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Elisheva Baumgarten: Mothers and Children

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Introduction

IN HIS FIRST LETTER to Héloïse, Abelard draws a sharp distinction between family life and the life of the philosopher¹:

What harmony can there be between pupils and nursemaids, desks and cradles, books or tablets and distaffs, pen or stylus and spindles? Who can concentrate on thoughts of scripture or philosophy and be able to endure babies crying, nurses soothing them with lullabies, and all the noisy coming and going of men and women about the house? Will he put up with the constant muddle and squalor that small children bring into the home?²

The focus of this study is the cradles and the nurses and the noisy coming and going of men and women about the house . . . exactly that which Abelard intended to dismiss—the connection between these aspects of medieval life and the more accessible lives of scholars. This study follows the Jewish family in medieval Germany and northern France during the High Middle Ages, from the birth of a child until that child was ready for formal education.³ An understanding of the family unit, the most basic building block of the medieval Jewish community, is essential in order to broaden our knowledge of Jewish family life in the past and to comprehend the Jewish community. During the period of their lives examined here, children were under the supervision of their mothers and other women. The girls remained under this influence until they got married, whereas the boys left the female sphere sooner and began their formal religious education under the guidance of male tutors and teachers at the age of five, six, or seven. As mothers played a central role in their children's existence during these years, this study has placed special emphasis on their lives. It is, however, a book about both mothers and fathers, about their shared goals and their distinctive roles.

Each aspect of Jewish life studied here is compared with that of the Christian surroundings. Each issue is evaluated not only in the context of Jewish society, but in that of European society as a whole. In some cases, these two separate groups are, in fact, one, for Jews and Christians lived in close proximity and, as neighbors, maintained daily contact with each other. In other cases, the inner structure of each society commands our attention, as the practices studied were conducted on distinctly parallel planes, with no direct contact between the two societies. By examining Jewish families along with Christian ones, we may identify shared social structures and mentalities, as well as differences.

FAMILY HISTORY AND GENDER STUDIES

Until recently, motherhood and childhood were considered subjects without history.⁴ Many scholars of Jewish society, like those studying other societies, took for granted that the lives of mothers and children in the past were similar to those of their modern contemporaries,⁵ but in recent decades, social historians have revealed the great variety of cultural and social patterns that have characterized different societies, demonstrating the extent to which this assumption was incorrect. Among the first, prominent studies to examine these topics was research on the lives of medieval families; and to a great extent, interest in the topics of motherhood and childhood began with the examination of medieval European culture.

Central to this investigation of family life in the past was Philippe Ariès's book *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime*.⁶ This book generated a polemic that precipitated a new historical discourse. As Barbara Hanawalt has recently argued in her summary, and assessment of several decades of this debate, despite the refutation of many of Ariès's arguments, his book is still central to all studies of childhood and family life.⁷ A central focus of the initial debates following the publication of Ariès's book was his characterization of the emotional attachment of parents and, especially of mothers, to their children. Many of the conclusions attributed to Ariès in this context — such as the lack of parental love toward their children and especially the lack of grief over the death of children (as a consequence of high infant mortality) — became fundamental tenets of a school of research that sought to portray premodern parent-child relationships as characterized by neglect and indifference.⁸ While detailed research over the past three decades has persuasively argued that medieval parents were, in fact, emotionally attached to their children and has refuted many of the other claims made by Ariès and his followers, there is no doubt that his study was a central factor motivating much of the subsequent research. Important surveys and detailed studies written by Shulamith Shahar, Barbara Hanawalt, Pierre Riché, Danielle Alexandre-Bidon, Monique Closson, Didier Lett, James Schultz, and most recently Nicholas Orme among many others, have demonstrated the complexity of medieval childhood.⁹

While Ariès focused only on childhood, some of his followers and critics expanded the field of study to include questions dealing with parenting in the past. Different models of parenthood and, especially of motherhood, were studied, giving rise to the awareness that being a mother or father in the past was not the same as parenthood today. While a small portion of this research was motivated by ideological purposes, particularly the work of radical feminists such as Elisabeth Badinter,¹⁰ most of this scholarship drew a new picture of a historical phenomenon that had received little attention in previous research.¹¹ Book-length studies by historians such as Clarissa Atkinson and, more recently, Mary Dockray-Miller, as well as a number of authors of essays pub-

lished in edited volumes on medieval motherhood, have examined attitudes toward motherhood and the medieval reality of mothers' lives, while other scholars have studied birthing and infant feeding practices.¹²

This study of motherhood was instigated by an additional set of interests as well. The feminist revolution revived interest in the lives of women in the past. At first, heroines were sought out and the actions of women in the public sphere were emphasized, and little attention was devoted to the lives of unexceptional women. Feminist scholars tended to ignore the private lives of women and their traditional functions—as mothers, wives, and daughters. Many feminist historians, like many other feminists during the 1970s and 1980s, saw a basic conflict between motherhood and feminism. Consequently, motherhood was one of the last topics to be addressed by feminist historians.¹³ When private life was studied, the questions investigated were usually limited to marriage and marriage practices.

Fifteen years ago, the first book on motherhood in medieval Christian society was published; since then, more have followed. Along with the study of motherhood and the lives of women, a new awareness has affirmed the necessity of examining the roles and understandings of men as fathers in the past.¹⁴ These studies of fathers are only beginning to be published, almost fifteen years after the first appearance of studies on motherhood. While some of the studies of motherhood, particularly those popular two decades ago, addressed questions of emotional attachment, most recent studies have focused on understanding the historical context and culture of family life in the Middle Ages.

Although much has been published on childhood and on the lives of women in the past, few studies have examined women and children together. The history of childhood has been adopted by social historians, as well as by scholars interested in psychoanalysis. The history of women has been examined by historians interested in the family, who have often studied the role of women as part of their discussion of marriage and of the division of labor in society. These scholars were interested in women as one of the components of the family, but often not as a topic in and of itself. By contrast, feminist research concerning the lives of women in the past adopted other methods of inquiry. In these studies, the interest was in women as a separate group, often portrayed as at odds with male hierarchies, resisting or submitting to them. Research that sought to outline an exclusively women's "History of Their Own," always included a chapter devoted to family life. These chapters were, however, often lopsided, presenting only women's stories, while all but ignoring the men.

Over the past two decades, women's studies has shifted to include both genders, as scholars have realized that one cannot study women and their lives without examining men and their place in society. This shift has led to an inclusion of the lives of men and of society at large in the study of the lives of women. Feminists have demonstrated the extent of men's presence, even when the main subject of their inquiry is women, thus reversing the attempts to iso-

late a separate female sphere. Such a female sphere was suggested both by more traditional historical writings, which allocated women a place only in the domestic sphere, as well as by feminist historians, who sought a point of entry into women's lives in the past. A prominent example in this context is birth, an area that in premodern times, was supervised by women and took place exclusively in the presence of women. As, however, gender perspectives were introduced to research, this supposedly female sphere, like others, came to be seen as a reflection of the society in its entirety, rather than the world of women alone.

In addition, not only is the constant inclusion of both men and women necessary for historical analysis, but as many of the sources studied, especially in the medieval period, were written by men, new methods had to be developed for examining these sources. Only so could scholars come to understand the perspective from which they were written and how that perspective presented the women mentioned in these sources. As noted over a decade ago by Christine Klapisch-Zuber, the women presented in the medieval sources are often idealized; their descriptions are not of actual medieval persons. Consequently, we must take care to distinguish the sources referring to actual women and their deeds from sources referring to an ideal of womanhood, whether fair or wicked.¹⁵ In our case, in which the writers were all men, and generally wrote their observations about women for a male audience, these distinctions are of utmost importance.¹⁶

In summary, the study of motherhood and childhood, and the broader study of family life share many characteristics. In both cases, historians today are studying topics that, a few decades ago, were not considered worthy of historical analysis. Scholars of family life have demonstrated time and again that, although biological functions such as birth and lactation, as well as the basic needs of infants and children, have not changed over time, the ways societies understand and satisfy these needs has. One can no longer explain these needs or functions as simply "natural." They must be understood within their specific cultural and historical contexts.¹⁷

JEWES IN CHRISTIAN EUROPE

The literature concerning the development of research on gender and family history is one part of the foundation for this study, providing a methodological basis for the research and a model for some of the questions posed in the pages that follow. As mentioned above, many of the scholars who pioneered the study of family life in the past were also historians of medieval Europe. As a result, their work provides not only a methodological basis but a substantive one as well. This substantive foundation has been complemented by a growing number of studies concerning women and families in medieval Europe over the past decades. The Jewish communities examined in this study shared many as-

pects of this well-documented world. The question of how to view Jewish society in light of this research and within the broader medieval context provides an additional foundation for this study. I will now briefly describe the Jewish communities of medieval Ashkenaz that are at the heart of this book.

This study focuses on the Jewish family in medieval France and Germany during the High Middle Ages. The earliest sources examined are from the ninth century and the latest sources are from the early modern period. The bulk of the source material was, however, written in the High Middle Ages, between the time of the First Crusade and the Black Death. Since changes in the family often evolved over time, the long period of time examined allows for an assessment of the variation in society that took place over the years.

A time framework similar to the one generally employed in studies of medieval northern France and Germany was chosen for two reasons. As is the case in Christian Europe, the Jewish sources from before the eleventh century are relatively sparse. Despite this relative dearth, the ninth and tenth centuries were formative periods both for the Jewish communities and for their Christian neighbors and institutions. The relative wealth of sources from the late eleventh century onward reflects the vitality of the lives of the Jews of Ashkenaz. This situation parallels that of the Christian world, where we find a wealth of sources from the twelfth century on,¹⁸ as many scholars of childhood and family life in the Middle Ages have pointed out.¹⁹ The early materials from the Carolingian period are very valuable, however, as they reflect a period in which changes that shaped the institutions of the High Middle Ages were initiated. This is equally true of the scarce but important documents we have of community agreements and halakhic opinions from the ninth and tenth centuries.²⁰

The terminus ad quem of this study, the mid-fourteenth century, also has shared significance for Jewish and Christian society. The Black Death has been shown to be a turning point in many different contexts, an event that provoked extreme changes in both attitudes and practices. While in some cases, these changes reflect processes that began in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, many became prominent only after the Black Death. Consequently, many studies about family life in medieval Europe end with the Black Death, just as many studies concerned with early modern Europe begin their inquiry at this point.²¹ The Black Death was also a moment of change for the Jewish communities in Europe and, as such, serves as a suitable period for the end of our inquiry. The Black Death changed the face of European Jewry. Following the Black Death, the process of expulsion of Jews that had begun in England at the end of the thirteenth century, and continued in France at the beginning of the fourteenth century, spread to some cities in Germany as well.²² In addition, many Jews in German communities began to move to Poland during this period. As the population moved eastward, the result of these migrations, both forced and voluntary, created a new Jewish geography.²³ My examination of sources from after the Black Death demonstrates some of the effects of those

changes and investigates to what extent changes that began earlier were accentuated, continued, or transformed after the mid-fourteenth century.

The communities examined are situated in today's northern France and Germany, and are generally called "Ashkenaz" in Jewish historical writing. Although these areas did not belong to a single geopolitical entity during the Middle Ages, and Jewish sources themselves reflect some differences between the localities, the corpus of sources that provides the basis for this study is, for the most part, shared by the two communities.²⁴ Jews settled along the banks of the Rhine during the ninth and tenth centuries, in cities that over time became central Jewish establishments. The "Shum" communities — Speyer, Worms, and Mainz — were home to many important rabbinical figures as well as to the financial leaders of the time (the two vocations often went hand in hand).²⁵ Additional German communities were home to rabbinic authorities and successful traders as well. Over time, Jewish settlement spread eastward, and new centers of business and learning were established.²⁶

The Jews of northern France, like their brothers and sisters in Germany, were also a vital part of the urbanization of Europe during the Carolingian era.²⁷ Jewish families established themselves along the trade routes and in the large urban centers. By the High Middle Ages, larger communities, numbering several hundred families, lived in the big cities in France, while many smaller Jewish communities were established, some numbering only a handful of families. The Jews of these communities in France and Germany maintained close contact with other Jews who shared their customs — Jews living in Bohemia, Austria, and Italy (where many of the Ashkenazic Jews originated).²⁸ Some sources from these areas will be examined here as well.²⁹ I have not included the Jews of England in this discussion, since the Hebrew sources from England are of a different nature from those on the continent, and, despite the existing contacts between Jews in England and in Ashkenaz, the communities' traditions are not the same.

My decision to jointly examine the areas that are today part of Germany and northern France, distinguishing between them only when such distinctions arise from the sources, does not ignore the fact that these were separate geographic units with distinctive sociopolitical features. Some sources demonstrate that the medieval Jews themselves were well aware of such distinctions. Historians have differed over the importance of these distinctions. While some have argued for examining the two traditions jointly, others have argued for distinguishing between the Jews of northern France and those of Germany.³⁰ My approach assumes that the customs and practices in both areas were, for the most part, shared.³¹ Scholars who went to study in the yeshivas frequently traveled between France and Germany, as did many of the business people. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, students often traveled from France to Germany, and in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, German students often traveled to France to study. As we shall see, in the context of family life, both areas shared many features and, in fact, can be defined as a single broad region.

In short, the geographical and chronological frameworks examined here accord with those commonly employed when studying Christian society. As was the case in some of the first studies that examined family life, as well as women's history in medieval Europe, the geographic scope of our project is rather broad. As in those projects, I have focused on northern Europe, to the exclusion of the southern parts of Europe — Spain and Provence.³² This division suits the study of Jewish society, as Spain and Provence had legal and philosophical traditions different from those of Ashkenazic Jews, while Muslim rule, under which the Jews had lived in previous centuries, gave rise to substantial differences in religious customs as well as legal traditions.

Over the past two decades, Christian family life and gender divisions in medieval society have been studied extensively. In the course of this period, there has been a gradual shift from studies examining longer time frames and larger geographic areas to research with narrower geographic and chronological foci.³³ One can hope and assume that, as more social and cultural research pertaining to the Jews in medieval Ashkenaz is undertaken and published, our ability to distinguish between communities and localities will improve.

Jewish Life in Medieval Europe

As stated at the outset, the premise of this study is that it is impossible to comprehend the history of medieval Jews without an in-depth understanding of the society in which they lived. This premise has been debated and contested since the earliest studies on Ashkenazic Jewry written by *Wissenschaft* scholars in the nineteenth century. Certainly, the Jews formed a distinct social and religious group that saw itself, and was perceived by others, as separate from its surroundings. Moreover, the medieval Jewish communities, as well as their Christian neighbors, strove to create separate and even opposing identities, cultivating their own unique customs, some of which were designed to set Jews apart from Christians. Some of these distinctions, within the family framework, will be examined below.

At the same time, however, within the medieval cities, the Jews in Germany and northern France were in contact with their Christian neighbors on a daily basis and had to deal with many of the same mundane worries and troubles. Clearly, on the most basic level, the everyday needs of a Jewish family were similar to those of their Christian neighbors. The Jews needed to support themselves financially, as did their neighbors, and they too married, gave birth, and died. In the context of family life, giving birth, and raising children, we can assume that Jews and Christians who lived in similar material surroundings and environments shared many of the same concerns. This similarity is aptly illustrated by medieval accounts of medical techniques and beliefs related to child care, as well as other categories of medical care.³⁴

Aside from daily concerns, Jews and their neighbors shared a common lan-

guage — the local vernaculars in which they conducted their everyday business and family life.³⁵ They also shared many beliefs, values, and principles, in spite of their separate and, at times, conflicting religions. These shared values are expressed through the shaping of their respective rites of passage and their social institutions, as well as through shared outlooks on life.³⁶ While these similar worldviews sometimes led to intense interfaith polemics, they were also the foundation upon which those polemics were built.³⁷ As such, it is important to outline the similarities as well as the differences between Jewish and Christian family lives.

These shared approaches and attitudes derived not only from common living conditions and beliefs, but also from daily contact. Medieval sources provide many examples of everyday contact between Jews and Christians, especially between Jewish and Christian women, including trade and daily neighborly life. Through these connections, Jews and Christians became familiar with one another's customs. On the family level, Christian women lived inside Jewish homes as servants and as wet nurses, sharing many aspects of the family's daily routine.³⁸ This certainly provided opportunities for exchanging opinions and beliefs. Christian women who worked for Jews learned about Jewish customs and taught Jews their own practices. These more intimate contacts between Jews and Christians are central to this study.

One might argue that since these Jewish-Christian contacts took place within a very clear framework in which Jews were masters and mistresses and Christian women at their beck and call, such contacts are of limited value in illustrating shared worlds. These contacts were, however, so commonplace, that they must be taken into account as part of any attempt to understand medieval Jewish life. As we shall see, many Jewish families, including very poor ones, had Christian servants and wet nurses. In addition, in spite of the very clear hierarchy within the Jewish home, the relationships between the Jewish masters and their servants were shadowed by a reverse hierarchy in which Christians had the upper hand over the Jews.

Contact with household servants was only one of the many facets of daily Jewish-Christian relationships. During the medieval period, there were no ghettos, and Jews and Christians were neighbors. Despite the clear preference Jewish community members showed for living in close proximity to one another, they almost always had Christian neighbors as well.³⁹ These shared neighborhoods created many points of meeting and contact: Jewish and Christian women shared ovens, Jews and Christians met by the local wells and cisterns, borrowed food, and knew each other's daily routines. Medieval *responsa* indicate that Jewish and Christian women borrowed dresses from one another and were familiar with intimate details of one another's customs.⁴⁰ To these informal connections, we may add commercial contacts between Jews and Christians.⁴¹ Certainly, a Christian man or woman who came to the home of a Jewish moneylender was witness to various aspects of Jewish life. Likewise, Jews

became aware of aspects of Christian life by receiving securities that had specifically religious connotations, or when business or other contacts required them to become familiar with the Christian ritual calendar. As Cohen and Horowitz have suggested, members of coterminous different cultures were probably more familiar with one another's rituals than with their respective ideologies.⁴²

Our focus will be on the more intimate and domestic contacts between Jews and Christians, especially those between women. The presence of Christian women in Jewish homes, as well as the shared world of medical practitioners and practice, are both central to understanding medieval Jewish family life. Medical practice is a central component of birth and child care. Jews and Christians exchanged knowledge and techniques and, in some cases, practitioners as well. In addition, medieval medicine had strong religious components—the relics and amulets used, the verses chanted and the explanations given for different practices were often based on religious texts and interpretations.⁴³

In spite of the many contacts between Jews and Christians, the Jewish community, as noted at the outset, saw itself and was seen by others as a separate entity. In many of the cases examined here, Jewish and Christian society will be compared, and I will point to parallel practices and developments as well as to central differences between Jewish and Christian practice. Many scholars have debated how ideas were transferred from one society to the other, especially in cases in which we cannot attribute shared outlooks and practices to daily contacts alone. When scholars of the nineteenth century identified parallel customs, they were often most interested in tracing the origin of the practice to either a Jewish or a Christian source, rather than explaining the culture and period in which the two parallel practices existed.⁴⁴ As my main interest is in the lives of medieval Jews and Christians in their cultural context, I will not be concerned with tracing practices back to their alleged point of origin in Judaism or Christianity. My assumption is that Jews, as a minority society, were more influenced by their Christian neighbors, than the Christians, as a majority culture, were influenced by the Jews. Jews absorbed and appropriated some of the ideas and values of their social environment, more often than not unconsciously. Ivan Marcus has called this kind of cultural appropriation “inward acculturation,” as it did not lead to Jews’ joining Christianity and giving up aspects of their Judaism; rather, it involved the absorption of new ideas into Jewish society.⁴⁵

This approach presents a change from that adopted by past historians. It allows a departure from the attempt to portray Jews as living in a world separate from that of their Christian neighbors. This method also emphasizes that Jews belong to European culture. As Robert Bonfil has shown, this approach also raises new questions: If the Jews are indeed part of their surrounding society, then their lives must be studied in light of their environment.

To a certain extent, this method, which has been developed in different ways by a number of scholars recently,⁴⁶ was already examined and discussed by his-

torians of medieval Ashkenaz in the nineteenth century. However, an additional dominant emphasis in many of those studies was the history of persecution that was a central component of medieval Jewish life.⁴⁷ This emphasis also underlined the difference between the unpleasant contact of Jews with their Christian surroundings, and the religious and creative spirituality enjoyed by leaders of the Ashkenazic communities. As a result, subsequent scholarly approaches usually restricted their gaze to the world of scholarship, positing an unfriendly world beyond the spiritual environment. Family life, according to this approach, was an internal aspect of Jewish life because it was regulated by the Torah and by the leaders of the Ashkenazic communities. With few exceptions, it was presented as a world apart, not connected to the daily contact that existed between Jews and Christians.

The social, rather than the religious or intellectual history of the Jews, was the subject of a number of studies in nineteenth-century Germany and England, but was first brought to the forefront of research through the writings of Salo Baron and Jacob Katz. Baron's approach, which held sway in the twentieth century, especially in North America, concentrated on the social history of the Jews and refused to see the Middle Ages only as a period of persecution. Yet despite the tremendous scope of Baron's research, he did not devote attention to Jewish family life.⁴⁸ Another prominent social historian, Jacob Katz, devoted his attention to the family in medieval and early modern times. Katz's analysis, however, was based on a sociological prototype, and he was not interested in understanding the daily life of the family or the place of women and children within the family framework.⁴⁹

Well before Baron and Katz, scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such as Moritz Güdemann, Israel Abrahams, and others were interested in cultural history, and the Jewish family had a prominent place in their work. On the whole, these scholars, many of whom lived in Germany, were interested in situating Jewish history, and specifically medieval European Jewish history, within the context of the dominant Christian culture.⁵⁰ They pointed to many parallels and shared features of Jewish and Christian life, while maintaining the position that, even in cases in which practices were shared, an inherent difference existed between the Jews and their neighbors. While aspects of family life were examined within the Christian context, an underlying assumption was that the Jewish family was a special haven from the rough, and at times anti-Jewish and unkind world Jews inhabited.⁵¹

After World War II, and especially with the establishment of the State of Israel, medieval Jewish life in Europe attracted much interest. In these studies, the self-organization of the medieval Jewish communities became a central topic. The family, however, the basic building block of these communities, received little attention.⁵² The lack of attention to family history, as well as to the place of women and children in medieval Jewish society, was not merely a reflection of the interests of historians who studied Jewish culture. It also re-

flected the foci of historical research generally during these years; family history and gender studies were not yet prominent in medieval studies. Jewish historical research turned to the family and gender studies only several years after this trend was initiated in general studies of the medieval world in the late eighties and early nineties of the twentieth century.⁵³

In addition to the interest in medieval Jewish community life, the past decades of medieval research have followed the more traditional study of the history of Jewish thought — the works and lives of the great rabbinical figures, whose writings also provide most of the evidence for this study.⁵⁴ Many studies on Jewish-Christian relations were also published.⁵⁵ Only recently have scholars attempted to illuminate the social settings in which these intellectual pursuits took place and connect between these two topics, by examining the works and lives of rabbinic scholars in the context of Jewish-Christian relations. These new emphases in research follow many years in which scholars assumed that Jewish intellectuals functioned in a rather rarefied and isolated intellectual environment.⁵⁶

The tendency, prevalent until quite recently, to examine Jewish life in medieval Ashkenaz in isolation from the lives of non-Jewish neighbors contrasts with research on the Jews of medieval Spain, which has emphasized the shared features and joint culture of Jews, Muslims, and Christians.⁵⁷ There are a number of reasons for this difference: First and foremost, the focus of most scholars studying medieval Ashkenaz was the halakhic corpus composed by scholars during the Middle Ages. These sources are mainly in Hebrew and were not written in order to describe social conditions or situations; rather, they focus on legal and exegetical topics. Scholars' major interest has been in the authors and their intellectual creativity, in the rabbis, and in the contact between them. Their wives, children, and unlearned neighbors were of little concern. Thus, family life was disregarded. An apt illustration of this point can be found in the information we possess regarding the families of the sages themselves. Only a small number of their wives are known by name, and, even in those cases, little else is known about them.⁵⁸

A second reason for the tendency to examine internal Jewish communal life in relative isolation has to do with the extant sources. Most of the sources examined in the past, as in this study, are traditional Jewish sources written in Hebrew. These sources are religious writings focused on the interpretation of Holy Scripture and other canonical texts. As such, they seem to invite examination from an internal Jewish perspective. The second focus of research — Jewish-Christian relations — also promoted separate examination of religious traditions. The discussion of Jewish-Christian polemics assumed difference, for if there is no difference, there is no argument. Despite recent tendencies to concentrate on the dialogue between Judaism and Christianity, the main focus of scholarship in this area has been on the presentation of the differences between Jews and Christians, rather than on their shared aspects.⁵⁹

With the growing interest in the lives of women in the past, this too has been changing. One of the most important works reflecting this outlook is that of Avraham Grossman, a prominent scholar of sages' lives who has recently turned his attention to the history of medieval Jewish women and, especially, to issues relating to marriage and family.⁶⁰ Grossman has emphasized the more ancient elements of Jewish tradition, which are important for any attempt to understand medieval Jewish texts, along with comparing Jewish practices to those of their Christian and Muslim neighbors. However, although Grossman does compare Jewish and Christian society in his work, both societies remain distinctive entities, and his comparisons, unlike those of some scholars of Spanish Jewry, single out parallels, rather than describe shared mentalities and frameworks.

A third possible reason for this attitude toward Ashkenazic Jewry lies in the events that have been emphasized in the history of the Middle Ages: the persecutions and expulsions the Jews experienced in Ashkenaz and beyond. From the eleventh century onward, we find many accounts of these persecutions as well as of the rise of accusations such as host-desecration accusations and blood libels.⁶¹ The tremendous impact of these events, as reflected in research, led to a growing perception of medieval Ashkenazic Jewry as a community living in hostile surroundings. Many of the earlier studies that examined Jewish-Christian relations also emphasized the antagonism that existed between Jews and Christians in medieval society. Recent research, however, has sought to re-examine these relationships, and, while scholars do not deny the existence of this hostility, they have also emphasized the shared facets of Jewish and Christian practice and belief.⁶²

This study is based on the premise that, although Jews and Christians belonged to two distinct religious groups, they lived in the same time and place and often shared many aspects of their lives, despite hostilities that existed between them. Furthermore, these features were not only common to both religious groups, but were also part of a shared dialogue. Thus, medieval Jews and Christians must be studied both as part of a larger joint society and as members of independent religious societies. In some cases we will witness shared practices and frameworks, while in others, the separate structures will be salient. As such, the comparison between Jews and Christians in the pages that follow will serve to identify cases in which the similarities between both societies were overwhelming. There, we may speak of a single framework of medieval life. In other instances, where we will be struck by the distinct differences between Jews and Christians, we will inquire as to whether this diversity resulted from religious differences or from some other cause.⁶³

This comparison also serves another, albeit secondary purpose. As mentioned, there is a substantial body of research about family life in medieval Christian Europe. In some cases where the Jewish sources were lacking in certain details, but the known features indicated great similarity between Jewish

and Christian practices, I have used this knowledge to help fill in the missing details. The dangers of such practice are obvious, since, in such cases, Christian society serves as both a comparison and a parallel. I believe, however, that the benefits of this method, when exercised cautiously, outweigh the dangers. In order to monitor the conclusions of such comparisons, I also make reference to some Jewish practices in other diasporas, beyond Ashkenaz. Although social research is still lacking for the Jews of Muslim lands and for the Jews of Spain, Goitein's monumental *Mediterranean Society* as well as work on Provence, Spain, and Italy have served as controls.⁶⁴

The methods employed here seek to identify parallels, joint practices, and shared beliefs. Due to the nature of the sources, however, this methodology meets with a central difficulty that must be noted at the outset. While we may isolate parallels and shared traditions and actions, it is rarely possible to reconstruct chains of causation and proof or processes of contact, dissemination, and exchange. I would like to emphasize that this is not the purpose of this study, and that, in this respect, it differs from previous research, especially nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft* studies, which focused on the question of who influenced whom and how. Rather, as I suggest explicitly in the book, I believe that Jews and Christians living in medieval Ashkenaz were part of the same cultural surroundings and shared a store of ideas, values, and beliefs. In some cases, these shared values were expressed in similar ways, while in other cases, due to religious and social differences (for example the fact that Jews were part of a minority culture, while Christians were not), they were expressed differently.

The nature of the topics examined in this book might lead some to dismiss many of the resemblances I discuss as arising merely from "common sense." After all, they might argue, children all over the world have the same basic needs, and parents caring for these children experience similar processes and share similar obligations. To use just one example examined here, that of birth, one could argue that throughout history, the biological process of birth has not changed, and that this explains the sharing of medical practices among Jews and Christians in medieval Europe. However, as noted, scholars of gender and of the history of childhood have shown that these biological processes take on diverse cultural significance in different cultures. Moreover, medieval medicine contained many elements that were closely tied to religious ideas and concepts and hence, cannot be treated as a value-neutral category. Also, as I demonstrate in chapter 1, procreation and celibacy have been at the heart of the Jewish-Christian debate since ancient times. Therefore, we cannot simply assume that Christian and Jewish practices surrounding procreation, fertility, and childbirth will "naturally" resemble one another. Rather, it is important to demonstrate the similarities between them as well as the differences. The other chapters of the book support this conclusion. In them I show that ceremonies and educational processes that have been presented in other studies as exclusively Jewish or exclusively Christian are actually based on shared social structures and values.

PARENTS AND CHILDREN IN MEDIEVAL ASHKENAZ

Fifteen years ago, Louise Tilly and Miriam Cohen drew attention to the fact that family history and gender studies have rarely been researched jointly.⁶⁵ While there has been some change over the years, as gender became a more prominent category of analysis, most studies of both medieval Jewish and Christian society have chosen to focus either on mothers or on children, but not on both. This book examines both parents and children, with special emphasis on mothers and motherhood. In this way, I intend to situate the medieval Jewish family within its wider framework, both in relation to fathers and the broader context of Jewish society, while devoting special attention to medieval Jewish women, who have become subjects of historical inquiry only recently.

The joint examination of motherhood and family life enables us to challenge preconceptions concerning both Jewish society in particular and medieval society in general. By examining parenting practices and attitudes toward infants and children, we become acquainted with material and social aspects of everyday life in the Middle Ages and increase our knowledge of the religious beliefs and values of the period. In medieval society, as in many pre-modern societies, women were seen as responsible for children's welfare during their early years. This fundamental social situation gave rise to shared needs among Jewish and Christian families. At the same time, religious beliefs and values are other factors that shaped cultural attitudes and practices. In the case of medieval Jewish and Christian society, I explore the extent to which religious difference led to distinct practices, and I attempt to outline the areas in which religion made a difference.

*The History of Childhood and Women's and
Gender Studies in Medieval Jewish Culture*

Just as much of the literature concerning childhood in medieval Christian society was grounded in the Ariès controversy, so too, studies of childhood in medieval Jewish society have taken Ariès as their point of departure. Three studies of medieval Jewish attitudes toward children have been written to date. Simḥa Goldin has examined the history of medieval Jewish childhood, comparing Jewish and Christian society. Israel Ta-Shma examined attitudes to children in *Sefer Ḥasidim* and argued for differences between Jewish and Christian society over many issues.⁶⁶ Another scholar who has devoted his attention to attitudes toward children and, especially, to education is Ephraim Kanarfogel.⁶⁷ These studies, accepting the theories of Ariès and his followers concerning medieval childhood, assumed that Christian parents did not love their children and were not saddened by their deaths. These scholars suggested that in Jewish society, by contrast, the situation was better.⁶⁸ Although they acknowledged that some of Ariès's conclusions *did* apply to the Jewish commu-

nity — for example, the idea that childhood was a more poorly demarcated period of life and that the lack of distinguishing terms for concepts of childhood attests to this fact.⁶⁹ They argued that Jews, unlike Christians, loved and cared for their families. This argument was made without acknowledging the vast body of literature written on precisely this topic over the past three decades.

The idea that Jews were somehow better than their Christian neighbors can be found in the many studies in the nineteenth century that compare Jews and Christians in medieval society. Even those nineteenth-century scholars who pointed to the many similarities between Jewish and Christian practices proclaimed the superiority of Jews over their neighbors. For example, Israel Abrahams noted: “In most of these particulars, I can hardly think that the life of the Jewish child differed from that of his gentile brother. But the Jewish view of domesticity showed itself in the success with which life was made lovable to the child notwithstanding the rigours of the discipline to which he was subjected.” Throughout his book, he emphasizes time and again: “The home was the place where the Jew was at his best.”⁷⁰

The study of childhood is but one component of the transformation the study of Jewish history has undergone over the past two decades. Social history and, more specifically, gender studies have now become a central area of study. However, this change in methodology and subject matter followed the path of its precedents in non-Jewish Western historical research. Some studies have examined Jewish marriage practices, while others have analyzed men’s attitudes toward women or women’s history in the public sphere, as teachers and educators of women. Few studies have examined motherhood or have sought to place women within a broader context of family and community.⁷¹ Furthermore, much of the work on Jewish women in the past has emphasized our inability to recover their voices, as well as the misogynic attitudes toward women in ancient sources.⁷² These studies, many of them written in the wake of current ideological debates, either sought to demonstrate the oppression of women in Judaism or were written in a more apologetic vein and wished to prove the opposite.

In addition, when comparing Jewish and Christian women’s lives, some scholars have emphasized the superiority of one culture over another, just as we found in the discussion of childhood. They often emphasized how much better attitudes were toward women in Jewish society, and the superior rights they enjoyed, or emphasized that negative attitudes toward women in Judaism were the result of non-Jewish influence. It is our contention that this type of analysis is not productive, as it often tends to apologetics rather than historical examination. Any attempt at determining which society was better or worse leads to value judgments based on principles that are anchored in modern life and are of limited value in understanding the past.⁷³ Although it is easy to slip unconsciously into such comparison,⁷⁴ I have tried to circumvent such discussions by avoiding labeling practices when discussing medieval Jewish society.⁷⁵

I have tried to distance myself from both the apologetic and the triumphal-

ist (ethnocentric) positions. I have taken as a given that medieval Jewish society, like all of medieval society, was patriarchal, and that its communities were governed by male hierarchies. My purpose has been to explore the fabric of this society and examine the social ideologies, hierarchies, and practices that characterized it. Where possible, I have also explored our capacity to accurately recover the actual women's voices through the testimonies provided by male writers. These voices are frequently found in descriptions of conflicts or arguments over various practices.

In addition to the aspiration to provide a fuller picture of motherhood, fatherhood, and family life, two other issues are central to this study. The first is the examination of birth rituals and the understanding of ritual frameworks regulating birth for parents and children in medieval Ashkenaz. The second is the examination of the daily contacts between Jews and Christians in the sphere of family life.

The study of ritual has become a central tool for historical analysis over the past years. Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages, as in most societies, celebrated birth, marriage, and death with elaborate ritual. As scholars have shown, examining these rituals offers new insights into the place of individuals in their societies, as well as the social settings and religious ideologies that framed these rituals.⁷⁶ Over the past years, ritual theory has been used extensively to understand different aspects of medieval Christianity,⁷⁷ and the beginnings of such an approach can be seen in Jewish studies over the past decade.⁷⁸ In the medieval context, the rite of passage that marked the beginning of boys' education, as studied by Ivan Marcus, is the most notable example of such research on medieval Ashkenaz.⁷⁹ Few studies, however, have studied the social aspects of rituals, and most have focused exclusively on the religious symbolism that was part of the ritual in question.⁸⁰ Moreover, only circumcision has been studied extensively, despite the fact that other, less formal rituals existed as well.

The issue of daily contacts between Jews and Christians has been studied in the economic sphere and, most recently, in the context of Hebrew Bible and New Testament exegesis and the connections between Jewish and Christian scholars. Our focus is on the more mundane contacts, especially between women inside and outside the house. Wet nursing and midwifery, as well as advice shared between women about health and child care are all part of these contacts. By demonstrating these close contacts between Jewish and Christian women, and the world shared by both groups, we hope to open up new vistas for research. The evidence pointing to a world shared by Jewish and Christian women encourages historians of both Jewish and Christian society to search for and learn from comparisons between them. In that way, at times by filling in the blanks, we can piece together a fuller picture of the knowledge women shared in medieval society, as well as a sketch of a central channel through which Jews and Christians, both men and women, learned and adopted ideas that became part of Jewish and Christian life alike.

THE SOURCES

The sources that provide the basis for this study are varied and were, for the most part, written in northern France and Germany during the High Middle Ages. They include halakhic responsa (questions and answers addressed to prominent rabbinical authorities), exempla such as those in *Sefer Ḥasidim*, ritual books, comprehensive books of commandments (*sifrei miṣvot*), biblical and talmudic commentary as well as commentary on liturgical poetry (*piyutim*), medical tractates, polemical compositions, chronicles, lists of the dead, and gravestones. In addition to sources originating in the Jewish communities, canon law, municipal records, medical texts, commentaries on the Bible (Old and New Testament) and *legenda* provide knowledge about the Jewish communities, their Christian surroundings, and the contacts between Jews and Christians. Some of the Hebrew sources are found in printed editions that have been published extensively since the mid-nineteenth century. Other sources remain in unpublished manuscripts. The majority of these sources were not written with the intention of discussing family life; rather they address a variety of concerns, both legal and theological, and the details about family life emerge from the narrative.

Sefer Ḥasidim provides unique information about parent-children relations and about attitudes toward children and family life. Scholarship about this book has debated the nature of the group that adhered to the instructions of *Sefer Ḥasidim* and constituted the audience of the book. While some have suggested seeing Ḥasidei Ashkenaz as a unique and separate group, others have suggested that many of the moral lessons recommended in the book pertained to all of Ashkenazic society.⁸¹ While I do not intend to discuss this issue in the book, I propose reading many of the stories concerning women, children, and family life as representative of Ashkenazic society as a whole.⁸² Even if Ḥasidei Ashkenaz were as small and sectarian a group as some have suggested, this does not mean their family life was completely different from that of their Jewish neighbors. As a way of checking these conclusions, I have sought to compare between attitudes expressed in *Sefer Ḥasidim* and those expressed in other contemporary Jewish and Christian sources in order to determine how normative these ideas were.

Working with the sources described above involves a number of difficulties, both technical and more substantive. As I stated above, these texts were all written by and for men. This perspective poses difficulties for the evaluation of the opinions and attitudes of women cited in these writings. Unlike many of the parallel Christian sources, the men writing these texts had families and were not removed from family life. Despite this, one cannot forget that their readers were only men. I have tried to demonstrate how, in some cases, one can discuss women's attitudes and opinions in spite of these limitations. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that most of the sources were not meant to dis-

cuss the family. Consequently, the evidence in the sources must be examined both in its context and in a broader perspective. The attempt to combine information from sources belonging to different literary genres requires that we be cognizant of the rules of each genre when piecing the sources together. Most of the sources examined here have been discussed in previous literature by scholars who specialized in medieval Ashkenaz. In the tradition of gender studies, I have examined these sources in new ways, posing different questions.

It is also crucial to note the sources we are lacking. Besides the obvious fact that we have not a single source written by a woman, we also have no sources providing demographic or statistical information,⁸³ nor do we have maps or city plans to provide us with a layout of the cities in which Jews lived. We also have no Jewish parallel to the medieval hagiographic sources that describe the saints' lives — sources that have been used extensively to study family life in medieval Christendom.⁸⁴

While I have used a variety of sources in comparing Jewish and Christian society, my most basic resource for Christian society has been the extensive research on medieval women, men, and children. In some cases, I have based my comparison on these secondary sources, while in other cases I have returned to the medieval sources themselves. As the main focus of this study is Jewish society, most of the sources are Jewish sources.

FAMILY LIFE IN MEDIEVAL ASHKENAZ

In the chapters that follow, the narrative begins with pregnancy and ends with boys' entry into formal education, at age six or seven. This narrative was chosen because it enabled a combined analysis and discussion of several kinds of sources. This is necessary, since one type of source may provide a wealth of information on one topic, but none on others. For example, a huge body of legal literature discusses common breast-feeding practices. By contrast, there are almost no legal writings on birth.

While we can find a wealth of information about the process from birth until early childhood, the lack of demographic and statistical information prevents us from outlining other basic information about the family and its characteristics. I have relied on the suggestions made by others on the composition and character of medieval Jewish families as well as their living conditions. The following summary will provide an overview of the research I have utilized for the study.

Living conditions are especially important because young children — boys who had not yet begun school (at the local synagogue or their tutor's home) and young girls — spent most of their time at home. When they went out of their homes, young children were usually accompanied by adults. Since we know that these children's mothers were mobile and could be seen in many public spaces — around the home, at synagogue, as well as in the streets and

marketplace — we can assume that they often took their young children with them, even if there is little evidence of such outings. There is substantial evidence, however, of their visits to the synagogue. These visits began long before they were ripe for education and attended the synagogue to study with the local tutor.⁸⁵ Both young boys and girls attended the synagogue with their parents. The synagogue was a central communal meeting place for social and spiritual functions. Archeological evidence reflects the tremendous importance the Jewish communities attributed to their communal places of worship — both as an antithesis to the local churches and as a sanctuary.⁸⁶

Over the past years, a wealth of research has been published on the locations of medieval Jews habitations. These studies are, for the most part, the result of research done in Germany, where scholars have been interested in understanding the development and settlement of Jews in Germany during the Middle Ages.⁸⁷ Few of these studies have, however, examined the lifestyles and living conditions of individual families within the city. Fifty years ago Alexander Pinthus raised some of these questions in his study *Die Judensiedlungen der Deutsche Städte. Eine stadthiologische Studie*, and little has been done in this direction since.⁸⁸

In contrast to the lack of sources on Jewish living conditions, we know that the Jews' Christian neighbors lived as nuclear families, and that each couple usually had a room of their own and formed an independent economic unit.⁸⁹ These units were often tied to broader family frameworks in their daily life, but they almost always lived independently.⁹⁰

With the exception of studies concerning the age of marriage and especially child brides,⁹¹ little research has been done on Jewish family structures.⁹² Kenneth Stow is one of the few scholars who has addressed this topic, and he has argued that the Jews, like their urban Christian neighbors, lived in nuclear families.⁹³ The medieval Jewish sources, also, point to the complex networks that existed between and within families, especially insofar as economic relationships and partnerships were concerned.⁹⁴ Sources that discuss economics and business deals may potentially shed additional light on family structures, since so much of Jewish business took place within the home.

As we shall see in the following chapters, especially regarding rituals, the wider family framework was also central in religious and social life. Family background was an essential component in matchmaking agreements and was a central factor in determining social status.⁹⁵ Few sources, however, discuss the involvement of grandparents in the upbringing and education of their grandchildren. Consequently, we cannot outline the nuclear family's relationship with broader family networks in the context of early childhood. While we can assume that grandparents and siblings were involved in the upbringing of children, especially in cases in which a young bride gave birth, there are few details on these relationships.⁹⁶ These issues all require further research, research that was not undertaken in the context of this study.

The first chapter traces family life from marriage and the period before conception, to birth and practices surrounding birth, including attitudes toward procreation and the preference for boys over girls. The social organization around birth, the work of midwives, the connections between Jewish and Christian women, as well as the gendered conceptions of birth are all addressed in this chapter. The second and third chapters discuss birth rituals — the more institutionalized rite of circumcision, as well as the less formal rites for girls, boys, and women after birth. This discussion outlines the understandings of the rites in both individual and more communal terms. The place of women in these rites, and the changes in the rituals over time are central to the discussion. From the ritual framework, I turn to examine daily practices and attitudes toward children and child care. Chapter 4 discusses breast-feeding and wet-nursing practices and exposes a complex world of interactions between Jews and Christians. Chapter 5, the final chapter, discusses attitudes toward children and child care, from the division of labor to the place of child care in religious and ethical thought. All the chapters compare Jewish and Christian sources and practices.

In the conclusion, I summarize the insights that arise from this examination of Jewish society within the wider Christian context. I argue that the only way to understand Jewish family life in the past is by studying Jewish families within their cultural context. Medieval Jewish attitudes and beliefs must be understood in the context of earlier Jewish traditions as well as in those of the contemporary environment. Practices and ideas were shared by Jews and Christians, at times in spite of substantive differences in religious belief, and notwithstanding the dissimilar explanations provided for similar customs. By examining the changes that took place in the lives of families in medieval society — mothers, fathers, and children — we may further our understanding of the ways in which Jews in medieval Europe developed and preserved their separate identities, while being full partners in medieval society. Our quest to see and understand women's lives and history, from a gender perspective, constitutes a first step toward a more inclusive Jewish history — a history in which medieval Jewish women can find their place in a narrative alongside the rabbis and students whose works are so well known and so often studied. If we rephrase Abelard's statement in Jewish terms, we are seeking to examine the connections between pupils and nursemaids, thoughts of scripture and babies being soothed by lullabies, and above all the noisy coming and going of men and women about the house.