

## INTRODUCTION

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*Judaism in Practice: From the Middle Ages through the Early Modern Period* testifies to the great variety of religious practices that characterized Judaism in the twelve hundred years between approximately 600 C.E. and 1800 C.E. Although this vast span of time has often been regarded monochromatically, scholars have increasingly come to speak of this period's enormous complexity. The more that we learn about Judaism during this period of time, the more we recognize the dimensions of this complexity, as we will see below.

One of the many ways in which this anthology differs from earlier collections of primary Jewish source materials is in its focus on religious practice and religious experience—in keeping with the series of which it is a part. Older sourcebooks have tended overwhelmingly to be interested in either the political, social, and economic history of the Jewish people as a minority community under Islam and Christianity, or in documenting the intellectual religious achievements of medieval and early modern Jewry. There are thus a number of anthologies having to do with medieval Jewish philosophy, mystical thought, and religious poetry, but virtually nothing of scholarly consequence that seeks to encompass the broad range and variety of Jewish religious practice.

That this is the case is a matter of considerable irony, in light of the fact that Judaism has historically been regarded as essentially legal, that is, practical in nature. Yet, it is only recently that scholars have come to explore with increasing sophistication the embodied nature of Jewish religion. As the contents of this volume will demonstrate, the ways in which Judaism has been practiced can hardly be isolated from the historical and political experiences of Jews, or from their many different constructions of faith and theology. Nevertheless, a fuller appreciation of the dimensions of religious practice in Judaism requires that they be studied not merely as an appendage to treatments of Jewish history or Jewish thought but on their own terms, as well. The chapters in this book illustrate many different approaches to the analysis of ritual and practice, including literary, anthropological, phenomenological, and gender studies, as well as the methods of comparative religion.

Rather than encompass the entire history of Judaism, this sourcebook focuses on the medieval and early modern periods. There are several vantage points from which to construe the emergence of medieval Judaism. From a political point of

view, the medieval period may be said to begin with the rise of Islam in the Arabian peninsula in the early seventh century, bringing with it dramatically new developments for the Jewish communities of the Near East, and eventually North Africa and the Iberian peninsula. From the point of view of religious literary creativity, the medieval period begins with the closing of the centuries-long process of the composition and editing of the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds (the final editing of the Talmuds took place between approximately 450 and 600 C.E.), and the gradual development of many new types of religious expression. These include, among other things, legal codes, philosophical and mystical books of diverse types, systematic treatises on ethics, and liturgical poetry. And from the perspective of religious practice, the medieval period is characterized by great variety and diversity, as we shall see below. This is the case despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of Jews during this period were united by their allegiance to what is known as rabbinic Judaism, that is, the form of Judaism that evolved during the period of the Talmuds and early midrashim (approximately 70 C.E. through 600 C.E.).

As its title indicates, this book draws a distinction between the medieval and early modern periods. The line between these is by no means crystal clear, and varies significantly from one cultural and geographical location to the next. For example, Italian Jewry participated in the cultural excitement of the Renaissance beginning as early as the fifteenth century, whereas the vast Jewish communities of Poland and Russia, as well as the Jews of the Near East, lived lives mostly undisturbed by early modernity well into the eighteenth century. Generally speaking, however, early modern Judaism is usually considered to coincide with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—roughly equivalent to what European historians mean when they invoke the category “early modern Europe.” Early modern Judaism may be said to be distinguished by, among other things, ever-increasing interaction with the non-Jews among whom Jews lived (and related exposure to non-Jewish ways of life), a gradual breaking down of the strong hold that rabbinic authority had held for centuries, and a growth in interest on the part of many Jews in all manner of secular matters. Among the chapters in this book that exemplify aspects of these developments are “Italian Jewish Women at Prayer,” “Jewish Exorcism: Early Modern Traditions and Transformations,” “The Life of Glikl of Hameln,” “The Early Messianic Career of Shabbatai Zvi,” “Leon Modena’s Autobiography,” and “The Scholarly Life of the Gaon of Vilna.”

Early modern Judaism may be said to have come to an end in the nineteenth century, as a result of European Jewry’s political and social “emancipation,” and the concomitant embrace of and integration into Western culture. This period witnessed a gradual shift in which traditional Jewish identity now found itself challenged by the cosmopolitan and secular trends of the nineteenth century. The modern period itself is distinguished by two transformational events, the devastation of two-thirds of European Jewry at the hands of Nazi Germany, and the development of Jewish nationalism in the form of the Zionist movement, eventuating in the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. In addition to these

developments, the modern and contemporary Jewish experience has been dominated by the influence of a thriving Jewish community in the United States, especially since the end of the Second World War. All of these factors have contributed to dramatic changes and innovations in the entire realm of Jewish religious life and practice, not to mention the emergence of forms of Jewish identity based primarily on a secular point of view.

### Medieval Jewish Law

The point of departure for any discussion of Jewish practice begins, appropriately, with the question of Jewish law. Although there is far more to Judaism than law, as we shall see, the fact is that law stands at the heart of traditional Judaism. The origins of Jewish law go back to ancient Israel (approximately the thirteenth century B.C.E. through the fifth century B.C.E.) and to the various legal sections found in the Torah, that is, the Five Books of Moses, the first part of the Hebrew Bible. The books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, in particular, delineate the legal traditions that the ancient Israelites developed. These traditions address not only matters that are self-evidently “religious,” such as laws governing moral conduct or devotional rites in the form of cultic sacrifice, but also matters that in our culture are considered secular, such as laws having to do with agriculture as well as property damages and torts. According to the Torah, the people of Israel were expected to devote themselves to God by becoming a “holy nation” and a “kingdom of priests.” As such, it was inconceivable that any aspect of life would fall outside the purview of the sacred life. The authority of biblical law was rooted in the belief of ancient Israel that the Torah had been revealed by God, transmitted to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai.

Biblical law underwent enormous development and dramatic change during the rabbinic or talmudic period, that is, the first six centuries of the common era. This period is called “rabbinic” or “talmudic” in reference to the sages (or rabbis) whose religious scholarship became the basis for the great corpus of literature known as Talmud. Following the destruction of the sacred Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 C.E. by the Romans—under whose authority the Jews of Palestine had lived since 66 B.C.E.—the sages who came to be known as rabbis engaged in the study of the ancient ancestral traditions preserved in the Hebrew Bible, in addition to postbiblical traditions that had circulated in oral fashion. The earliest of these rabbis, known collectively by the term *tannaim* (plural for *tanna*), transmitted these postbiblical oral traditions from master to disciple in study houses and academies. These (mostly legal) oral traditions were eventually edited around the year 200 C.E. by a leading rabbinical authority, Judah the Prince (in Hebrew, Judah ha-Nasi). The resulting corpus became known as the Mishnah, a large work divided into six main divisions or “orders,” which are further subdivided into sixty-three separate treatises or books, covering a vast array of topics.

In the course of this process the rabbis determined that there were 613 basic legal obligations or precepts (sing. *mitsvah* or *mizvah*, pl. *mitsvot*, or *mizvot*) in the Torah. But from each of these 613 *mitsvot*, the rabbis derived numerous further precepts, resulting in an ever-expanding body of Jewish law, or, as it came to be known, *halakha*. The term “*halakha*” (lit., the “path” or “way”) refers, then, to the entirety of Jewish law, including the Mishnah and its subsequent development.

A good example of this process may be seen in connection with the laws of the Sabbath. Whereas the Torah itself prescribes rest on the Sabbath, it provides very little specific guidance as to what such cessation from labor entails. When we turn, however, to the treatise of the Mishnah devoted to the laws of the Sabbath, we find that the sages delineated no fewer than thirty-nine types of activity that they regarded as labor. For each of these thirty-nine activities, rabbinic tradition derived still further precepts, thus exponentially expanding the laws and rituals governing celebration of the Sabbath. Another well-known example of this process has to do with the dietary laws, or *kashrut*. Whereas the Torah provides a number of general guidelines and principles with respect to which animals are fit for consumption, rabbinic law transforms these into a vast network of ritual obligations that go far beyond what the Torah itself provided.

Written in Hebrew, in a way that somewhat resembles a systematic, formal code of law, the Mishnah is organized into terse, often enigmatic, paragraphs of legal traditions. Composed with virtually no explanation of its laws, and usually without explicit reference to the scriptural basis for its traditions, the Mishnah, by its very nature, generated centuries more of discussion, explanation, and interpretation. The rabbis who participated in this process of exploring the Mishnah beginning in the third century C.E. were known as *amoraim* (sing., *amora*), and the voluminous commentaries they composed in Aramaic are known as Gemara. The development of Gemara took place simultaneously in Palestine and Babylonia, that is, in present-day Iraq, where Jews had settled centuries earlier along the fertile banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

Thus, there were two communities of amoraic scholars, each of which more or less independently pursued the study of the Mishnah, although there were continuous and intimate relations between Palestinian and Babylonian scholars. The activities of the Palestinian *amoraim* came to a close in about 450 C.E., resulting in the Palestinian Gemara. The Mishnah, along with the Palestinian Gemara, is known as the Jerusalem Talmud (even though it was produced primarily in academies in the Galilee), or sometimes as the Palestinian Talmud. The composition and editing of the Babylonian Gemara went on for approximately 150 years longer than the Palestinian, and was completed about 600 C.E. It is thus a considerably larger document than its Palestinian counterpart, and is distinguished by its greater clarity and literary sophistication. The reasons for this have to do with the fact that the center of gravity for Jewish life had shifted from Palestine to Babylonia by the fourth to fifth centuries C.E., and the community there flourished in comparison to that of the Jews of Palestine. Thus, it was the Babylonian Talmud (Mishnah plus Babylonian Gemara) that ultimately became more authoritative,

and exerted far greater historical influence. Even today, rabbinical students learn Talmud primarily on the basis of the Babylonian version, whereas the Palestinian tends to be reserved for especially advanced scholars.

The importance of the Talmuds has to do with the fact that the enormous bodies of tradition found in this literature gradually became the basis for Jewish religious practice down through the centuries that followed. That is to say, although the rabbis of Palestine and Babylonia constituted an elite class of religious intellectuals and scholars, and even though there were often very considerable differences between what these individuals taught and the way people actually practiced, their teachings ultimately came to be regarded as authoritative by the Jewish community at large—at least in principle. This was true not only in Palestine and Babylonia but also in most places where Jews lived. The rabbis themselves had contended that their teachings were nothing less than the legitimate interpretation of Hebrew scripture as intended by God when He revealed Himself to Moses at Mount Sinai. They claimed only to be determining through their study what was implied in scripture from the very beginning. This view came to be regarded as axiomatic by the vast majority of Jews up until traditional rabbinic authority came under challenge, beginning in the eighteenth century in western Europe. In the centuries immediately following the editing of the Talmuds, the rabbis succeeded in so consolidating their authority that the vast majority of Jews looked upon themselves as “rabbinic” Jews. The expression “rabbinic Judaism” can thus be understood in a narrow sense, referring to the rabbinic or talmudic period per se, or it can be understood in a far broader way, referring to the whole of rabbinic culture that characterized traditional Judaism down through the medieval and early modern periods. It is for this reason that we can say that although all of the texts found in this anthology are chronologically post-talmudic, that is, from the seventh century and later, the great majority of them fall under the category of rabbinic Judaism in the larger sense.

The development of *halakha*, however, did not come to an end with the Talmuds. If the terseness of the Mishnah had served as an invitation to the rabbis to interpret it, paradoxically, the verbose, complex, and indeterminate nature of the Gemara made further clarification of that text’s legal discussions necessary. The Gemara consists, in significant part, of a vast legal dialectic in which competing views on matters of *halakha* are set forth without necessarily being clearly decided; the rabbis appear to have been at least as interested in preserving their own debates as they were in arriving at definitive, practical conclusions. As a result, post-talmudic generations of rabbinic authorities devised still newer methods by which to determine how the *halakha* should be practiced. (It should be pointed out that the literature of the Talmuds contains a good deal besides legal materials. It also includes folk traditions, anecdotes about sages, ethical traditions, even prayers, all of which are known under the category of *aggadah*, or narrative, in contrast to *halakha*.)

The early medieval period, between the seventh and eleventh centuries, is sometimes called the geonic period, due to the prominence of leading rabbinic

teachers during this time in Babylonia who were known as *ge'onim* (sing., *ga'on*). The *ge'onim* were the heads of the famous rabbinical academies at Sura and Pumbedita (near Baghdad, where these academies were eventually transferred), and played a critical role in the post-talmudic consolidation of rabbinic authority to which I have already referred. For a period of time, they served as the central spiritual and legal authorities for much of worldwide Jewry.

It was during the period of the Babylonian *ge'onim* that several new forms of halakhic literature evolved, two of which are of particular interest for our purposes. The first of these was the legal codes, the goal of which was to present the law in a way that was systematically organized and definitive. Two somewhat different forms of code developed during the geonic period—books of *halakhot* (laws) and books of *pesakim* (decisions). In the case of books of *halakhot*, the final conclusion as to what constitutes binding law comes after some brief discussion that identifies and explains the earlier rabbinic sources upon which the conclusion is based. The effect of this procedure was to preserve the intimate relationship between the legal conclusion and the web of prior sources from which it is derived. By contrast, codes of *pesakim* articulate the final conclusion without citing the earlier sources on which they are based, and without any discussion. These have the advantage of being unencumbered by anything “extraneous,” but they also run the risk of severing legal conclusions from the rich network of sources upon which they are based. Moses Maimonides (1138–1204), without doubt the most famous of all medieval Jewish scholars, composed what became one of the preeminent codes of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*, doing so in the simpler form of the *pesakim*. The *Mishneh Torah* is well-illustrated in our anthology by the chapters “Moses Maimonides’ Laws of the Study of Torah,” and “Defending, Enjoying, and Regulating the Visual.” The latter chapter also includes passages from the influential sixteenth-century code of Jewish law, the *Shulkhan Arukh*, composed by Joseph Karo (or Caro). Maimonides himself is the subject of the chapter “The Life of Moses ben Maimon.” Through letters and other documents by and about Maimonides, we gain a glimpse into the life of one of the most remarkable Jews of the medieval age.

Another principal form of post-talmudic Jewish law is known as responsa literature. In Hebrew the expression used is *she'elot u-teshuvot*, literally, “questions and answers.” The Hebrew expression more accurately conveys the nature of this literature. Individuals, or sometimes communities, would submit halakhic queries to rabbinic authorities, who would respond in writing to the question. The collected questions and answers of individual rabbis would eventually assume their place as part of the larger body of legal precedent. During the geonic period it was the *ge'onim* themselves to whom such inquiries would be submitted. Often these inquiries would come from a considerable distance—Spain or North Africa, for example. Eventually, as authoritative rabbis were to be found throughout the Jewish world, responsa were produced in numerous places. As Menahem Elon wrote in his important study of Jewish law, the responsa literature occupies a

central role in the development of Jewish law, and Jewish religious history more generally:

Questions submitted to a respondent arose in the factual context of the time, and the responsum had to resolve the issues in a manner consonant with the contemporaneous circumstances. The subjects of the questions generally related to social, economic, technological, and moral conditions, which differed from period to period and from place to place. The social and economic circumstances of Babylonian Jewry in the eighth and ninth centuries C.E., for example, differed from those of Polish Jews in the sixteenth century; and the condition of Spanish Jewry in the thirteenth century bore no resemblance to that of the Jews of Salonika in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The halakhic authorities in each generation were called upon to determine the position of Jewish law with regard to the questions that arose in their time; and if they could find no explicit solution in existing law or if, in their opinion, the existing legal rules did not satisfy the needs of the time, they sought and found a solution by means of one or more of the legal sources of Jewish law—interpretation, legislation, custom, *ma'aseh* [a set of facts having legal significance], and legal reasoning (*sevarah*). The responsa literature thus reveals innumerable new problems that arose in the course of centuries and exemplifies how the methods for the development of Jewish law were utilized to find solutions.<sup>1</sup>

It is hard to overstate the importance of the responsa literature for the history of Jewish ritual and practice, as it is responsible for the vast majority of Jewish law in the medieval and early modern periods. The responsa are immensely significant as well for the study of Jewish history as a whole, insofar as they richly reflect the political, social, and economic circumstances under which Jews lived. There are approximately 300,000 extant responsa, contained in over 3,000 books of responsa by different authors. Chapters in our volume containing examples of this legal genre—from the responsa of Rabbi Meir ben Baruch of Rothenberg (c. 1215–1293)—are “Women and Ritual Immersion in Medieval Ashkenaz: The Sexual Politics of Piety” and “Defending, Enjoying, and Regulating the Visual.”

In the case of both the legal codes and the responsa literature, the goal was essentially the same, even though they employed considerably different forms. Their purpose was to interpret and adapt earlier legal tradition and to arrive at binding, practical decisions so that individuals and communities might know how to practice rabbinic Judaism, that is, the form of Judaism that had come into being with the formation of the Talmuds.

If the geonic period saw the successful consolidation of rabbinic authority, principally around nearly universal allegiance to Jewish law as construed by the rabbis, how do we understand the fact that medieval and early modern Judaism were characterized by great diversity and variation when it came to religious practice? In order to answer this question, most of the remainder of this introduction will address significant factors that contributed to patterns of diversity.

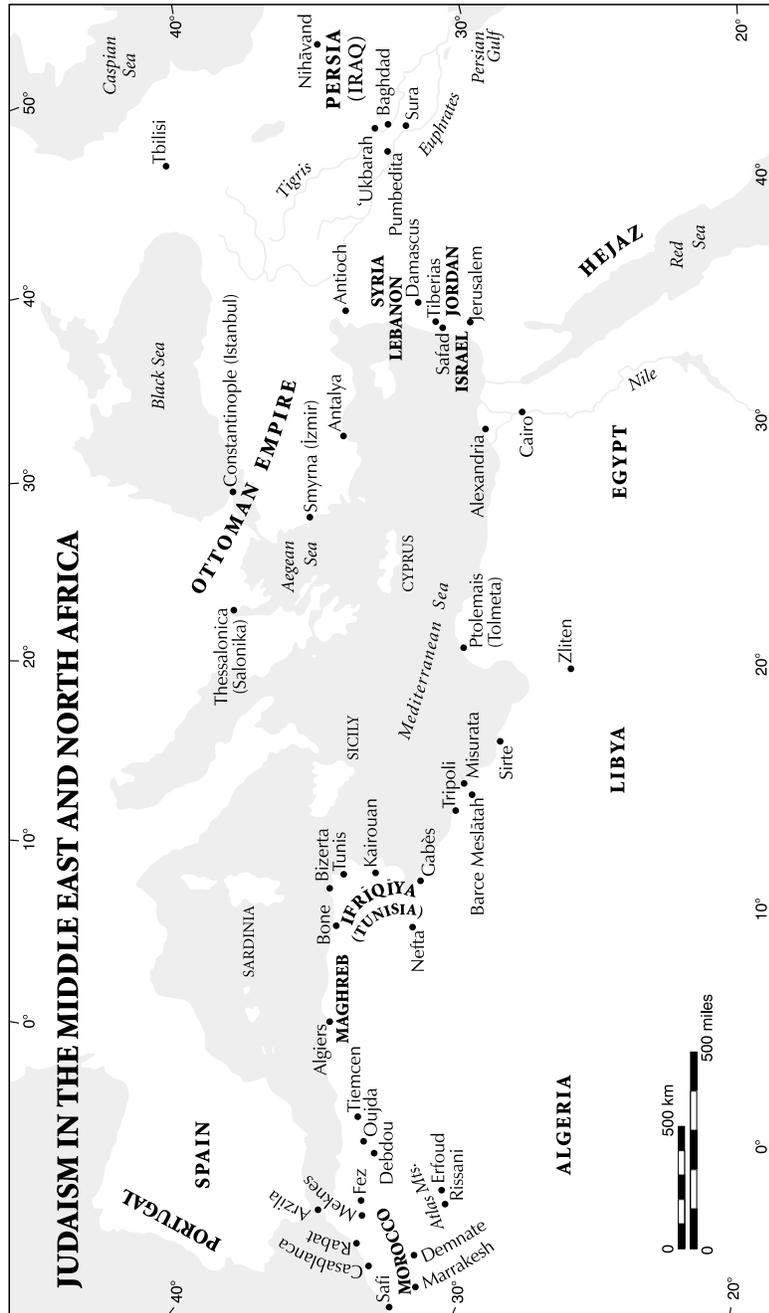
## Midrash and Aggadah

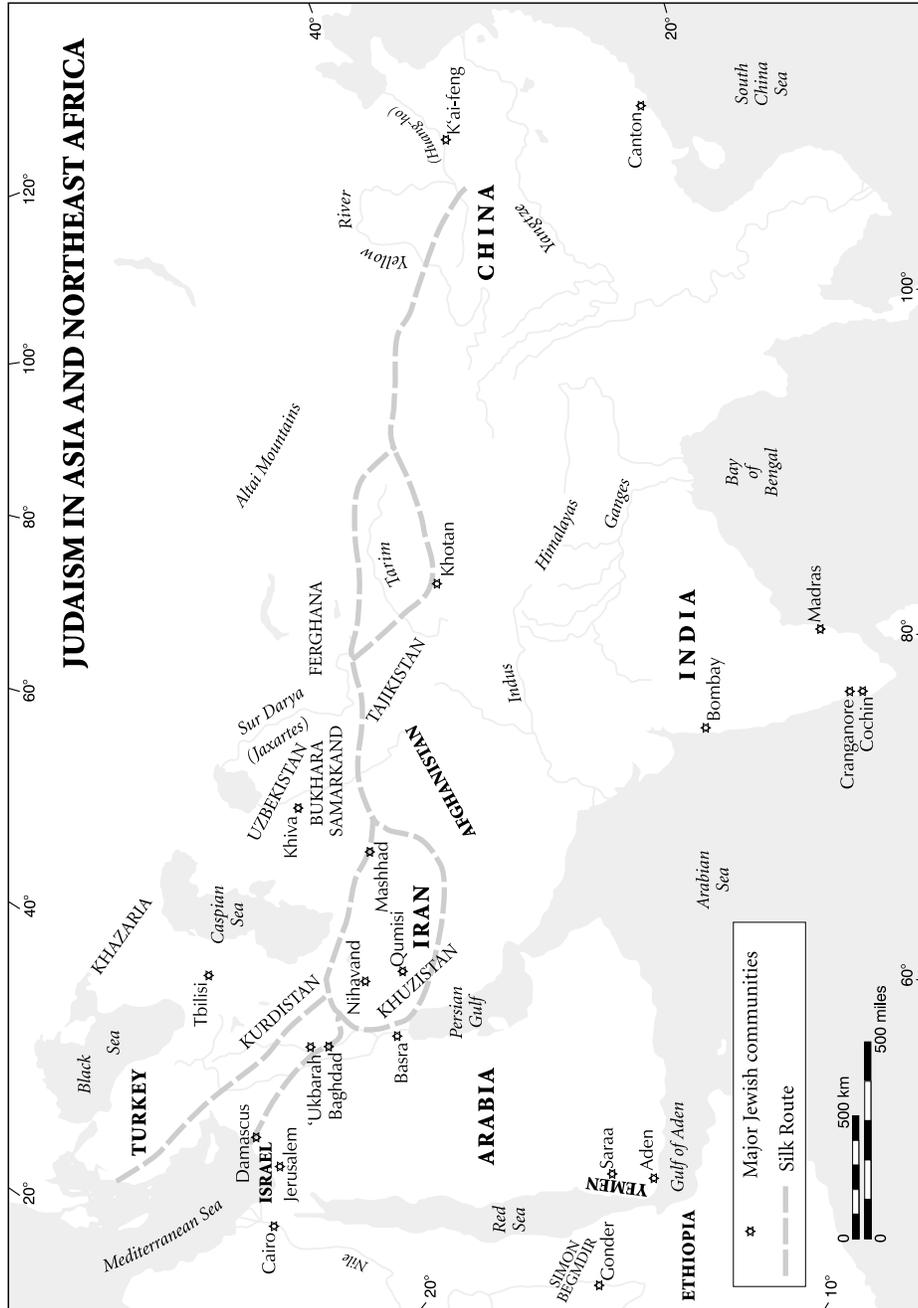
Before turning to a discussion of this diversity, however, we want to say a few words about *midrash*, another central genre of Jewish literature that flourished between about 400 and 1200 C.E. Originating in oral sermons given in the synagogues of late antiquity, *midrash*, which literally means to “search out,” is a verse-centered literature that always seeks to interpret scripture. A midrashic text is one that uses scripture as a point of departure in order to establish a new teaching, although the authors of these texts did not claim to be innovative. Although such interpretations could be for the purpose of elaborating upon matters of *halakha*, most of the midrashic collections are known as *midrash aggadah*, referring to interpretations of a nonlegal or narrative type. Such *midrashim* (pl. of *midrash*) incorporate highly imaginative discussions of the behavior and motivations of biblical women and men, as well as ethical and theological matters, among other things. *Midrash aggadah* contributed in its own way to the development of Jewish practice, especially in the realm of ethical virtues and certain customs. More generally, it helped legitimate the highly creative processes of wide-ranging and multi-textured interpretation of Jewish tradition.

## Local and Regional Variation

Although the origins of the Jewish people were in the Near East, by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries Jewish communities could be found in most parts of Europe, as well as more distant regions such as India and China (see Maps 1 and 2). This development helps account for the richly varied ways in which different Jewries evolved ways of practicing Judaism. This phenomenon goes back to at least the talmudic and geonic periods, as a result of the somewhat different, and competing, practices of Palestinian and Babylonian sages, particularly in the areas of liturgical prayer and the setting of the religious calendar. Whereas the Palestinian rabbis had historically exerted cultural influence over Syria and Egypt, Babylonian authorities had held sway over the communities in Iraq and Iran, and eventually North Africa.

From the tenth century forward, the Jews of North Africa and Spain—who for several centuries shared similar political and cultural features under the influence of Islam—became increasingly independent of Babylonian authority. As they gained their own competence in rabbinic law and tradition, they relied on their own rabbis for guidance in the sphere of religious practice. Local scholars began to answer halakhic inquiries rather than send them off to the Babylonian academies, and thus they accumulated a body of responsa literature of their own. In fact, among the very earliest medieval commentaries on the Babylonian Talmud were those by a Tunisian rabbi from Kairouan, Hananel ben Hushiel, and his student Nissim ben Jacob ibn Shahun. Their work influenced the greatest North





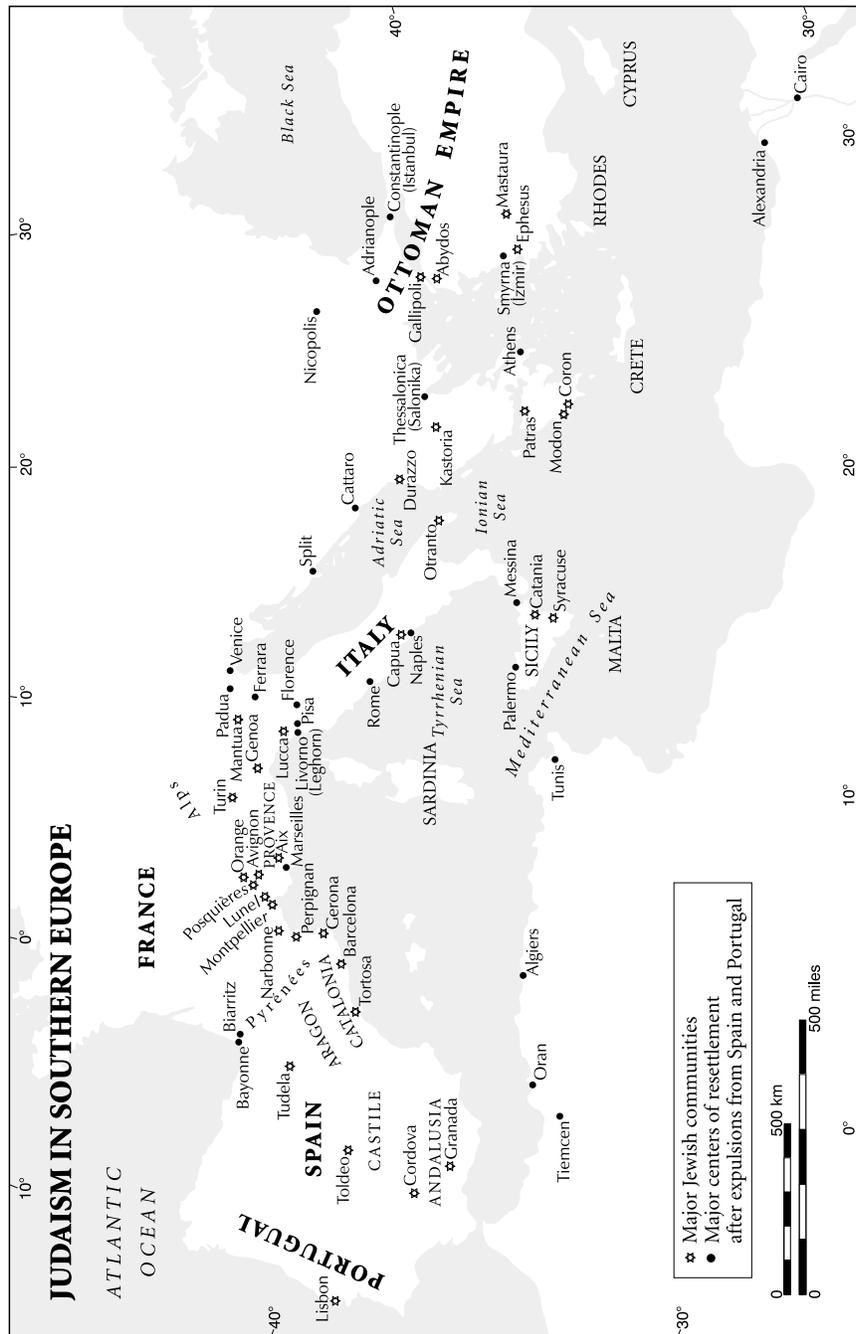
Map 2

African scholar of this period, Isaac Alfasi (1013–1103), author of the most important halakhic code prior to that of Maimonides. Alfasi's influence, in turn, was passed on to rabbinic scholars in Spain.

Although the experience of the Jewish community of Islamic Spain has frequently been called a "Golden Age," the fact is that there were strong anti-Jewish sentiment and outbreaks of terrible violence against Jews during this period. In 1066, the Jews of Granada were massacred in the wake of the assassination of the prominent Jewish courtier Joseph ha-Nagid. The Jews of Andalusia suffered further at the hands of the zealously religious Almoravids in the latter half of the eleventh century, and of the Almohads in the middle of the twelfth century, both fanatic Muslim Berber groups that had come to Spain from North Africa. Despite this, it is true that on the whole Jewish life flourished under what was generally benevolent Muslim rule. The *Sefardim* (or *Sephardim*), as the Jews of Spain (*Sefarad*) were called in Hebrew, produced immense achievements in virtually all areas of Jewish culture: art, music, and architecture, poetry and linguistics, philosophy and mysticism, law and biblical interpretation. These cultural achievements attest to the rich, complex symbiosis that took place between Jewish and Islamic culture during this period. This exemplifies a fundamental fact about Jewish culture in the Middle Ages, namely, that it was influenced and shaped in profound ways by the surrounding cultures, especially those of Islam and Christianity.

When the Jews of Spain and Portugal were forcibly exiled from their homelands in the late fifteenth century by Christian rulers, they migrated primarily to North Africa, Italy, and the Ottoman Empire (see Map 3). As they did so, they took with them their highly sophisticated and distinctive patterns of religious observance. This is a dramatic example of the way in which what began as regional variation spread widely as a result of migration, forced or otherwise. Thus, rabbinic culture as practiced by the *Sefardim* wherever they settled became one of the dominant variations of Judaism down to the present day. Sefardic culture is well represented in this anthology. Chapters that, all or in part, illustrate numerous aspects of Sefardic ritual and practice include "Life-Cycle Rituals of Spanish Crypto-Jewish Women," "Moses Maimonides' Laws of the Study of Torah," "Defending, Enjoying, and Regulating the Visual," "Illustrating History and Illuminating Identity in the Art of the Passover Haggadah," "Jewish Preaching in Fifteenth-Century Spain," "Visionary Experiences among Spanish Crypto-Jewish Women," and "Mystical Eating and Food Practices in the *Zohar*."

It is important to distinguish between those Jews who traced their ancestry back to Spain and Portugal, the *Sefardim*, and those who lived in the Islamic East without having had any direct connection to the Iberian Peninsula. The latter included Jews living in the land of Israel, the Arabian Peninsula (especially Yemen), North Africa and Egypt, Syria, and Iraq (formerly Babylonia). Traditionally, such Jews were known as *Musta'rabim*, that is, native Arabic-speaking individuals. Sometimes called today (somewhat misleadingly) "Eastern" or "Oriental" Jews, these various communities preserved highly distinctive identities and



Map 3

cultures of their own down through the centuries, as they do to some extent even now in contemporary Israel. The blurring of identity between the *Sefardim* and the native Jews of Arab lands is due to the fact that many of the *Sefardim*, as we know, eventually settled in the Muslim countries of the Near East and North Africa.

Besides these two distinctive cultures, the other dominant form of Jewish religious culture goes by the name Ashkenazic, referring, at least originally, to the Jewish communities of the Germanic lands, or *Ashkenaz* in Hebrew, as well as France. Ashkenazic Jewry traces its origins back to the eighth to ninth centuries, when the Frankish kings, Charlemagne in particular, sought to encourage Jews living in Italy to migrate to southern France and to the Rhineland. These rulers were motivated by the desire to attract Jewish merchants and traders who could develop the commercial life of a region whose economy was almost exclusively agricultural in nature. As a result, very significant Jewish settlements were established in the towns and cities along the Rhine River Valley, including Mainz, Worms, Speyer, and Cologne (see Map 4). These settlements would, in turn, become the basis for the great Jewish communities of western, central, and eventually even eastern Europe, including Poland and Russia.

Ashkenazic Jews originally prospered as traders and businessmen and had relatively stable relations with their Christian neighbors for a considerable period of time, at least until near the end of the eleventh century. As recent research has demonstrated, Jews and Christians lived in close enough proximity to both adapt and repudiate aspects of one another's culture. Circumstances took a catastrophic turn for the worse, however, toward the end of the eleventh century. In the spring of 1096, zealous Christian crusaders forcibly baptized Jews and assaulted Jewish communities along the Rhineland on their way to liberating the "Holy Land" from the Muslim "infidels." The chapter in this book entitled "The Earliest Hebrew First-Crusade Narrative" provides a detailed account of the religiously motivated martyrdom of Ashkenazic Jews who are depicted as having willingly given up their lives rather than convert to Christianity. Although the historical questions having to do with relations between Jews and Christians in medieval *Ashkenaz* are exceedingly complex, it is fair to say that beginning with the twelfth century, the social and political situation of Ashkenazic Jewry gradually worsened, and led to widespread expulsion and persecution during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Nevertheless, Jewish religious culture in all of its dimensions was influenced by the Christian culture in which it found itself.

As was the case with the *Sefardim*, Ashkenazic Jewry constructed a rich, multi-textured religious life, with its own distinctive character. Rabbinical academies developed around the beginning of the eleventh century in Mainz, inaugurating an illustrious tradition of talmudic and rabbinic scholarship. In contrast to the Arabic-speaking Jews of the Near East, North Africa, and Spain, whose interaction with Muslim culture resulted in spectacular religious creativity in many different spheres, Ashkenazic scholarship tended to focus especially on the study of the Talmud and cognate literature. The French rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, better



known by his acronym, Rashi (1040–1105), stands out as the greatest commentator on both the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud. Influenced by his scholarship, the rabbinical academies of Champagne and northern France eventually came to supplant in significance those of the Rhineland. As was also the case in Spain, the study of Jewish law in *Ashkenaz* served practical purposes as well as academic ones. As far as possible, Jews preferred to have legal transactions and business disputes among themselves adjudicated by Jewish courts. Needless to say, when it came to matters of religious life and practice, the Jewish community looked to its rabbis to guide them. In general, religious life among Ashkenazi Jews tended to be characterized by a greater degree of austerity than that of the Jews of *Sefarad*. As we will see below, this austerity manifested itself as a full-blown ascetic lifestyle in the most important specialized religious movement to come out of medieval *Ashkenaz*, namely, the German Pietists, or *Hasidei Ashkenaz* of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

In addition to these especially well-known regional variations on rabbinic Judaism, numerous other Jewish communities all over the world also developed distinctive identities, including customs and practices of their own, such as in the case of Italian Jewry and Greek-speaking Byzantine Jewry. That this would take place is not hard to understand. Although Jews always preserved their identity as a minority community in the lands in which they lived, they were inevitably influenced by the larger culture, even when that culture was fundamentally hostile to them. Ways of dress, language, folk customs, popular superstition, art and aesthetics, even theological conceptions, were all colored by local and regional culture. In addition, social, economic, and political factors also contributed to distinctive ways of doing things. An excellent example of this may be seen in one of the most famous regional enactments of the medieval period, by the prominent early Ashkenazic authority Rabbenu Gershom (c. 960–1028). Rabbenu Gershom issued a *takkanah*, a legal “enactment” or “decree” that banned the practice of polygamy for the Jewish inhabitants of German and nearby lands. The adoption of this enactment was influenced by the fact that Christian law prohibited a man from marrying more than one wife, as well as by the economic and social conditions that prevailed in Europe during Rabbenu Gershom’s time. There is evidence, for example, that Jewish merchants from Christian lands would travel abroad for years at a time to Muslim countries, where they would frequently marry again. On the other hand, this legislation was not enacted or accepted by Jews of Islamic countries, where economic conditions and social attitudes were substantially different, and where polygamy was widely practiced. Finally, the absence of a single central authority for all of Jewry, at least following the decline in prestige of the Babylonian ge’onim in the tenth century, contributed significantly to the growth and importance of local legislation.

How did medieval authorities look upon local or regional customs in regard to religious practice? Were these seen as a challenge to the unifying nature of rabbinic tradition? The answer to these questions is bound up with the important notion of *minhag* (custom) in Jewish law. Rabbinic law itself recognized and validated

such variation, a phenomenon that goes back to late antiquity. As far as the Talmud is concerned, when there are two valid opinions about a law, proper practice can be determined either by way of following the majority view of the sages, or by following the popular practice of the people themselves (Jerusalem Talmud, *Yevamot* 12.1, 12c). In the words of the Babylonian Talmud (*Berakhot* 45a; *Pesahim* 54a), one must “go and see what the people do.” The popular acceptance of one form of practice over another is regarded as valid because “if the people of Israel are not prophets, they are the children of prophets” (Jerusalem Talmud, *Pesahim* 6.1, 33a). Popular practice itself, then, came to be viewed as part of an unbroken chain of tradition. Although some customs became universally accepted, others were considered as binding only for those residing in a particular locality or region, as we saw in connection with Rabbenu Gershom’s decree. The impact of this notion can be seen especially clearly, even to this day, in the considerable variation in the sphere of liturgical rites amongst traditional Jews.

Two further things should be pointed out about *minhag*. First, the diversity and variation embodied in *minhag* did not undermine the unity of rabbinic Jews or their overall practice. The vast majority of ritual practice was essentially the same from one place to the next, and Jews traveling to new locales could generally feel comfortable in a different setting. Second, what we have said about the legitimization of variant practices pertains only to the premodern period. More “radical” innovation espoused by the nineteenth-century modernizing movements of Reform and Conservative Judaism were regarded by traditionalists as falling outside the boundaries of legitimate variation.

Beyond the question of localized *minhag*, it is important to note that Jewish communities in the Middle Ages were, for the most part, self-governing, autonomous entities (albeit significantly constrained by the ruling authorities to which they were subject). As such, their basic law was predicated on *halakha* and their judges were rabbinic authorities. There was no one centralized authority for all of Jewry, and thus individual communities were in a position to adapt and accommodate Jewish practice to local or regional needs and cultural sensibilities. Beside these considerations, it is important to point out that variation in local practice also resulted from the nature of the Talmud itself. The Talmud often accepted conflicting religious practices based on the notion that different views were all “words of the living God.”

### Mystical Movements and Ritual Variation

A great deal of variation in practice may be attributed to the numerous esoteric movements that Jewish culture has produced. Although generally less well known than normative rabbinic Judaism, there is a rich and diverse history of Jewish mysticism. The first such movement is known as *Merkavah* or *Hekhalot* mysticism, which originated in Palestine in the early centuries of the common era

alongside talmudic and midrashic literature, but which continued to develop into the early medieval period. This literature is characterized by highly imaginative descriptions of visionary ascents through the seven heavenly “palaces” (*hekhalot*), which culminate in numinous visions of the divine throne (the *merkavah*). The chapter in this volume entitled “The Book of the Great Name” includes a magical text from this literature. This particular text, probably written between the sixth and ninth centuries, provides instructions for an adept to prepare himself ritually so as to engage successfully in the recitation of esoteric names of God. It also includes fragments of poetic hymns that exalt God and His name, and describes the power of the magical book that contains this information.

German Pietism (*Hasidut Ashkenaz*), referred to earlier, was an important mystical movement of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Three individuals, in particular, were the leading figures of this movement, all members of the Qalonimos family: Samuel, son of Qalonimos (mid-twelfth century); his son, Judah the Pietist (d. 1217); and the latter’s disciple and cousin, Eleazar of Worms (died c. 1230). In their writings these men developed the idea that the will of God is only partially apparent in the Torah when it is read in literal ways; thus a *hasid*, or Pietist, must search the Torah for the inner, esoteric meanings that scripture encodes. The central theological conception of the Pietists was that all of life is composed of suffering and trial, tribulations imposed by God so as continuously to test an individual’s faithfulness. In particular, God subjects an individual to diverse temptations so that he might strive to prevail over his passions, the “evil impulse” about which the ancient rabbis had spoken so much. Constant self-examination of one’s motives and behavior served as the basis for a wide range of innovative practices, a key feature of which was asceticism. Beyond the simple avoidance of illicit pleasures, the Pietist was to pursue actively severe rites of self-affliction, both as trial and as a form of penitence.

In a way that is strikingly reminiscent of the vast medieval ecclesiastical literature of Christian penitentials, pietistic literature includes systematic catalogues of sins and their corresponding penances. Thus, they call for extensive regimens of fasting, immersion in icy water, periods of sexual abstinence, and flagellation. For example, according to *Sefer Hasidim* (The Book of the Pietists), a man who had engaged in sexual intercourse with a Gentile woman had to fast three consecutive days and nights for a period of three years, or practice three-day fasts in the course of a single year. According to Eleazar of Worms, if a man has sexual relations with another’s wife, he is required to sit in icy water in the winter, and among insects in the summer. These ascetic rites are an excellent example of how a particular religious ideology led to the development of special and highly unusual ritual practices among certain medieval Jews. The German Pietists strictly adhered to all of the regular halakhic requirements of Jewish tradition, but they added to these through supererogatory rites such as described here. This movement may have provided the context for the unusual setting for religious study described in “A Monastic-like Setting for the Study of Torah.” In addition, the Pietist Eleazar of Worms’s depiction of his wife Dolce is found in the chapter

entitled “Dolce of Worms: The Lives and Deaths of an Exemplary Jewish Woman and Her Daughters.”

In the Islamic world, at approximately the same time that the German Pietists flourished, another Jewish group who also called themselves *hasidim* (pietists) appeared, this time in Egypt. Islamic mysticism, Sufism, flourished in thirteenth-century Egypt, and exerted strong influence upon various Jewish circles. One of the leading figures in this Jewish-Egyptian pietistic movement was none other than the son of Moses Maimonides, Abraham Maimuni (1186–1237). As one of the chapters in this book, “Devotional Rites in a Sufi Mode,” makes clear, the adaptation of Sufi concepts and rituals was a creative process in which Jewish teachers synthesized Islamic and Jewish rituals in innovative ways. We find that Jews who were attracted to this form of spirituality took up various Sufi contemplative practices, including solitary retreats and the ritual repetition of Divine names. As with the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*, those who practiced in this way did not ignore traditional Jewish law but adapted Jewish practice so as to incorporate these novel rites into their devotional lives. At the same time, we know that some individuals became so intrigued with the Sufi way of life that they turned wholeheartedly to Islam. This phenomenon is poignantly illustrated in the chapter in this volume, “An Egyptian Woman Seeks to Rescue Her Husband from a Sufi Monastery.”

“Prophetic” or “ecstatic” Kabbalah is a mystical movement associated with a Spanish Jew by the name of Abraham Abulafia (1240–1291). Abulafia was born in Saragossa, in the Spanish province of Aragon, but spent much of his life traveling, including journeys to Palestine, Greece, and Italy. Abulafia developed a highly distinctive contemplative system based upon an eclectic array of practical techniques. These included the reciting and combining of names of God and a variety of body postures and breathing exercises, some of which bear a strong resemblance to yogic practices. Abulafia spurned traditional Kabbalah (described below) in favor of his own system, the goal of which was ecstatic union with God, described primarily in terms borrowed from the philosophical system of Moses Maimonides.

The term Kabbalah is used, as well, to describe a rather different and far broader mystical movement that emerged in the south of France in the latter decades of the twelfth century. Southern France was the provenance for the appearance of the first kabbalistic work of a theosophical type, the *Sefer Bahir*. By theosophical we refer to a complex conception of divinity according to which God manifests ten aspects or qualities of personality, known as *sefirot*. The *sefirot* are the many “lights” or “faces” of divinity, which, through study, prayer, and contemplation, human beings are able to imagine and experience. These ten *sefirot* emanate or pour forth from within the hidden recesses of an otherwise concealed dimension of divine being, known by the expression *Ein Sof* (the Infinite). *Ein Sof* is the root of all being, the source of all that exists, which in and of itself remains beyond the capacity of the human intellect or imagination to fathom. In distinctive and

colorful mythic symbolism, the *Bahir* describes these ten attributes that derive from *Ein Sof* and that compose the dynamic, inner life of God.

Owing to the *Bahir* and a small but prominent circle of kabbalists, Kabbalah spread to Spain by the beginning of the thirteenth century. A number of important centers came into being, beginning in the city of Gerona and eventually spreading to central Spain, Castile. This classical phase of Kabbalah, which produced a significant number of kabbalistic treatises, reached its highest development in the composition of the *Zohar* (Book of Splendor), the seminal work of Spanish Jewish mysticism. A remarkable work of the imagination, the *Zohar* was written largely if not exclusively by Moses de Leon, who began to circulate manuscripts of *Zohar* in the 1280s and 1290s. The *Zohar* was the culmination and crystallization of a century of kabbalistic literary creativity and, in turn, served as the primary inspiration for centuries more of Jewish mystical literature and life. Much of the appeal exerted by the *Zohar* was the result of the fact that de Leon wrote in a pseudepigraphic manner, attributing its teachings not to himself but to a second century rabbi, Shimon bar Yohai. De Leon claimed that he was merely distributing manuscripts that he had copied of a previously unknown work of midrash originating in the land of Israel. The influence of the *Zohar* upon halakhic practice among many Jews had to do in part with the traditional belief in the *Zohar's* antiquity.

Beginning in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the traditions of Spanish Kabbalah were carried to many parts of the Jewish world, including the Franco-Ashkenazi provinces. It was in the sixteenth century, however, in the wake of the expulsion of Jewry from Spain and the forced mass conversion of the Jews of Portugal, that Kabbalah experienced its most powerful renaissance. Exiled Jews from the Iberian Peninsula brought with them to Italy, North Africa, and the Ottoman Empire the literature of Kabbalah and knowledge of its practice. In Italy, even prior to the Spanish Expulsion, a distinctive orientation emerged in which Kabbalah was interpreted in philosophical ways and was suffused with magical techniques.

The most consequential resurgence of post-Expulsion Kabbalah occurred, however, in the land of Israel, especially after it became part of the Ottoman Empire in 1517. The small Galilean village of Safed emerged as the scene of an intense messianically oriented mystical community, the foundations of which were built upon earlier Kabbalah. The most important figures associated with Safed were Moses Cordovero (1522–1570) and Isaac Luria (1534–1572).

These several different phases of theosophical Kabbalah contributed in innumerable ways to the realm of Jewish practice. In the first place, the kabbalists taught that the traditional precepts, the 613 *mitsvot*, were to be performed accompanied by specific contemplative intentions, called *kavvanot*. These *kavvanot* enabled the practicing kabbalist to focus in a meditative way upon the *sefirot* while performing the *mitsvot*. This was also true when it came to the liturgy. For a kabbalist, the words of the prayerbook were understood as an elaborate structure by which they could contemplatively ascend the ladder of the ten *sefirot*.

But in addition to investing existing rituals with kabbalistic significance, kabbalists also created altogether new rituals of many types. This phenomenon reached its highest stage of development in sixteenth-century Safed, where a vast array of kabbalistic rites evolved, many of which are still practiced. The most well-known (and still widely practiced) of these is the preliminary service that precedes the evening service on Sabbath eve. Known as *Kabbalat Shabbat* (Welcoming the Sabbath), the chanting of this collection of psalms and songs is intended to be a way of ushering in the Sabbath by welcoming the Sabbath Bride, understood in kabbalistic terms as a feminine dimension of divinity, the *Shekhinah* (divine presence). Examples of just a few of the ways in which Kabbalah influenced and elaborated upon Jewish ritual may be found in the chapters entitled “Adorning the ‘Bride’ on the Eve of the Feast of Weeks,” “New Year’s Day for Fruit of the Tree,” “Mystical Eating and Food Practices in the *Zohar*,” “Pietistic Customs from Safed,” and “Jewish Exorcism: Early Modern Traditions and Transformations.”

In the seventeenth century, the most significant expression of kabbalistic life was the turbulent messianic movement known as Sabbatianism, which galvanized around the charismatic but troubled personality of the Turkish Jew Shabbatai Zvi (1626–1676). Zvi (also called Sabbatai Zevi or Sevi) became infamous for his claims to messiahship, his dramatic mood swings, his practice of violating Jewish law, and his eventual apostasy when he converted to Islam under duress. For much of the seventeenth century, the Jewish world was thrown into turmoil as communities became caught up in Shabbatai Zvi’s activities and the intense controversies they generated. The chapter “The Early Messianic Career of Shabbatai Zvi” provides a description of Shabbatai’s life by one of his followers.

Kabbalah survived the turmoil of the Sabbatian movement, but by the eighteenth century it had lost much of its potency as a living force. This was partly a consequence of the vast challenges to all types of traditional Judaism posed by the assimilationist and secularizing trajectory of modernity. At the same time, an altogether different development coopted the creative energies of Kabbalah, namely, eastern European Hasidism. Hasidism was a mass pietistic movement that originated in the rural villages of southeast Poland in the middle of the eighteenth century. Israel ben Eliezer (1700–1760), better known by his title, the Baal Shem Tov (Master of the Good Name), was a charismatic figure around whom the earliest Hasidim coalesced. As a popular movement, the Hasidic rebbes (or *tsaddiqim*, lit., righteous ones) taught that God could be served through the practice of contemplative prayer and ecstatic song and dance. One did not need to be a master of talmudic tradition in order to serve God properly. Rather, Hasidism placed a premium upon the emotional and spontaneous expression of the love of God. In contrast to the more complex mythic symbolism of the older Kabbalah, Hasidism had a simpler teaching. Sparks of divine light from above are present in every single dimension of reality. The more material the phenomenon, the more concealed the sparks seem to be. The spiritual task is to make oneself aware of the divine life force that lies at the heart of all things, and by doing so to “raise up” these sparks to the source on high from which they derive. Drawing

in part upon kabbalistic ritual, the Hasidim developed a vast array of distinctive customs and practices of their own, especially in the sphere of prayer. The spiritual vitality that Hasidism manifested is illustrated in “Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl: Personal Practices of a Hasidic Master,” and some of the legendary traditions concerning the life of Hasidism’s central early figure are the subject of “Israel ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov.”

### Sectarian Judaism

Religious diversity of a different type was a result of certain sectarian forms of Jewish religious practice. Sectarianism had been a prominent feature of Judaism in the several centuries immediately preceding the destruction of the second Temple. During the Hellenistic, or intertestamental period, that is, from about 300 B.C.E. through 70 C.E., a variety of sectarian groups lived alongside one another, and to a significant degree competed with one another. This was the period during which the Pharisees, Sadducees, Dead Sea Sect, Zealots, Jewish-Christians, and certain other lesser-known groups flourished. In the wake of the Roman destruction of the Temple, only the Pharisees and the Jewish-Christians survived as groups. The former served as the nucleus for what would become the rabbinic movement, whereas the latter gradually evolved into a full-fledged Christian community, now with an identity completely separate from the Judaism from which it had originally come. The success of the rabbinic movement within the Jewish community was such that in the course of the Middle Ages few sectarian groups emerged to compete with it. And when they did, they met with relatively limited success. It was not until the nineteenth century that rabbinic Judaism would find its authority significantly undermined by competing sectarian forms, namely, Reform and Conservative Judaism.

Nevertheless, there were some sectarian groups during the Middle Ages that contributed in substantial ways to religious diversity. The best-known and important of these from an historical point of view was the Karaites (from the word *mikra*, scripture), a group that emerged in Iraq in the eighth century. Karaism represented the only serious attempt to challenge the dominance of the rabbinic movement. The origins of the Karaites lies partly in political opposition to the expanding authority of the Babylonian ge'onim, whom we discussed earlier. At the center of this opposition was the figure of Anan ben David, a learned and aristocratic individual. According to some accounts, Anan had been a member of the powerful family of the Babylonian exilarch, the title held by the political head of the Jewish community in Iraq. A tendentious rabbanite account of Anan’s sectarianism contended that Anan had been motivated by having been passed over for appointment to the office of the exilarch.

In any event, Anan helped to forge a schismatic movement the central principle of which was that the interpretation and practice of the Torah which the rabbinic movement had produced was, in fact, illegitimate. Instead, Anan argued that Jews

must return to the practice of the Torah as it was originally intended, shorn of the elaborate misreading of it perpetrated by rabbinic sages. He believed, further, that individuals should have some freedom to interpret scripture on their own, although such independence was to be limited by the Karaites' own traditions. Anan composed a legal code of his own, *Sefer ha-Mitsvot* (Book of Commandments), in which he gathered together elements of a sectarian *halakhah*, intended to compete with rabbinic law. Despite the fact that he had repudiated the exegesis of Scripture as practiced by rabbinic authorities, ironically Anan employed similar techniques in arguing for his own version of "pure" Jewish teaching. One of the important results of Karaism was that it led to vigorous study of the Bible, even by rabbinic Jews, and inspired a new interest in the Hebrew language, its grammar, and lexicography.

Anan's approach to Scripture was particularly attractive to certain communities that were not yet firmly under the influence of the Babylonian authorities, including those in Persia. Subsequent Karaite leaders, including Benjamin al-Nahawendi and Daniel al-Qumisi, modified Anan's original teachings and developed their own traditions of scriptural interpretation and ritual practice. The Karaite rejection of rabbinic tradition was not motivated by a desire to make religious life simpler or easier. On the contrary, it was characterized by a pronounced ascetic quality—teaching, for example, that not only could lights not be kindled once the Sabbath had begun, but that even light kindled before the onset of the Sabbath was prohibited. This question eventually became the subject of controversy among the Karaites themselves. Besides a more literalist understanding of the laws of the Sabbath, other Karaite customs included not blowing the ram's horn (*shofar*) on Rosh Hashanah (the New Year festival), not waving the "four species" of plants on the festival of Sukkot, and ignoring the holiday of Hanukkah, since it is not mentioned in the Bible. The Karaites were also known for especially stringent taboos with respect to the laws of marriage between relatives.

Although the Karaites never came close to usurping rabbinical hegemony, they did succeed in attracting many followers, including distinguished scholars. By the end of the eleventh century, the Karaites had adherents in almost all of the Jewish communities of the Islamic world and the Byzantine Empire, in Palestine and Egypt, North Africa, Spain, and Asia Minor. The Karaites themselves, however, regarded the Jewish diaspora as a tragic reality. For they emphasized the obligation to live in the land of Israel, and especially believed in the messianic significance of residing in Jerusalem and practicing ascetic rites of purification. The Karaite movement began to decline in the Islamic East in the twelfth century, but continued to survive in Egypt until recently. The Karaite community in the Byzantine Empire, the center of which was in Constantinople, eventually spread as far as the Crimea and Lithuania, where it too existed until modern times. Remarkably, there are still minor Karaite communities in Israel, Turkey, and a few other places.

Although Karaism was the most significant heterodox movement in medieval Judaism, it was not the only one. The same ferment engendered by the spread of Islam that helped give rise to the Karaites also provided the conditions for a

number of other smaller Near Eastern sectarian groups, all of which appear to have died out before too long. Some of these groups are described in the chapter “Jewish Sectarianism in the Near East: A Muslim’s Account,” and the distinctive rites of the Karaites are depicted in “Karaite Ritual.”

### Communities on the Margins

In addition to these sectarian phenomena, some of the most interesting forms of religious practice developed among communities living at the cultural and geographical margins of the rest of Jewry. Certain communities that were far removed from the vast bulk of Jews living in the Near East and Europe, and living under altogether different cultural conditions, adapted Judaism in unusual ways. In contrast to a sectarian group such as the Karaites, which self-consciously distinguished itself from mainstream rabbinic Judaism, these communities at the margins did not possess such antagonistic motives. Indeed, typically, they had little or no knowledge of rabbinic practice. Instead, they fashioned syncretistic Jewish identities that reflected the distinctive cultures in which they found themselves, and that enabled them to assimilate to those cultures without losing their Jewish identity.

The most prominent examples of such syncretism are the Jewish communities of China, India, and Ethiopia. In the case of China, individual Jewish merchants arrived there along with other western traders, perhaps as early as the second or first century B.C.E., in the view of some scholars. The earliest extant evidence of their presence there, however, dates only from the beginning of the eighth century. Little is known about these early Jewish settlers, and it is difficult to estimate how many there were. We have more information about the Jewish community in Kaifeng. This community traces its origins back to the eleventh century, when approximately a thousand Jews, bringing cotton from either Persia or India, were given permission to settle in this town in central China. A synagogue was built in Kaifeng, and was rebuilt several times over the years. Three monuments, or steles, were erected in the courtyard of the synagogue in 1489, 1512, and 1663. The chapter in our anthology, entitled “Living Judaism in Confucian Culture: Being Jewish and Being Chinese,” contains a translation from Chinese of the stele of 1489. As Jonathan Lipman points out, we learn from the inscription on this stele that its author, a certain Jin Zhong, “put Chinese prose into the mind of Abraham, Chinese virtues into the character of Moses, Chinese ritual rectitude into the behavior of Ezra.” Although they thoroughly appropriated Confucian ways, as did other foreign religions transplanted into China, Kaifeng’s Jews nevertheless “survived as Jews for almost a thousand years with a synagogue, Hebrew texts and leaders who could read them, and ritual observances at odds with the overwhelmingly large populations around them.”

Prior to the period of British colonialism, there existed two distinct Jewish communities in India, the Bene Israel (Children of Israel) in the Konkan region

in the present-day state of Maharashtra, and the Jews of Cochin, in the region of Kerala. The larger of these two separate groups, the Bene Israel, regard themselves as descendants of Jews who fled the persecutions of the Syrian ruler Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century B.C.E., but they are not mentioned in any sources other than their own prior to their first contact with Cochin Jews in the eighteenth century. The Bene Israel assimilated to the surrounding culture by adopting the Marathi language, along with local customs and dress, and by employing the names of their Hindu neighbors. Living in a Hindu culture, where they did not experience hostility or persecution, the Bene Israel developed an appreciative understanding and positive attitude toward aspects of Hindu beliefs and values. This included Hindu teachings concerning nonviolence and the sanctity of all life. Until recently, for example, the Bene Israel believed that the eating of beef was prohibited by the Torah—a practice, of course, that conforms to Hinduism. On the other hand, they adhered with great devotion to significant elements of Jewish practice, including circumcision, the dietary laws, the Sabbath, certain Hebrew prayers, and some traditional festivals. In the eighteenth century, Ezekial David Rahabi (1694–1771) of Syria became acquainted with the Bene Israel as a result of his travels in the service of the Dutch East India Company. Struck by their ignorance of Jewish traditions, Rahabi set out to teach the community Hebrew and prayers, and arranged for their instruction throughout the many villages in which the Bene Israel were dispersed. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the Bene Israel began to settle in Bombay, where they built a synagogue in 1796. Beginning in the 1920s, many Bene Israel became Zionists and eventually settled in Israel.

Evidence concerning the Jews of Cochin goes back to about the year 1000. According to inscriptions on copper tablets, long in the possession of the Jews of Cochin, the Hindu ruler of Malabar granted privileges to settle to a certain Yosef Rabban. The famous Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela wrote of the presence of a thousand Black Jews on the Malabar Coast in about 1170. This community presumably resulted from the marriage of early Jewish male immigrants to local Indian women, along with others who may have converted to Judaism. According to Benjamin, they “are good men, observe the Law, possess the Torah of Moses, the Prophets, and have some knowledge of the Talmud and the *halakhah*.”

A good deal more information about Cochin Jewry derives from the fifteenth century. The Portuguese destroyed the Jewish settlement of Cranganore, north of Cochin, in 1524. Refugees from this community, along with Jewish exiles from Spain, Portugal, and elsewhere, were granted land by the raja of Cochin in order to resettle. Known even to this day as “Jew Town,” the community established the Paradesi (foreigners’) synagogue there in 1568. When the Portuguese were defeated militarily by the Dutch in the seventeenth century, the Cochin community began a period in which they flourished. Dutch Jews became interested in the far-away community and provided it with support, including gifts of Hebrew books. According to one important historical report from this period, there were nine synagogues with a membership of 465 households of “White” Jews

who had come to Cochin from Cranganore, Castile, Algiers, Jerusalem, Safed, Syria, Baghdad, and Germany. Two rather separate communities thus evolved among the Cochin Jews, Black and White, each maintaining a distinctive identity and their own communal institutions.

Over the course of the last three centuries, the religious practice of the Cochin Jews was significantly influenced by contact with Jews who continued to arrive in India. In particular, the aforementioned Rahabi family played a central role in this connection. Ezekial Rahabi's father, David Rahabi (d. 1726), instructed the Jews of Cochin in the beliefs and practices of the ancient community of Aleppo, from which he had emigrated in 1664. Rahabi's descendants continued this activity, so that by the eighteenth century the religious life of the Cochin community essentially conformed to the pattern of Syrian Jewry, including the study of the Talmud. There were approximately 2,500 Black and a mere 100 White Cochin Jews remaining in India in 1948. Shortly after the establishment of the state of Israel all the Black Jews settled there, whereas most of the White Jews remained. By 1968, there were some 4,000 Cochin Jews in Israel.

The Black Jews of Ethiopia refer to themselves as Beta Israel (House of Israel), although they are better known as Falashas, meaning "foreigners" or "wanderers," a name given to them by other Ethiopians. Although the Beta Israel have their own traditions concerning their ancestry, most scholars believe that the origins of Ethiopian Jewry go back to Jewish cultural influences from the Arabian Peninsula that made an impact upon Ethiopia. It is possible, however, to reconstruct the history of this community only from the thirteenth century forward. The religious practices of the Beta Israel are based on the Torah and other books of the Hebrew Bible, as well as certain ancient noncanonical Jewish books.

Like many other communities on the margins, the Beta Israel were unfamiliar with the literature of rabbinic tradition, Mishnah and Gemara, and the midrashim. This unfamiliarity is readily apparent, for example, in their Sabbath rites, which closely parallel the noncanonical Book of Jubilees. Thus, for instance, according to both Jubilees and Falasha legal tradition, marital relations are forbidden on the Sabbath, in direct contrast with rabbinic tradition, which teaches that sexual relations between a husband and wife on the Sabbath are highly desirable. As with the early Karaites, but unlike rabbinic law, the Beta Israel believed that the Torah (Exod. 35:3) proscribed not only kindling fire on the Sabbath itself but before the Sabbath as well. Thus it seems that Falashas did not kindle lights on Sabbath eve, or employ methods to keep food warm during the Sabbath.

Strong evidence for the rootedness of Falasha practice in biblical law may be seen in their highly elaborate purity rites. Falashas believed that any contact with individuals outside of their community could generate a state of ritual impurity, and necessitated purification by way of ritual bathing, a rite that constituted one of their most important practices. The Falashas used ritual purity as a means of preserving their separateness from people beyond their own community. As Michael Corinaldi points out in his study of Falasha identity, "Falasha villages were built near rivers, so as to make immersion easier, and the Ethiopian Jews, both

male and female, regularly bathed before the Sabbath, the women after each menstrual cycle as well. Ritual immersion was [also] essential for purification after contact with strangers, and it had to be performed in the running waters of a river—‘live waters.’”<sup>2</sup> With the settlement of most of the remaining Jews of Ethiopia in Israel, the Falashas have increasingly taken on the ritual practices of rabbinic Judaism.

Finally, it should be pointed out that there have been many other Jewish communities on the margins that developed distinctive religious identities and practices, especially in Inner Asia, such as the Jews of Georgia in the Caucasian Mountains, and the Jews of Bukhara, Kurdistan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan.

### Women and Judaism

There is a whole other group of Jews whose religious lives and practices have not received the attention they deserve in accounts of Jewish religious life, for reasons having nothing to do with geographical isolation. Until recently, the modern study of Judaism virtually ignored the history of women. This is especially apparent when it comes to premodern Judaism. Jewish scholarship is only now beginning to turn its attention in a serious way to the question of women and Judaism. The most frustrating difficulty in the study of the history of Jewish women has to do with the fact that we have only the scantiest evidence from women themselves. We are almost entirely dependent upon sources of various types written by men, and thus must use these sources in creative ways to learn as much as possible about the actual religious lives of women. Beyond the idealized expectations men had with respect to how women should behave, and beyond the halakhic parameters that prescribed what women were and were not supposed to do, what do we know about the actual religious lives of Jewish women in the Middle Ages and the early modern period? Although the study of what was expected of women by men is a significant question, it is hardly the whole story. We are learning increasingly not only about how *halakha* limited opportunities for women, particularly in the realm of public, communal ritual, but also about how women found diverse ways to cultivate and express religious life.

As several chapters in this book indicate, rabbinic law significantly circumscribed women’s religious activities. According to traditional Jewish law, women are obligated to practice all those *mitsvot* that are formulated in negative terms, that is, prohibitions, of which there are 365. Thus, for example, women, like men, must refrain from practicing idolatry, from blaspheming God’s name, from eating unpermitted foods, from stealing, perpetrating injustice, or from committing murder. As for the 248 positively formulated *mitsvot*, women are obligated, in general, to practice all except whose enactment are time-bound, that is, limited to a specific time. Examples of positive precepts that women are obligated to practice include resting on the Sabbath and other festivals (although they are not obligated to

observe every ritual of these celebrations), returning lost property to its owner, giving charity to the poor, loving one's neighbor, and honoring one's parents.

Positive commandments that are considered bound by a specific time, and that women were thus exempt from performing, included the obligation of formal, public prayer, insofar as the three daily prayer services must be performed within specific hours of the day. Rabbinic tradition does not provide clear or elaborate rationales for this important exemption, but there is every reason to infer that the primary motive was that women were expected to attend to their domestic responsibilities without being distracted by the requirement of making a public appearance three times a day for communal prayer.

Insofar as women were exempt from the religious obligation of participating in public prayer, rabbinic tradition taught that they were prohibited from being counted as part of a quorum (*minyan*) of ten adults required for communal worship, as well as from leading the congregation in prayer. Nor were they permitted to come up to the Torah for an *aliyah*, an honor involving the recitation of a blessing during the reading of the Torah in the synagogue. On the other hand, women certainly could go to the synagogue, as they tended to on Sabbaths and important festivals. When they did attend synagogue, women sat in a separate section or gallery, although it is clear that such separation of the sexes was not a fully established practice until the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Girls who came from wealthier or more highly educated families, especially rabbinic families, tended to have higher levels of literacy and education themselves, and could thus more fully participate in synagogue services. In fact, we know that beginning in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Germany and France, such learned women often served as prayer leaders within the women's galleries. Women also participated in the life of the synagogue in other ways. Sometimes poor women would serve as beadles or caretakers, whereas wealthier women contributed financially to the support of the synagogue by donating not only money but also such items as Torah scrolls, oil for lamps, and prayer books.

Although these are the general principles set forth by rabbinic tradition, there are important exceptions to them. The most significant exception has to do with the study of Torah, that is, the study of sacred texts as a whole. Even though this is a precept that is not bound by a specific time (one can study at any time of the day), women are nevertheless not obligated to such study. Exemption in this case, as in many other cases, often translated into de facto exclusion. According to one well-known passage in the Mishnah (*Sotah* 3:4) pertaining to this question, a sage by the name of Ben Azzai teaches that "a man is obligated to teach his daughter the law" (*torah*), but Rabbi Eliezer opposes this by arguing that "if anyone teaches his daughter the law, it as though he taught her lasciviousness." Even though this rabbinic discussion appears to concern whether daughters should be taught about a certain matter of Jewish law in particular, many medieval authorities cited Eliezer's view to justify the exclusion of women from studying altogether.

Not all rabbinic authorities, however, shared this view. In her chapter "Women and Ritual Immersion in Medieval Ashkenaz: The Sexual Politics of Piety," Judith

Baskin provides the view of the German Pietistic text, *Sefer Hasidim*, a work not normally known for liberal attitudes. It promotes education for girls in the practical areas that pertain to them: “A father is obligated to teach his daughters the commandments, including halakhic rules. This may appear to contradict the talmudic ruling. . . . However, the rabbis were referring to deep immersion in Talmudic study, discussion of the reasons behind the commandments, and mystical understandings of the Torah. These should never be taught to a woman or to a minor. But one must teach her practical laws because if she does not know the rules for the Sabbath, how will she observe the Sabbath? The same goes for all the other commandments she must perform.”

Despite this view, and others like it, the exemption from all but rudimentary study had incalculable consequences for women. Religious study, nearly universally practiced by Jewish males, was considered the most essential ritual of Judaism, as the most desirable activity, and as the crucial ingredient in religious life. It was also the primary means of achieving power and prestige within the religious community. With very few exceptions, only men possessed advanced knowledge of Jewish law and tradition, and certainly only men became rabbis. And only rabbis had responsibility for the further evolution of that tradition, even when it directly affected the lives of women, for example in matters of marriage and divorce. Thus, even though study of Torah is but one precept out of 613, its significance was extraordinary. The exemption from participating in communal prayer, together with the exemption from formally studying sacred texts, served to limit dramatically women’s involvement in the two spiritual activities most prized by traditional male Jews.

On the other hand, there are three precepts that are considered specifically to be “women’s *mitsvot*,” including the practice of ritual immersion (*tevilah*) following the menstrual period (see Baskin, “Women and Ritual Immersion”), the lighting of Sabbath candles to usher in the Sabbath on Friday evening, and the baking of *challah* bread for the celebration of the Sabbath. More generally, women’s religious lives revolved primarily around the home and family, which in premodern Judaism occupied an especially crucial role in Jewish practice. Women were responsible, for example, for maintaining the dietary laws, the laws of *kashrut*. In fact, women were sometimes consulted about fine points of these complex laws by rabbinic authorities. Women also instructed their young children, especially their daughters, in aspects of the tradition.

But women managed to devise various other ways, as well, to engage in religious practice, as evidenced by many of the chapters in this volume. Our sourcebook includes a wide variety of materials that attest to the fact that despite the restrictions imposed by tradition upon women’s practice, women nevertheless were involved in many different activities, including prayer. In one of the texts in the chapter “Karaites Ritual,” for example, we learn that Karaite women were expressly included in instructions concerning proper prayer: “The Congregation, both men and women, should concentrate their attention behind the leader. Both men and women should pray in soberness and purity. . . . Neither men nor women in the

congregation should occupy their minds with news or gossip, lest their worship be spoiled.” According to the testimony of an ordinary Jew by the name of Eleazar of Mainz (d. 1357): “They [my sons and daughters] should attend synagogue in the morning and in the evening where they should be particularly attentive to the recitation of the standing prayer and the *Shema*” (see Baskin, “Women and Ritual Immersion”).

For centuries, Ashkenazic women, during the period of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (New Year and Day of Atonement), made special candles and engaged in special prayers of supplication in Yiddish. These were for the purpose of memorializing deceased ancestors as well as for praying for the living. More generally, Yiddish petitionary prayers, *tekhinnes*, were part of a rich devotional literature written expressly for and often by Ashkenazic women, and described in the chapter “Measuring Graves and Laying Wicks.” The *tekhinnes* are important historical evidence inasmuch as they constitute the only premodern corpus of religious literature that was composed, at least in significant part, by women themselves. These prayers and rituals provide unusual and invaluable insight into the nature of religious experience among Ashkenazic women, connected especially but not exclusively to affairs of the household, preparation of food, family and children, and home celebrations associated with the Sabbath and other festivals, as well as pregnancy and childbirth. The business, domestic, and religious life of women in early modern *Ashkenaz* is also vividly described by Glikl of Hameln (seventeenth to eighteenth centuries). Glikl left us a fascinating lengthy autobiographical account of her life, with detailed descriptions of weddings and marriages, relationships between children and parents, her moral values, and, perhaps most interesting of all, her ruminations on matters of faith and God. This exceptionally important document is among the first full-fledged Jewish autobiographies, and certainly the first authored by a woman. Selections from it are found in the chapter “The Life of Glikl of Hameln.”

We find that in early modern Italy, women took a special interest in prayer, as well. There is evidence that some women practiced the donning of *tephillin* (phylacteries), the leather boxes and straps worn by men during the daily morning services, although authorities apparently sought to prohibit such behavior. We learn about quarrels by women over the seating arrangements in the women’s section of the synagogue in sixteenth-century Verona, and that in Modena women practiced the custom of interrupting the service in order to announce publicly their grievances against particular men in connection with various kinds of domestic matters.

From early modern Italy we also learn that some women chose to adopt certain special pietistic practices, including voluntary regimens of fasting, whereas others became expert ritual slaughterers, and that a number of private rituals were practiced by women, including the custom that a woman in labor would hold a scroll of the Torah as a protective means of easing her delivery. Our knowledge of many of these phenomena derives from evidence preserved in halakhic literature in

which rabbinic authorities either question such behavior or seek to prohibit it altogether.

An especially interesting form of women's piety occurred among Spanish crypto-Jewish women, or *conversas*, beginning in the fourteenth century. These were individuals who, along with Jewish men, converted to Catholicism either as a consequence of forced conversion or under the pressure of the Spanish Inquisition, but who continued to practice Judaism surreptitiously. That is, in public they behaved as Christians, but in private they placed themselves at risk by maintaining as much Jewish ritual as possible. In the chapter entitled "Life-Cycle Rituals of Spanish Crypto-Jewish Women," we discover a wide variety of ways in which *conversas* preserved their faith by adapting Jewish rituals to the dangerous circumstances in which they found themselves. In a related chapter, "Visionary Experiences among Spanish Crypto-Jewish Women," we find that around the beginning of the sixteenth century messianic ferment emerged among the *converso* communities of the region of Extremadura, and that certain young *conversa* girls experienced prophetic visions that they proclaimed publicly.

Although they are not represented in this volume, it is worth noting that we have other examples of visionary women in premodern Judaism. We know that in the kabbalistic community of sixteenth-century Safed there was a small number of women who were known as mystical visionaries, although they were not participants in the formal, organized activities of kabbalistic men. In the seventeenth century, there were women associated with the Sabbatian movement who cultivated visionary experiences of a prophetic type. It is significant that in the case of both *conversas* and Sabbatian women this behavior manifested itself in circumstances where traditional Jewish law had been subverted, although for very different reasons. These were both communities where the normal rules of Jewish behavior did not apply, and in which some individuals expressed themselves in ways that were highly unusual for Jewish women. This is consistent with historical patterns in other religious traditions, where often under anomalous conditions women find ways of going beyond the boundaries normally placed upon them. The case of sixteenth-century Safed is especially interesting in this connection, for this was not a culture in which traditional rules had been broken. On the other hand, it was a period in which revelatory and visionary experiences were highly prized and quite common among male kabbalists.

Along somewhat different lines, we have evidence that there were certain rituals in which women once played a significant part but from which they were eventually excluded, or at least marginalized. In "The Role of Women at Rituals of Their Infant Children," we discover that mothers were at one time more actively involved in the rituals of circumcision of sons (*brit milah*) and "redemption of the firstborn son" (*pidyon ha-ben*). According to the ninth-century prayer book of Rav Amram Gaon, the first known comprehensive prayer book, the mother of an infant about to be ritually circumcised was integrally involved in the ceremony. Prayers were made on behalf of her healing, and she was given a cup of wine to drink. In connection with redemption of the firstborn son, we learn that not only

was the mother expected to be present but also that she testified personally to the standing of the firstborn in question. Even more, despite the fact that only the father is obligated to redeem the son, the geonic ritual has the mother saying “We are obliged to redeem him.” On the other hand, there is evidence that the involvement of mothers in such ways in these two rituals was deliberately curtailed by subsequent European rabbinic authorities.

Finally, evidence concerning the faithfulness of Jewish women to God in the face of the most extreme duress derives from the Crusade chronicles, referred to earlier. As Robert Chazan points out in his introduction to the *Mainz Anonymous*, a narrative account of the Crusade of 1096, women are depicted as having played a central role in choosing martyrdom for themselves and their children rather than submit to baptism. The most compelling episode in this account concerns a woman by the name of Rachel, whose anguish over her unbearable situation is described in the most poignant terms. Taken together, the kinds of evidence presented in this volume make it clear that the realities of medieval and early modern Jewish women’s religious lives were far more complex than once realized. It also suggests that the study of the history of women in premodern Judaism is still in its infancy and that there is much more to be discovered.

### The Religious Lives of Ordinary People

In the recent past, historians of religion have given increased attention to the lives of ordinary people, a type of inquiry often referred to as “popular religion.” Such inquiry is especially significant in the study of Judaism in light of the fact that Jewish scholarship has historically focused on “normative” religious activities prescribed by elite authorities. Judaism tends to be viewed through the lenses of the texts written by rabbinic authorities and the intelligentsia, the systems of beliefs espoused by philosophers, mystics, and ethicists, and the expectations for religious practice prescribed in halakhic literature. Although there is, of course, a significant correlation between these and the experiences of ordinary individuals, the realities are more complex. Just as we have seen that women’s religious lives cannot be measured simply in terms of normative rabbinic expectations, the same is true with respect to the lives of ordinary people as a whole (which included most women). The actual religious experience of most people was informed by an endless and variegated array of folk customs, popular superstitions, and magical practices, sometimes sanctioned by rabbinic authorities, and sometimes discouraged or even repudiated by them.

We have already seen examples of such phenomena in connection with women’s rituals. Women’s practice of making special candles on certain occasions, of holding a Torah scroll while giving birth, and innumerable other customs associated with women’s life experiences attest to the great significance of rituals generated from among the folk themselves. But the lives of both men and women were equally shaped by such forces “on the ground,” as illustrated in a number

of the chapters in this book. In the chapter “Honey Cakes and Torah: A Jewish Boy Learns His Letters,” for example, we learn about a folk ritual practiced by medieval Ashkenazic Jews in connection with the initiation of very young boys into formal schooling. On the morning of the festival of Shavuot a young boy would be brought to a teacher and seated upon his lap, shown a tablet on which the letters of the Hebrew alphabet had been written, have the letters read to him, and eventually invited to lick off honey that had been smeared upon the writing on the tablet. He would similarly be given to eat various other foods upon which Hebrew letters and words had been written; this was intended to inaugurate the experience of Torah study as one of sweetness. Moreover, he would be asked to recite a magical incantation adjuring the “prince of forgetfulness” so that his learning would forever remain with him. As Ivan Marcus makes clear, these folk practices were influenced by the Christian environment, as Jews creatively adapted or responded to non-Jewish cultural phenomena, a process quite common in connection with popular rituals.

As the chapter in this volume entitled “The Book of the Great Name” suggests, the practice of magic in Judaism is well documented as far back as the Greco-Roman world. An interest in magic was widespread in the Middle Ages, as evidenced by the extensive number of Hebrew manuscripts and printed books devoted to this subject, along with huge numbers of amulets containing magical inscriptions. Jewish magic entailed such features as invoking the names of angels and demons, and employing various types of unusual, often esoteric, names of God in a formulaic, ritualistic manner. As the case with other religious traditions, magic among premodern Jews was typically used for purposes of satisfying some personal need on the part of a practitioner, such as acquiring esoteric knowledge, divining the future, healing illness, and most frequently, appeasing and warding off evil powers. Magic could be practiced by individuals equipped with complex and sophisticated specialized knowledge, as well as by the simplest individuals armed with little more than common, well-known formulaic incantations.

Another chapter in this volume that illustrates well the religion of the folk is “Jewish Exorcism: Early Modern Traditions and Transformations.” Here we learn about a range of ritual techniques designed to extirpate evil spirits from those believed to be demonically possessed. Such undesirable spirit possession is well documented in Judaism, although cases of ritual exorcism proliferated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially in communities influenced by Kabbalah. Even though rabbinic authorities sometimes regarded certain expressions of popular religion with wariness, rabbis themselves were hardly immune from the appeal of these practices. An excellent example of this is offered in “Leon Modena’s Autobiography,” where we find that this prominent seventeenth-century Venetian rabbi was fascinated with astrology, various forms of divination, and alchemy, as were many other members of the rabbinic elite in the medieval and early modern periods.

## Ethical Practice

Beginning with the Hebrew Bible itself, one of the central foundations of Judaism has been the practice of ethical behavior and proper interpersonal relations. The Torah is replete with ethical instruction: honoring one's parents; valuing human life; protection and compassion for the vulnerable in society: the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger; dealing justly and honestly in business and in judicial matters; not bearing a grudge; and loving one's neighbor as oneself. The sages of the rabbinic period took up all of these issues and more, concentrating great intellectual energy on the complex questions of virtuous human conduct. Their teachings on these matters are found scattered across the vast sea of rabbinic literature, the Talmuds, and midrashim.

For the most part, it was not until the medieval period that we see attempts to organize ethical theory and ethical practices in a systematic manner. A significant genre of ethical literature appeared beginning in the tenth century, often written by religious philosophers. This includes such classics as the last chapter of Saadia Gaon's *Book of Doctrines and Beliefs*, Moses Maimonides' *Eight Chapters*, Jonah Gerondi's *The Gates of Repentance*, and Bahya ibn Pakuda's *Duties of the Heart*. Beginning with the sixteenth century, kabbalists also produced influential ethical treatises based upon their own particular brand of esoteric metaphysics. Many of the most popular ethical works among Jewry in the late medieval and early modern periods derived from this synthesis of Kabbalah and ethics. Among the most important of these are Moses Cordovero's *Palm Tree of Deborah*, Elijah de Vidas's *The Beginning of Wisdom*, Eleazar Azikri's *Book of the Devout*, Isaiah Horowitz's *Two Tablets of the Covenant*, and Zvi Hirsch Kaidanover's *The Straight Path*.

A number of the chapters in *Judaism in Practice* exemplify medieval and early modern Jewish ethics, although the texts presented here were chosen precisely because they are not part of the above-mentioned classical literatures. In lieu of these better-known treatises, we have selected materials that are slightly off the beaten track. From the mystical community of sixteenth-century Safed we have a number of texts known as *hanhagot* (lit., customs or behaviors). These are in the form of lists that enumerate ritual and ethical practices in a concise manner, either by way of describing how kabbalists of Safed behaved or prescribing how they ought to behave. The two sets of *hanhagot* presented in "Pietistic Customs from Safed" were authored by Abraham Galante and Abraham Berukhim, and provide a valuable window onto the distinctive ethical and spiritual life of this community. The interpersonal aspirations of another kabbalistic community are presented in the chapter entitled "A Mystical Fellowship in Jerusalem." Here we find a "contract" agreed to by the members of a small, intentional kabbalistic fellowship of the seventeenth century that called itself *Ahavat Shalom* (The Love of Peace). Among other things, the participants in this brotherhood "agree to love one another with great love of soul and body," and agree that "each one of us

will think of his associate as if the latter were part of his very limbs.” The *tsaddiqim*, that is, the charismatic masters of the Hasidic movement in Eastern Europe, adapted the earlier kabbalistic habit of writing *hanhagot*, but they did so in a highly personal way by addressing their own disciples and encouraging them to cultivate a spiritual practice. This widespread Hasidic genre is illustrated in our volume by “Rabbi Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl: Personal Practices of a Hasidic Master.”

In “The Love of Learning among Polish Jews,” we are informed about the responsibility that the vast Polish Jewish community at large assumed for education of its younger male members, about the obligations of hospitality to strangers and the requirements of charity, as well as about the structure of the judicial system intended to ensure communal justice. The ethical practices of women, in particular, are illustrated to some extent in the texts describing the lives of two German-Jewish women, the twelfth-century Dolce of Worms, and the seventeenth-century Glikl of Hameln. With respect to Dolce, for example, we are told that “she adorned brides and brought them [to their wedding] in appropriate [garments],” and that she “bathed the dead and sewed their garments.”

### Art and Aesthetics

Finally, we turn our attention to an area of inquiry that has been neglected until recently, namely, the realm of the aesthetic in Jewish history and tradition. Despite the image of Jewish religious culture as more interested in matters of law and intellect than in the sensual and the beautiful, or in the natural world, the fact is that art and aesthetics have played a significant role in Judaism nearly from its beginnings. Artistic sensibilities were central to the building of the portable sanctuary (*mishkan*) in the wilderness by the ancient Israelites as described in the Torah, as well as in connection with the construction of a permanent Temple in Jerusalem, as artisans of all kinds were involved in the building and decoration of the first and second Temples. In the period following the destruction of the second Temple, we have numerous examples of exquisite mosaics on the floors of synagogues throughout the Mediterranean world, along with the famous pictorial murals that adorn the walls of an ancient synagogue at Dura-Europos in Syria. Ancient Israelites, as well as Jews during the Greco-Roman period, also cultivated rich musical traditions that became the basis for the musical cantillation chanted in the synagogue when Scripture is recited. And the literary artistry of so much of the Hebrew Bible, along with the highly imaginative qualities of rabbinic narrative (*midrashim*), represent a sophisticated literary sensibility. Each of these aesthetic impulses—architectural and decorative, pictorial, musical, and literary—found significant expression in medieval and early modern Jewish culture.

In his chapter “Defending, Enjoying, and Regulating the Visual,” Kalman Bland demonstrates that despite the biblical prohibition against idolatry and the graphic

representation of an incorporeal divinity, Jews were nevertheless artistic. As Bland writes: “If observant Jews are forbidden to worship idols, and they are, it does not follow that they are also forbidden to illuminate manuscripts, engrave burial markers, design jewelry, decorate synagogues with sculptured lions, weave tapestries picturing biblical heroes, hang portraits and paintings on the walls of their homes, or embellish marriage contracts with intricate designs and patterns. Premodern Jews performed all of these visually creative acts.”

“Illustrating History and Illuminating Identity in the Art of the Passover Haggadah” presents examples of the often beautiful hand-painted illuminations that accompanied Hebrew manuscripts. Here we see that the pictures which accompanied the text of the Haggadah—the book used at the *seder* meal on the festival of Passover—served as a “countertext and commentary” on the primary liturgical text of the Haggadah. The visual thus played a crucial role in the *seder* celebration. It is worth mentioning in this connection the attention paid to the design of ritual objects so that they might be as beautiful as possible: candlesticks and wine cups for use on Sabbaths and other festivals, *etrog* boxes (to contain the lemonlike fruit used on Sukkot), spice boxes used for *havdalah* (the ritual that accompanies the end of the Sabbath), and so on. This was in keeping with the rabbinic conception of beautifying the performance of a ritual act, in Hebrew, *hiddur mitsvah*.

The preaching of sermons in the synagogue, a practice rooted in late antiquity, provided the opportunity for rabbis to cultivate the rhetorical arts of inspiration, admonition, instruction, and persuasion. As the author of “Jewish Preaching in Fifteenth-Century Spain” suggests, fine preaching was not simply a matter of devising an intelligent, learned, or clever text, but was a performative art that involved “the appearance of the preacher, the sound of his voice, his gestures, the level of his animation, his pace and pitch, his emphases and silences. In the best preachers, the quality of the sermon was dependent not merely upon the power of an intellect, or the quality of writing, but on a highly sophisticated performance art.” This chapter includes the only two known examples of guidance in the art of Jewish preaching prior to the modern period, as well as a text that critically assesses the contemporary state of Jewish preaching in fifteenth-century Spain.

The centrality of textual learning in Jewish culture—well represented in this volume—transformed the book into an aesthetic object, above and beyond the illumination of manuscripts already mentioned. Not only were books, handwritten or printed, valued for their fine physical production but they were also to be treated with great care, attention, and even affection. In “The Arts of Calligraphy and Composition, and the Love of Books,” we see that fine calligraphy and skill at composition were prized, especially among Jews influenced by Islamic culture. And we learn that books were to be handled and cared for with the utmost respect as physical repositories of sacred tradition.

We hope that taken together, the multifaceted texts in this volume will provide a window onto the diverse worlds of medieval and premodern Jewish religious

experience. Although the texts presented here represent, of course, only a tiny fraction of what could have been included in this volume, we believe that they exemplify those diverse worlds in rich, interesting, and significant ways. In lieu of providing a single bibliography, we invite readers to follow the endless paths to study found in the suggestions for further reading included in each chapter.

### Notes

1. Menachem Elon, *Jewish Law-History, Sources, Principles* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994), vol. 3, p. 1,461.
2. Michael Corinaldi, *Jewish Identity: The Case of Ethiopian Jewry* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998), pp. 74–75.