

Introduction

Since my first college course in European history some forty-five years ago, the historical period usually called “early modern” (roughly comprising the late fifteenth to late eighteenth centuries) has held a special fascination for me. It displays so conspicuously the trends and processes historians delight in studying: radical change, social and cultural crises, and the complex and often unexpected mingling of the old and new. One is hard-pressed to understand how such developments as the new geographic and scientific discoveries, the invention of print, the emergence of new national political structures and policies, protracted and devastating famines and wars, economic contractions and expansions, and religious individualism countered by religious discipline and control can all be subsumed easily under one overarching interpretative framework. Such labels as “a period of transition,” of “paradox,” or of “seeming contradictions and inconsistencies,” often evoked to characterize early modernity, transparently betray how challenging it is for the historian to make some sense of the epoch as a whole in relation to its diverging and contrasting parts.

Such is the case for those who study early modern Jewish history as well. Take, for example, the story I enjoy relating to my students about three prominent rabbis and writers who lived and worked in Venice in the first half of the seventeenth century, although one of them spent much of his life traveling to other parts of the European continent and to the Middle East. It would be safe to say that each of them was aware of and

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appreciated the others and that each highly respected the others for their intelligence and erudition.

The first, Leon Modena (1571–1648), served as rabbi, cantor, and preacher in the ghetto while composing many works (both published and unpublished) including an autobiography, a collection of rabbinical responsa, sermons, a critique of the kabbalah, a work composed in Italian explaining Judaism and its practices to non-Jews, and several books defending the integrity of the rabbinic tradition and the Talmud. Modena also composed an unfinished work called *Sha'agat Aryeh* (The Roar of the Lion) responding unfavorably to another composition called *Kol Sakhal* (The Voice of a Fool), a radical and devastating critique of the very foundations of rabbinic Judaism. Given the apparently lame response Modena offered to counter this work, it has often been assumed that he also penned the *Kol Sakhal*. (This assumption informs the most thorough and compelling treatment of this work by Talya Fishman.) The colorful rabbi and educator was not only a writer of many genres and a holder of the many professions that he lists at the end of his autobiography but also appears to have been a dissimulator, simultaneously defending the Talmud and the rabbis while criticizing and holding them accountable for the miseries they had allegedly inflicted on the Jewish community. Modena was also going against the grain in challenging the predominance of kabbalistic sapience in a Jewish culture saturated with esoteric books and their teachers. Modena's life and thought is one of the most documented of any rabbinic figure in early modern Europe, but ironically it may be the least understood.¹

Modena's rabbinic colleague, Simone Luzzatto (1583–1663), was a similarly enigmatic figure, functioning as a

rabbi and educator for more than fifty years in Venice, but appearing to have little sustained interest in rabbinics or in traditional Jewish subjects given the paucity of his Hebrew writing in these areas. Indeed, Luzzatto is primarily known for two works he published in Italian, apparently written for non-Jewish readers. The first, the *Discorso circa il stato de gl' hebrei et in particular dimoranti nell'inclita città di Venetia* (A Discourse on the State of the Jews, Particularly Those Dwelling in the Illustrious City of Venice) represented a vigorous defense of the Jewish presence in Venetian society, arguing that their economic utility to the state, their political allegiance, and their high cultural profile entitled them to live peacefully and creatively among their Catholic neighbors. Luzzatto later published a work titled *Socrate ovvero dell'humano sapere* (Socrates, or Concerning Human Knowledge), his own highly original reconstruction of the Socratic trial, containing rich discourses on many of the philosophical and scientific issues of his day. The work purports to argue that without the aid of divine revelation human beings are incapable of understanding the truth and knowing the world. At least this seems to be the theme of this work from a perusal of its long title page. But alas, the reader who persists in reading the book from beginning to end will discover only a skeptical bent with no discussion whatsoever of the virtue of revelation—Jewish or otherwise. In fact, there are few references to the Jewish provenance of this work other than the name of the illustrious Venetian rabbi! What could have motivated this allegedly prominent spokesman of Judaism to compose a text in which his faith appears to be totally absent? Despite the considerable learning and eloquence of both works, one written to

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influence public opinion and the other without any obvious pedagogic or religious objective, Rabbi Luzzatto remains a mystery to those who would wish to understand his true intentions and his ultimate beliefs.²

Their colleague Joseph Delmedigo (1591–1655), known by the name Yashar of Candia (Crete), was as complex a thinker as either of his two colleagues. Born in Crete, he gained his medical degree at the University of Padua as well as an extensive background in the sciences, even studying with Galileo, and spent time in Venice as well before returning to Crete to practice medicine. From there he set out on an extensive journey through the Middle East, eastern and central Europe, and even Amsterdam, engaging in conversations with Jews and especially Karaites wherever he went. His scientific work *Sefer Elim* (The Book of Elim) was published in Amsterdam by Menasseh ben Israel. It demonstrated his intricate understanding of contemporary cosmology and astronomy and ensured his place as the leading Jewish scientific writer of his day. Soon after, one of his disciples published a large collection of his writings called *Ta'alumot Hokhmah* (The Secrets of Wisdom). The work includes both a treatise defending the study of the kabbalah along with an extensive collection of recent kabbalistic works. He also composed in a separate letter a critique of Jewish esoteric wisdom and advocated the study of philosophy and the sciences for contemporary Jews. Delmedigo's recent biographer, Isaac Barzilay, wrestled with the obvious discrepancies among these various works, the seemingly contradictory stance of promoting the kabbalah and its writings while at the same time deprecating its teachings in favor of a "scientific" view of the universe. In the end, Barzilay dismissed

Delmedigo's kabbalistic leanings as a deception and saw him as a proto-*maskil* (a man of enlightenment), an early advocate of rational enlightenment. But Barzilai had hardly reconciled the inner contradictions seemingly underlying the composite nature of Delmedigo's search for truth: Was he a secret kabbalist or not? Had his positions shifted over time? And how was it possible to reconcile these inconsistent strands of his thinking, revealed in works he wrote to disparate colleagues and students from Cairo to Vilna to Amsterdam? Who was the real Joseph Delmedigo?³

Here, then, is a wonderful example of the richly textured complexity of Jewish cultural life in early modern Europe. How might one characterize these three rabbis, friends and associates, and their intellectual commitments and the nature of their religious beliefs? Was Modena a defender or detractor of Jewish norms and rabbinic authority? Was Luzzatto a skeptic, or a believer? And was Delmedigo hostile to kabbalistic musings, or were they for him the pinnacle of Jewish spirituality and creativity? Were these three all dissimulators practicing a form of double talk that Leo Strauss characterized in his well-known book *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, speaking publicly in one voice while masking their true private opinions?⁴ Perhaps their seemingly contradictory positions are symptomatic of something deeper in their culture and society that the historian needs to decipher: a crisis of confidence in what constitutes true knowledge, epistemological doubts about the porous boundaries between occult and rational thinking, a compulsion to challenge religious and political authority in the name of an inner voice of conscience, or, perhaps, an autonomous personality questioning all conventions and norms.

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I have not yet made up my mind on how to explain precisely each of these three intriguing individuals and their parallel quests to understand the world around them. Whether typical or not of other early modern cultural figures among European Jewry, this cadre of rabbinic scholars illustrates profoundly and dramatically the challenges of understanding, defining, or classifying the milieu in which they lived and the culture they helped to shape. Was their age traditional or modern? How should the historian weigh such factors as the language in which they expressed themselves, the books they printed and those that remained in manuscript, their mobile or sedentary lifestyles, their interactions with Jews and non-Jews, or the reciprocal impact each had on the other? Whatever factors one considers in reconstructing their world, the individual portraits these rabbis cut in all their complexity and impenetrability are exciting and compelling. Their stories illuminate the vast treasures that await the student of Jewish history in the baffling age called early modernity. Theirs and other stories are what sparked my long-held interest in understanding this captivating era.

In this quest, however, I have hardly been alone. Many others have entered this field in recent years and have scrutinized its multiple dimensions intensely and resourcefully, not only focusing on Italy but throughout the continent and beyond. When I began my graduate studies in early modern Jewish history at the Hebrew University in the late 1960s, I was expected to master a finite canon of recent historical works on this era written especially by such giants as Jacob Katz, Yizhak Baer, and Gershom Scholem. This list was conspicuously weighted in favor of Israeli scholarship; almost all of it was written in Hebrew, but some in English.⁵

By the late 1970s, the study of this period was significantly enlarged by the work of a younger group of scholars, most of them residing in Israel but some of them in other countries. Several researchers expanded the study of the cultural and intellectual history of the conversos beyond the previous focus on Benedict de Spinoza and heresy. Scholem's regnant reconstructions of the history of the kabbalah were now challenged by several of his most prominent students. A younger group of scholars, several of them trained in America with strong interests in social and economic history, begin to revive the study of Jewish history in Poland and Lithuania. New reconstructions of the social history of Anglo-Jewry, the cultural and intellectual history of Italian Jewry, and the social and cultural history of Ottoman Jewry appeared in these same years. Richard Popkin's prestige and ability to surround himself with a talented group of researchers enhanced the study of Jewish-Christian relations, Spinozism, converso skepticism, and millenarianism in numerous ways.⁶

In subsequent decades, the maturation of this younger group of historians has now produced major and fuller treatments of larger units of study. Several scholars, initially attracted to the social and economic history of the 1960s, have shifted their interest to cultural history as well. They have been joined by others still primarily Israeli, but increasingly represented by North American and European scholars.⁷

Several areas previously ignored by an earlier generation have become prominent—undoubtedly the result of trends in general historical research. Several scholars have pioneered the study of print and book censorship in the formation of early modern Jewish culture.

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Others have generated a renewed interest in the study of Christian Hebraism, especially Christian kabbalah, as well as the study of antiquarianism and scholarship among Jews. Still others have opened up the study of women and gender in this period, while much new work on the conversos from a variety of researchers on three continents continues to appear. New archival work from central and eastern Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and elsewhere has offered new vistas from which to reassess Jewish cultural and social history. The ultimate result of all of this new research is an extraordinary number of books and articles in many languages. My students now confront a body of scholarly literature they can never fully master and absorb. The finite reading list of my own student days is now a thing of the past!⁸

Quite surprisingly, despite the plethora of new studies related to Jewish history in early modern Europe and despite the great interest among students of Jewish history this literature has generated, there has been little attempt to understand the whole and to connect the smaller units of investigation in any coherent or meaningful way. Only one historian, Jonathan Israel, has attempted to offer a serious comprehensive portrait of the entire period, arguing for the first time that early modern Jewish history needs to be understood as a distinct epoch, distinguishable from both the medieval or modern periods.⁹ Others have remained indifferent to demarcating this period, or have simply designated it an extension of the Middle Ages, or have labeled it vaguely as a mere transitional stage between medievalism and modernity without properly describing its distinguishing characteristics.

This reluctance to offer a comprehensive, transregional portrait of Jewish culture and society in early

modern Europe, is attributable, I would argue, to at least three major challenges that have inhibited others from attempting to do what Israel tried to do. The first is the challenge offered by Jonathan Israel himself and, by now, the well-established and honorable place his book (*European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism 1550–1750*) has assumed in scholarly literature. While Israel has made an important case for a distinct early modern period for Jewish history and ably described its economic and political foundations, his understanding of Jewish culture was deficient in many respects when he first published the book in 1985. Subsequently, the new explosion of scholarship in the last twenty-five years has made his reconstruction even more outdated and incomplete. Israel's characterization of Jewish social and cultural history as primarily reflective and derivative of general trends located in non-Jewish society also requires revision and reevaluation. The history of Jewish society and culture in early modern Europe is more than a mirror of the Christian world and needs to be described more accurately and more comprehensively than Israel has done. It also needs to be viewed simultaneously from both external and internal perspectives.

The second challenge is that offered by my colleagues who prefer to speak about the early modern period exclusively from the vantage point of a particular region or locality they study. The overall assumption of their work is that Jewish history in this period can only be reconstructed on a microlevel. Its variegated histories are radically singular, diverse, and heterogeneous, lacking common features that might link them together. The general thrust of the recent narratives of early modern Jewish history is to deny the possibility that a distinct

early modern Jewish cultural experience can ever be meaningfully described. I wish to assert that such a description is possible and desirable.

The third challenge is the one posed by both European and world historians who have grappled with the slippery term *early modernity*. There is first their discomfort in dealing with the ambiguity of the label, which is commonly evoked but never clearly defined. There is also the more formidable challenge in overcoming the teleological progression from premodern to modern that the term *early modern* surely implies. And when the label is employed by world historians confronting the radical diversity of the societies they study, their comparative search for elements common to all societies often appears superficial and reductive, and even a distortion when viewing the entire globe, either explicitly or implicitly, from a Europeanist perspective. I wish to find a way to overcome the so-called early modern muddle in writing about the Jewish experience.

Beyond these three challenges one might even question on a more basic level the need for the historian to offer elaborate schemes of periodization in the first place. Any attempt at periodization invites the detailed criticisms of specialists eager to discredit any facile generalizations about the past. We undoubtedly live in an age where periodization schemes have gone out of fashion since they suggest an effort to essentialize, and it is much easier and more certain to focus on the particular than the sweeping explanations of larger historical units.

In light of the above, proposing the need for a bold construction of Jewish cultural history in the early modern period might appear to be highly unrewarding. In presenting this agenda, nevertheless, I wish to claim that

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historians, in search of useful knowledge, are required at times to step back from their narrow studies, to explore the wider and deeper meaning of an elusive historical past, and to uncover not merely a Jewish history specific to a Polish context or an Italian or Ottoman one but a history of the Jews and their cultural legacy as a whole. There is clearly a potential danger in such an endeavor in distorting or misconstruing the past by imposing upon it the preoccupations of the present. Yet the project of describing a transnational culture in early modern Europe still remains useful in attempting to link in some sense disparate communities and, more significantly, disparate historiographical traditions rarely in contact or in conversation with each other.

So what, specifically, am I proposing to study? I wish to describe as best I can the larger patterns of cultural formation affecting early modern Jewry as a whole.¹⁰ Cultural formation for me implies more than “pure” intellectual developments, a history of Jewish ideas, literary texts, and authors. Rather, my focus is on the study of the interconnections among intellectual creativity and the political, social, and technological conditions shaping Jewish life in this era. Thus my narrative is neither a series of readings of individual authors nor even an examination of the general trends of literary production with which Jewish intellectuals were engaged but a broader exploration of ideas and intellectual achievement in their social and political contexts.

In searching for larger patterns, I do not expect to efface the specificities and singularities of the subcultures of Jewish life other historians have carefully described. Nor do I intend to offer a new master narrative superseding their own individual interpretations. Instead I

propose only another interpretative layer, a perspective on their work that emphasizes connections, contacts, and conversations over time and across specific localities. In this I am especially indebted to the work of Jerry Bentley and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, among others, and their employment of the related concepts of cultural exchange and “connected” histories in addressing the meaning of early modernity for world history at large. These concepts, discussed more fully in the appendix of this book, might indeed provide a useful vocabulary in speaking about the variegated Jewish experiences of the early modern period. Connected histories recognize and appreciate disparate local traditions and cultural developments rather than obscuring or obliterating their uniqueness. By defining this era on the basis of intense communication and exposure to other groups and communities, the historian might be better able to speak about a common cultural experience while recognizing the perpetuation of distinct regional and local identities. Accordingly, like Subrahmanyam, I wish to highlight the dialectical relationship between local conditions and continental or even global patterns, to acknowledge the possible tension between them but also to insist that looking at the local and specific from the perspective of connected histories is useful and productive in reconstructing this multifaceted period. In the end, a merely derivative account of Jewish cultural and social history or one fragmented by disparate localized narratives are neither intellectually satisfying nor do they adequately describe the larger picture that might emerge if the sources and their modern-day reconstructions are allowed to connect, to speak with each other.

I consider five elements in this book that might allow me to describe the era as a whole. Each element needs to be examined over the entire period and across regional boundaries to assess its significance as a marker of a newly emerging Jewish cultural experience. These categories overlap, but to my mind they offer us a most promising beginning in speaking about a connected early modern Jewish culture. They also offer an outline for charting an agenda for future study of the field. I am hard-pressed to point to any overarching epistemological or methodological reasons why I have privileged these factors over others. They represent, at best, my own intuitive sense of what was distinctive and unprecedented about this era, based on my years of studying and teaching its manifold dimensions.

I would be the first to acknowledge that these markers are tentative at best, that they may even describe inadequately and incompletely the larger landscape I wish to define, and that some of the factors affected some people more than others. Nevertheless, I have yet to discover a better way of characterizing the formation of a common Jewish culture whose constituent parts were connected to each other in the early modern period. For the time being, they represent for me the most meaningful rubrics in speaking about the shared historical experience of early modern Jewry. Perhaps these five factors should be regarded by the readers of this book as primarily tentative proposals, certainly open-ended and preliminary to further discussion, research, and interpretation that my own reconstruction might hopefully generate. I have no objection if these five elements are corrected, revised, and expanded in the future based on new insights from

other fields or new research on specific localities still inadequately studied by scholars up to now.

I propose accordingly the following five primary components of the early modern experience for Jews:

1. An accelerated mobility leading to enhanced contacts between Jews and other Jews of differing backgrounds, traditions, and even languages, and between Jews and non-Jews; the strains and stresses these contacts engendered leading both to rapid cultural change and reactionary conservatism. I have in mind both the mobility of large numbers of émigrés expelled from their places of origin and forced to seek refuge in new and alien environments, a condition especially noticeable in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but less so in the eighteenth century. But I also refer to the mobility of individuals—especially secondary elites, peripatetic scholars, book dealers, peddlers, restless intellectuals—a relatively constant movement noticeable throughout the entire period and in almost every Jewish community of early modern Europe.

2. A heightened sense of communal cohesiveness throughout all Jewish settlements, reaching an apex in the remarkable Council of the Four Lands, the overarching self-government of eastern European Jewry as a whole. Such communal structures often reveal a striking tendency: the growing decline of rabbinic authority and the rising power of lay oligarchies, although local variations need to be carefully noticed. They also raise the intriguing question as to what extent their existence was a direct function of the conscious policy of the political states that supported them.

3. A knowledge explosion precipitated by the technology of the printing press, but also by other factors such as a growing interest in Jewish books on the part of Christian readers, an expanded curriculum of Jewish learning, and the conspicuous entrance of Jewish elites into the universities. This general transformation, more than all the others, seems to be constant and repercussive throughout the entire period and needs to be seen in relation to the factors of mobility and social mixing already mentioned above.

4. A subsequent crisis of rabbinic authority engendered by many factors, including the previous three, and often expressed through active messianism, mystical prophecy, radical enthusiasm, and heresy. While manifest throughout the entire period, it is most acute in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and leaves its mark in some way on all Jewish communities. It also precipitates a counterreaction on the part of the rabbinic establishment that we might refer to as the emergence of a united front of “orthodoxy.”

5. The blurring of religious identities, a factor intimately connected to the previous one, and most prominent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I refer specifically to the emergence of the conversos and their attempts to reenter the Jewish community; the boundary crossings of Sabbateans among Judaism, Islam, and Christianity; the paths of individual Jewish converts to Christianity; and the complex uses of Judaism among Christian Hebraists in their own searches for Christian authenticity and identity. This factor is clearly more visible in the West than the East, but given the vast international networks of converso merchants and messianic

enthusiasts, the expansive presence of both individual converts and Christian students of Judaism from Amsterdam to Krakow to Prague, and given its ultimate significance in redefining Judaism and Christianity and their relationship to each other, this factor is surely as significant as the others.

In singling out these five factors, among many others, I am fully aware that I leave myself open to criticism. Some might point to other factors more significant than these, such as the rise of the kabbalah and eventually Hasidism and their revolutionary impact on Jewish culture and society; transformations in the status of the family and women; or the rising importance of popular culture, for example. I would argue that the dissemination of the kabbalah and the rise of Hasidism at the end of this period are primarily effects of factors I have already mentioned such as mobility, the printing press, and the rise of radical enthusiasm. Within these contexts, the significant impact of the kabbalah needs to be understood. With respect to women's life and popular culture, we are not yet in a position to weigh either factor as primary in defining the early modern experience for Jews. This is partly a function of the state of scholarship in these fields which is still in its infancy. It also stems from the fact that the changing statuses of women and of nonelite culture appear to be highly more significant in the centuries that follow our period.¹¹

Some might object to the apparent arbitrary nature of selecting these five factors. Are they equally present throughout all the regions of Jewish settlement, and at the same time? Surely migrations, as I have already indicated, are decisive at the beginning of this era, but by

the eighteenth century mobility was less a characteristic of Jewish life than before. Radical messianism affected the Jewish communities of the Mediterranean more than those of eastern Europe. Communal developments, despite some general similarities, also varied from region to region. Mingled identities obviously were relevant to only certain special populations within the larger Jewish community but did not affect the latter as a whole. There is no doubt that these objections are valid to a certain extent. There are clear geographical and chronological variations that do not allow us to claim equal cogency and force for each of these factors over time and place. But, as I have already indicated, I am not claiming a homogeneity of early modern Jewish culture where local differences can be swept away. I am seeking only general tendencies that vary distinctly from place to place, but nevertheless reveal some commonality, some connections between the various parts and the whole.

With respect to the alleged randomness of my factors, I would argue that almost all of them are related in one respect: they reveal in their entirety the pressures this period exemplifies on the notion of religious and social boundaries between Jews and other Jews and between Jews and members of other faiths and ethnic groups. Mobility, social mixing, the loosening of rabbinic control, knowledge explosion, and mingled identities all clearly contest and complicate the borders imposed by Jewish law and Christian society on its Jewish minority. All five factors suggest a blurring of what constitutes Jewish identity with a variety of new options for Jewish self-definition and for representing Jewish civilization in the non-Jewish world. All five factors also describe in varying degrees a profound sense of crisis, especially a

loss of control and authority on the part of communal leaders that accompanied the intense creativity and productivity of Jewish life in this era.

Others might argue that my five factors are merely identical with those found in European society at large. Mobility, print, the widening of cultural horizons, radical enthusiasm, syncretism, and cosmopolitanism feature prominently in all descriptions of early modernity, so how is my description a compellingly Jewish narrative? What is unique about looking at these factors within a Jewish context? My answer would be that Jews were also Italians, Dutch, or Poles and one should not be surprised that they exhibited cultural tendencies similar to those of other human beings with which they came in contact. But what might be unique and interesting to study is not so much the similarity of these factors among different groups experiencing a common cultural environment and common cultural challenges but how each group responded to these challenges with its own specificity and out of its own special cultural and social conditioning and resources. The story of print is a universal story, but its specific Jewish dimensions are clearly not identical to those of Protestants, Catholics, or Muslims. Other people in early modern Europe were surely mobile, yet mobility had a particular impact on the Jews in forcing them to confront and become acquainted with non-Jews, but especially with other Jews they had hardly known so intimately in previous ages.

I have tried to look at these five factors across most of the Jewish world between the late fifteenth and late eighteenth centuries. I concentrate especially on the Jewish communities of Italy, the Netherlands, central Europe, eastern Europe, and the Ottoman Empire. I have not

adequately treated Anglo-Jewry, French Jewry, or North African Jewry in this book. This is primarily due to the state of scholarship regarding these communities. In the case of England, its cultural profile emerges distinctly only in the eighteenth century, and only at that century's end.¹² I know less about North African Jewry primarily because scholarship on this region for the most part has not addressed these issues. Jewish culture in early modern France, outside the converso communities, has only recently been examined in modern scholarship.¹³ Thus my focus on the communities I have chosen to study is not so much a judgment on their importance over other communities but a practical reflection of present research and my own limitations as a synthesizer. My project is primarily about Jews who lived in Europe and the Ottoman Empire. In not taking into account the Jewish experiences in North Africa and the rest of the Middle East beyond the land of Israel, I recognize the possibility that their histories might not be fully accounted for within my Eurocentric perspective. I hope that others can better integrate other perspectives into mine. Indeed, the strategy of connected histories that I have employed and the open-ended nature of this project surely encourage this refinement, as well as others, to take place.

I offer one final comment about the organization of the chapters that follow. Some readers might question the order that I have chosen. If one begins with mobility, why not follow with the mobility of books? Or, shouldn't a chapter on communal cohesiveness immediately precede one on communal crisis? There also appear to be points in my narrative where I return to subjects treated in earlier chapters, such as the converso diaspora, Christian Hebraism, or Sabbateanism. I am aware

of these apparent redundancies but have, nevertheless, allowed them to remain. I begin with mobility, followed by communal cohesiveness, since I consider them the two foundations upon which early modern Jewish culture was formed and thus wish to introduce them from the start. The last two elements seem quite interrelated, and also emerge late in the period, and thus seem better positioned at the end. I have tried to minimize redundancies but I also wish to treat some of the same subjects from different angles as my larger story unfolds. My hope is that the reader will appreciate my effort in filling in the picture gradually, layer upon layer. Each chapter provides new insights into moments of challenge and upheaval that are connected to others mentioned in earlier chapters. As my evidence accumulates, my general argument about crisis and boundary crossings hopefully becomes more compelling, as well as convincing.

The rest of the book thus represents an attempt to elaborate on the five elements mentioned herein in order to demonstrate that the early modern period is a meaningful chronological unit of Jewish cultural history. Despite obvious differences, it is my hope that these five elements still might allow us to consider how Jewish communities in early modern Europe from Krakow to Venice to Amsterdam and Smyrna were linked in fascinating ways, and how Jews living in this era were communicating with each other and were more aware of their connections with each other—economically, socially, and religiously—than ever before. Through a thorough examination of these markers across time and space, it might be possible to grasp more fully the unique nature of the Jewish cultural experience in early modern Europe—an experience both peculiar to the Jewish

communities across the continent and simultaneously one shared with other European peoples as well. Finally, through the project of describing an early modern Jewish culture, we are in a better position to understand the modern era for Jews, and its continuities and discontinuities with the period immediately predating it. At the very least, historians of the modern Jewish experience can no longer study their period in isolation from this distinct epoch. Mapping early modern Jewish culture provides an invaluable context and perspective in which to appreciate what modernity actually entailed.