaissance Italy.⁹ Here was a traditional community intent on drawing boundaries between itself and its Christian neighbors but also able to adopt and adapt motifs from the surrounding culture for its own purposes. Indeed, the Jews should not be seen as outsiders who borrowed from Italian culture but rather as full participants in the shaping of that culture, albeit with their own concerns and mores. The Jews were not so much “influenced” by the Italians as they were one organ in a larger cultural organism, a subculture that established its identity in a complex process of adaptation and resistance. Jewish “difference” was an integral part of the larger mosaic of Renaissance Italy. Expanding beyond Renaissance Italy to Jewish history as a whole, we may find it more productive to use this organic model of culture than to chase after who influenced whom.

The findings at Bet She'arim—as well as our richly decorated silver casket—challenge another common misconception: that Jewish culture was hostile to the visual arts. The Jewish religion has traditionally been understood as a textual or written tradition in which visual images played a minor role at best. Accord-

ing to some interpretations, the second of the Ten Commandments, which prohibits all images of God, also prohibits, by extension, human images. But it is questionable whether such a prohibition ever really existed.¹⁰ In the Middle Ages, illuminators of Jewish manuscripts were not shy about depicting human beings; the famous *Bird's Head Haggadah* and other Ashkenazic manuscripts from that period, in which people are portrayed with the heads of birds or other animals, are exceptions that prove the rule, and their meaning is still hotly debated.¹¹ Even within the textual tradition, there developed a particularly Jewish form of art, called micrography, in which the letters of a text were written in tiny characters that formed visual images.¹² In most cases, such as that of the casket, Jewish art involved an interaction between Jewish and non-Jewish motifs and artistic techniques. This interaction demonstrates how the culture of a minority group like the Jews can never be separated from that of the majority surrounding it.

Even in the earliest phases of Jewish history, the ancient Israelites were probably most often a minority among the Canaanite and other Near Eastern peoples who inhabited what the Bible itself calls "the Land of Canaan." In fact, the archaeological evidence suggests that many, if not most, of the Israelites were culturally and perhaps even ethnically descended from the Canaanites. As much as the authors of biblical monotheism tried to isolate the Israelite religion from the practices of their neighbors, it is now generally accepted among scholars of the biblical period that ancient Israel's cult, especially in its popular manifestations, was bound up with Canaanite polytheism.¹³ The theological segregation of "Israelite" and "Canaanite" religions is just as mythic as the social and cultural segregation of the two peoples called "Israelite" and "Canaanite." The correct question may therefore not be the difference between "polytheism" and "monotheism" but rather how a theology that claims one, transcendent God nevertheless surreptitiously incorporated and transformed many of the elements of polytheism.

What was true for cult is true for culture. For every period of history, interaction with the non-Jewish majority has been critical in the formation of Jewish culture. Even those Jewish cultures thought to be the most insular adapted ideas and practices from their surroundings. A case in point are the medieval Ashkenazic Jews, whose culture is often considered to have been far more closed than the culture of the contemporaneous Sephardic Jews. Yet their spoken language was essentially that of their Christian neighbors. And, consider how the thirteenth-century German *Hasidim* (Pietists), whose ideals included segregation not only from Christians but also from nonpietistic Jews, adopted ascetic and penitential practices strikingly similar to those of the Franciscan Order from the same period.¹⁴

Rather than the *Mekhilta's* explanation for why the Jews survived in exile—as well as in their own land—perhaps our supposition ought to be just the reverse: that it was precisely in their profound engagement with the cultures of their environment that the Jews constructed their distinctive identities. But this engagement involved two seeming paradoxes. On the one hand, the tendency to acculturate into the non-Jewish culture typically produced a distinctive Jewish subculture. On the other hand, the effort to maintain a separate identity was often achieved by borrowing and even subverting motifs from the surrounding culture.¹⁵

Language was one arena in which this complex process took place. Jews were remarkably adept at adopting the languages of their neighbors but also in reshaping those languages as Jewish dialects by adding Hebrew expressions: language was at once a sign of acculturation *and* cultural segregation. Yiddish, Ladino, and Judeo-Arabic (the latter is actually vernacular Arabic written in Hebrew characters) are the best known of these dialects, but there were many others. In the Greco-Roman world, Jews did not develop a Judeo-Greek, but they incorporated so many Greek words into both Hebrew and Aramaic that those languages, in Late Antiquity, must be considered “fusion” or “acculturated” languages (that is, languages strongly reflecting Greco-Roman culture).

The cases of Yiddish and Ladino are more complicated. Both started out as Jewish dialects of the local non-Jewish language: Middle High German (with some medieval French) for Yiddish, and Castilian Spanish for Ladino. But both took on a much more segregated quality when the Jews who spoke them migrated elsewhere. So, when the Ashkenazic or German Jews moved to Poland in the late Middle Ages, they did not develop a Judeo-Polish but rather absorbed some Slavic words into the Judeo-German that would come to be known as Yiddish. In Germany itself, the Jews continued to speak *ma'arav Yiddish* (Western Yiddish) into the early nineteenth century, long after the Germans themselves no longer spoke the German of the Middle Ages. Ladino was spoken by the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula, but it remained their language for half a millennium after the Expulsion in the Balkans, Greece, Turkey, and other areas of the Ottoman Empire; in these countries of “double exile,” the Sephardim never developed Judeo-Greek or Judeo-Turkish. So, two processes were at work: first, intense linguistic acculturation in the early and high Middle Ages, and then, later, a kind of linguistic conservatism—the preservation of these earlier dialects as ever-more distinctive markers of difference from the surrounding cultures, at times even regarded as the “secret” languages of the Jews.

Only in modern times did the Diaspora Jewish languages begin to die out, replaced by the languages of the countries in which the Jews became citizens or by Hebrew, revived by the Zionist movement as a spoken language. Yet even in the

modern process of linguistic acculturation, one can discern Jewish inflections in the way Jews wrote and spoke languages like German and English. In describing the translation of the Bible into German that they published in the 1920s, Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber used the word *Verdeutschung* rather than the standard German word for translation (*Übersetzung*).¹⁶ *Verdeutschung* obviously means “a rendering into German,” but it is also the Yiddish word for both translation into Yiddish and commentary (*teitsh humesh* means something like “the Bible translated and explained in Yiddish”). It is doubly ironic that Yiddish refers to itself as *teitsh*—that is, German—and to translation into Yiddish as “to render into German.” By using this rare German word with its Yiddish reverberations, Rosenzweig and Buber were hinting that one goal of the Bible translation was not so much to translate the Bible into “pure” German, as Martin Luther had, but to infuse German with the intonations of the original Hebrew and thus make it a “Jewish language.” And they performed this linguistic magic with the very word they chose to describe their project.

Linguistic adaptation was part of a larger strategy of resistance in which the Jews asserted their identity in intimate interaction with the majority culture. The study of indigenous groups living under colonialism has enriched our understanding of how a politically subjugated people shapes its culture and identity.¹⁷ This process involves both defending one’s native traditions *and* incorporating and transforming the culture imposed by the colonial power. Both parties to these negotiations end up defining themselves through and against the other. Although the situation of the Jews as a minority was not precisely analogous to that of non-Western colonized peoples under Western imperialism, there is a similarity in the way Jewish identity developed in a rich dialectic with the identities of the non-Jewish majority: the category of “Jew” assumed and, indeed, produced the category *goy*.¹⁸ The production of Jewish culture and identity in such circumstances can never be separated from the power relations between Jews and their neighbors.

A fascinating visual example of this process can be found in numerous Jewish medieval illuminated manuscripts. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council required that Jews wear identifying insignia, a piece of legislation purportedly motivated by fears of sexual relations between Jews and Christians. Among the distinctive forms of Jewish dress that one finds in the later Middle Ages is the hat, which assumed a variety of different shapes. In many Hebrew illuminated manuscripts, the Jews are depicted wearing these hats as a matter of course.¹⁹ If the intention of the Christian rulers was to degrade the Jews, it seems evident from these pictures that the Jews did not feel degraded, for otherwise it is hard to imagine why they portrayed themselves—or commissioned Christian artists to portray them—wearing the distinctive hat in scenes of private or synagogue life. In a

later period, the age of emancipation, the Jewish hat came to be seen as humiliating. Yet, for the Jews of the Middle Ages, the way Christians commanded them to dress became badges of their own identity, as much a part of their culture depicted in these manuscripts as the sacred words on their pages.

The Jewish minority often adopted non-Jewish beliefs or practices but infused them with traditional Jewish symbols. For instance, the ritual—practiced widely in many different communities—of the first day of school, during which a young boy would eat honey in the shape of Hebrew letters, may have been enacted by the medieval Ashkenazic Jews in a way that responded to the new Christian dogma and rituals of the Eucharist.²⁰ And when the same Jews confronted the Crusaders in 1096 with a messianic theology of blood vengeance—a theology that led some to slaughter their own children and commit suicide in order to bring down the divine wrath on their persecutors—much of the language of blood, sacrifice, and atonement, although rooted in earlier Jewish sources, resonates with similar Christian concepts from the time.²¹

The example of the Crusades suggests that the Jews did not interact with the cultures of their non-Jewish neighbors only during peaceful times but also in times of conflict. While much of this violence flowed from the majority toward the minority, the street was not exclusively one-way. In the Middle Ages, Jews also utilized violence, sometimes real and sometimes symbolic, to enforce the boundaries that they, no less than Christians and Muslims, wished to maintain. A particular instance of such ritualized violence was the custom of hanging an effigy of Haman on a cross during Purim, thus demonstrating the Jews' contempt for Christianity.²² Moreover, great cultural interchange, such as occurred during the so-called Golden Age of Spain (roughly 1000–1400), did not preclude such acts of real or symbolic violence.²³ Relations between the minority and the majority cultures cannot, therefore, be so easily categorized as either peaceful “symbiosis” or unrelieved antagonism, or, more broadly, as “golden ages” versus “dark ages.”

Jewish self-definition was, then, bound up in a tangled web with the non-Jewish environment in which the Jews lived, at once conditioned by how non-Jews saw the Jews and by how the Jews adopted and resisted the majority culture's definition of them. For all that Jews had their own autonomous traditions, their very identities throughout their history were inseparable from that of their Canaanite, Persian, Greek, Roman, Christian, and Muslim neighbors. An old Arabic proverb claims that “Men resemble their own times more than the times of their fathers.” Viewed in this light, Jewish identity cannot be considered immutable, the fixed product of either ancient ethnic or religious origins, but rather to have changed as the cultural context changed.

But if Jewish identity changed according to differing historical contexts, can