

Ashkenaz at the Crossroads of Cultural Transfer

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The major international conference “Ashkenaz at the Crossroads of Cultural Transfer,” hosted by the Institute of Judaic Studies at Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main on November 5-7, 2012 (sponsored), situated Jewish culture in medieval and early modern Ashkenaz at the crossroads of cultural transfer. While pre-modern Ashkenaz (i.e. the German lands and Northern France), a major cultural center of medieval and early modern Judaism, has long been seen as a self-sufficient, enclosed entity without much contact to the outside world, the conference started from the notion that culture is not uniform, but represents a comprehensive network of socio-political, material, and ideological conditions, developed by processes of inclusion and exclusion, integration and disintegration. Thus, Ashkenazi culture and society is to be perceived as composed of various elements brought together by dynamic contacts between people, texts, and ideas. While a new generation of historians has shown that Jews and Christians in pre-modern German lands shared numerous cultural, religious and literary notions, the conference aimed for an expansion and systematic application of the approach of cultural transfer to include inner-Jewish transfer as well. Thus, the conference marks a paradigm shift in the study of Ashkenaz with the ultimate goal of attaining a more nuanced knowledge of Jewish culture in medieval and early modern Germany.

The conveners of the conference, **Elisabeth Hollender** and **Rebekka Voß** (Frankfurt), opened with a theoretical introduction on the concept of cultural transfer, including both “object-based goods” and “concept-based goods,” and its application to the study of medieval and early modern Ashkenaz. Despite a growing interest in questions of cultural transfer involving medieval Ashkenaz, Hollender observed that we still hesitate to conceptualize Medieval Ashkenazic Jewry as a significant trade hub of cultural goods. She suggested, however, to re-examine some of the cultural areas that have been neglected regarding cultural transfer. Subsequently, Voß asked what makes cultural transfer medieval and what makes it early modern. Sketching out four kinds of cultural transfer (transfer in temporal distance,

media of cultural transfer, transfer in geographical distance, transfer between specific segments of society), she raised a number of questions about their implications for medieval and early modern Ashkenaz. Concluding the session on *Cultural Transfer in Theory*, **Margit Mersch** (Göttingen) presented the audience that consisted mainly of scholars of Jewish Studies with “Recent Theories of Cross-Cultural Connections” that have been developing in her field of Medieval German History in the last five to ten years, triggered by the impression of globalization. Emphasizing that culture has a multidirectional pattern, Mersch discussed the benefits and limits of conceptual terms and models like hybridity, rhizome, and palimpsest for the historical sciences that might also prove useful and inspire new paths for the study of Ashkenazic Jewish culture.

The original papers that followed during the next two and a half days, presented by both renowned senior scholars and early-career researchers from Europe, Israel, and the United States, explored the routes of cultural transfer entering, exiting and within Ashkenaz, in relation to historical and contemporaneous, Jewish and non-Jewish communities: the Ashkenazic acceptance and adaptation of cultural goods from communities within and outside Ashkenaz and the adoption and modification of Ashkenazic cultural goods by other communities.

The first conference day was dedicated to the subject of *Cultural Transfer within Ashkenaz*. **Ephraim Kanarfogel** (New York) discussed “The Interconnectedness of Medieval Ashkenazic Creativity: The Well-Rounded Rabbinic Culture of the Tosafists,” the German and Northern French rabbinic elite of the 12th/13th centuries. He showed that in contrast to the regnant perception, the Tosafists’ literary creativity was not restricted to Talmudic Studies. Rather, they were involved in a range of other disciplines including scriptural interpretation, liturgical poetry, magic and mysticism, and other aspects of Jewish thought. **Ivan Marcus** (New Haven) asked “Why Did Medieval Northern French Jewry (Zarfat) Disappear?” To find an answer why the Jews of royal France did not continue to exist as distinctive diaspora communities after their expulsion in 1306, he suggested that unlike the Jews of Ashkenaz and Sefarad, French Jews did not exist as a legally organized community and never developed a strong collective identity and were therefore more receptive to other Jewish cultures they encountered after the expulsion. **Simha Emanuel** (Jerusalem) described a serious vacuum of learning in the rabbinic study halls of Germany in the first quarter of the 13th century after the death of Eleazar of Worms. For one generation (until R. Meir of Rothenburg), the centers of

rabbinic learning in France attracted young scholars from Germany, while others left Germany to teach in Austria or Bohemia. (“The Sages of Germany in the Thirteenth Century: Continuity and Change”). **Naomi Feuchtwanger-Sarig** (Tel Aviv) illustrated the way Jewish material goods were transported, transformed, and transposed in Early Modern Ashkenaz. She demonstrated how Jewish ritual objects were decorated according to aesthetic notions of the Christian environment. In addition to this process of acculturation of material goods for Jewish needs, by a bottom-up process Christian folk rituals melded into Jewish daily life by way of adaptation of local Germanic observances, involving the use of additional objects that were closely parallel to those used by the local Christian society.

Each day of the conference was concluded by a roundtable. The first roundtable on Monday with **Elisheva Carlebach** (New York), **Johannes Heil** (Heidelberg) and **Ivan Marcus** (New Haven) discussed *The Transfer of Cultural Goods*, the different types of cultural goods that were transferred and the ways these cultural goods were changed by transfer. **Marcus** stressed the importance of language for the mechanisms of cultural transfer. He emphasized the different linguistic situations in Sefarad and Ashkenaz in Medieval times and their implication for participation in the culture of the majority society. In addition, he pointed out that only written and material testimonies have survived, but one has to keep in mind that the inhabitants of medieval towns also shared smells and sounds. **Heil** specified the linguistic situation in medieval Italy where Jews spoke Greek and Latin until the 9th century, when Hebrew was revived as a spoken and written language. Elements of Greek and Latin were thus also transferred into the Jewish communities of Ashkenaz and Zarfaz in their formative period between the 8th and the 10th centuries. While the notion of “Ashkenaz” and its socio-cultural construct in the scholarly past was that of an isolated island, **Carlebach** underlined the embedding of Ashkenazic culture in its Christian environment and to what great extent Jewish culture was influenced by Christian cultural and daily life such as language and literature, education, habits and the life cycle.

The second day of the conference started with a session on *The Media of Cultural Transfer*. **Shlomo Berger** (Amsterdam) discussed the important role of the printed book in Yiddish as the language of performance of the Ashkenazi majority for “Fixating an Ashkenazi Diasporic Consciousness.” **Matt Goldish** (Columbus, OH) read the transfer of the relics of the messiah Shlomo Molkho to Prague, after Molkho’s career ended at the imperial diet at Regensburg, as symbolically representing a larger shift of Jewish people and culture from Germany toward

Central and Eastern Europe. The influential Horowitz family of Prague was instrumental in this deeply symbolic act of transfer (“The Molkho Relics in Prague and the Eastward Shift of Ashkenazi Jewry”).

Astrid Lembke (Berlin) initiated the following session on *Cultural Transfer between Jews and Christians* with a lecture on the shared Jewish-Christian narrative pattern of the erotic relationship between a man and a non-human woman often used in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Times to discuss conflicts around creating social identities (“To Be and to Become a Man: The Struggle for Social Identity in Jewish and Christian Stories about Human-Demonic Relationships”). **Yaacov Deutsch** (Jerusalem) showed the blurring of boundaries between Judaism and Christianity when Jewish and Christians worked on shared texts. In his 18th-century Hebrew translation and commentary on the Book of Luke, Immanuel Frommann used Hebrew sources throughout, thus blending Jewish and Christian ideas together in the endeavor to understand the text (“A Jewish-Christian Commentary on the Book of Luke”). Shared concepts of dealing with the poor among Christians and Jews can be detected in historical and administrative documents on welfare in medieval Ashkenaz as **Rainer Barzen** (Jerusalem) showed (“The Poor of Your Own and the Poor of the Other: Jewish and Christian Welfare in Medieval Ashkenaz”). **Ephraim Shoham-Steiner** (Beer Sheva) introduced cases of collaboration between Christians and Jews in acts that have been regarded as crimes in early medieval Ashkenaz (“Partners in Crime: Jewish and Non-Jewish Involvement in Crime in Medieval Ashkenaz”). Obviously, the conflict between the two religions became less important when it came to business opportunities, bribes and smuggling. The greed for profit was shared by Jews and Christians across social strata. The session was concluded by **Birgit Klein** (Heidelberg) on “Transfer of Family Property in Early Modern Ashkenazic Jewry in Interaction with non-Jewish Legal Practice.” Klein investigated changes in Jewish legal practice in order to alleviate legal discrimination against women regarding inheritance of a deceased husband’s or father’s estate by introducing principles of non-Jewish legal practice into Jewish practice.

The *Transfer of Norms* was the topic of Tuesday’s roundtable with **Martha Keil** (Vienna), **Eva Haverkamp** (Munich), and **Elliott Horowitz** (Ramat Gan). In cases of transfer between majority and minority cultures especially, the transfer of norms is critical, since norms usually influence group identities and therefore should be guarded attentively. However, certain common norms are necessary in a shared space, ready to be adapted to specific situations. The

roundtable discussed the transfer of norms, its benefit and limits, with a particular focus on the transfer of non-Jewish norms in theory and practice. **Haverkamp** started with an example based on the events of the First Crusade in 1096: A Christian monk living in a monastery in Disibodenberg who was familiar with the description of the events in the Hebrew chronicles described the Jewish martyrological deeds with empathy and offered the same Scripture-based explanations as the Hebrew chroniclers. He even tried to make the Jews' acts understandable by referring to their pain and feelings. **Keil** demonstrated the role of women in business and pointed out the shared dating schedules for markets and fairs that were set according to the Christian calendar and noted in Jewish notebooks and diaries. Finally, **Horowitz** highlighted the discrepancy between the strict regulations of women covering their faces in the commentaries of Rashi and David Kimhi on Genesis 24 while in Hebrew manuscript illuminations of the 15th and 16th centuries women are shown with bare breasts or even completely naked. Similarly, late medieval and early modern commentators were not opposed to men bathing together with non-Jewish women. A general discussion on the difference between shared norms and transfer of norms followed, about the concepts of sharing and circulation, and the complex relationship of social behavior, oral and written transmission, among other things.

The keynote lecture on Tuesday evening was given by **Elisheva Carlebach** (New York) on the topic of "Jewish Calendars and the Transfer of Time," giving a glimpse into the wealth of information that Jewish calendars provide about the transfer of time in Ashkenaz and more generally about early modern Jewish history and cultural transfer. Dating and measuring time is a universal good in culture and is based on shared notions of length of hours, days, months and years. Although the scheme of dating is similar in Jewish and in Christian culture, Carlebach illustrated that calendars and especially Books of Intercalations (*Sifre evronot*) contain moments of polemics between Jews and Christians, in particular within textual and visual plays of words.

The conference's last day was dedicated to *Cultural Transfer into and out of Ashkenaz*. **Esperanza Alfonso** (Madrid) traced principles of *peshat*-commentary according to Rashi that were transferred into early thirteenth-century Castille where they were used in a commentary on Proverbs, Psalms and Ruth ("Rashi in Early Thirteenth-Century Castille). To what extent local customs could contradict official rules was the topic of the lecture by **Edward Fram** (Beer Sheva). His talk dealt with the timing of post-partum ritual immersion as an example in

which the medieval local Frankfurt custom continued to be more stringent still in the eighteenth-century than what the *Shulhan arukh* – generally accepted by the rabbis as the universal code of law – allowed (“Shulhan Arukh as a Predator of German Customs: The Case of Postpartum Ritual Immersion”). **Saskia Dönitz** (Frankfurt/Berlin) gave an overview of the transfer of concept-based goods from Byzantium to Ashkenaz, singling out Ashkenazic traditions that were shaped by concepts transmitted via Byzantium (“Bringing Byzantium to Ashkenaz). She called for an analysis of the cultural patterns of Byzantine and Ashkenazic cultures to draw a clearer picture of what kind of goods have been integrated and what has been rejected during the formative period of Ashkenazic identity. **Micha Perry** (Haifa) explored the foundation legend of *ve-Hu Rahum* circulating in the Jewish communities in Ashkenaz and France as well as in Latin and Old French sources. With the legend of the prayer being connected to the foundation legend of the Jewish communities in France, North Africa as well as England, its transmission testifies to knowledge transmission in Europe in the High Middle Ages and how it was used to ground Jewish existence in the Diaspora (“Diversity and Unity: Knowledge Transmission among European Jews in the Middle Ages”).

The concluding roundtable on Wednesday with **Lucia Raspe** (Potsdam/Frankfurt), **Elchanan Reiner** (Tel Aviv), and **Felicita Schmieder** (Hagen) dealt with *Transfer in Distance*, both geographical and temporal. The roundtable discussed the possibilities and challenges of transfer in distance, the way cultural goods transported over time and geographical distance were adapted and changed, and the significance this transfer had for the integration of various Jewish communities, both distant from one another in time and space, into a cultural network that shared some kind of Jewish identity. **Raspe** gave the example of Ashkenazic Jews migrating to Northern Italy where they wrote down the local hagiographic legends of Ashkenaz. Ashkenazic identity was thus at first preserved in Northern Italy, until the ghettoization in the 16th century forced the Ashkenazic immigrants to mingle with Italian Jews, ultimately producing a new hybrid Jewish-Italian identity. **Schmieder** pointed to the improbability of long distance contacts, paired with the expectation that people in far-away countries are very different and cultural transfer thus less desirable or likely. Permanent long distance contact as it is possible today was not the norm in the Christian Middle Ages. In this point, Schmieder suspected, the Jewish communities of the Diaspora were an exception because they maintained contact with other Jews over long distances and even continents. Finally, **Reiner** drew a picture of the major transformations of the Jewish cultural map of Ashkenaz in the 16th century. While the old Jewish centers on the Rhine, blossoming in the

Middle Ages, were declining in the Early Modern Times, the Polish communities developed into the new and dominant centers of Ashkenazic learning and culture. The Ashkenazic landscape was thus shifted eastward. Reiner also underlined the importance of print that changed the mode of learning: Fixating a text that had been transmitted orally and in manuscript before gradually substituted the fluidity of texts with their more uniformed versions, allowing less variants. The concluding discussion took up various points raised throughout the conference, among them, the role of languages (Yiddish vernacular vs. Hebrew in the Rhineland and the more prominent role of Yiddish in Poland), the importance of crisis, rupture and migration for the process of selecting and preserving tradition by writing it down, and the question when Ashkenazic culture became consciously Ashkenazic and why it was successfully preserved through today.

Locating Ashkenaz in a network of connections with Jewish and non-Jewish communities proximate and distant in both time and space, the conference has affirmed that the culture of medieval and early modern Ashkenaz was far from homogeneous. This scholarly application of cultural transfer may serve as a model for the study of other communities, Jewish and non-Jewish, historical and contemporary alike, especially considering its relevance to our increasingly globalized culture.