

A CALL FOR PAPERS (WITH EXPLANATION) FOR OUR NEXT SPECIAL ISSUE: *WHY MEDIEVAL MATTERS*

In his 2010 publication, *Reassessing Jewish Life in Medieval Europe*,¹ Robert Chazan asserted that one of the “areas of Jewish achievement in medieval western Christendom” that “benefited Jewish life” during the transition to modernity was the medieval “experience as a beleaguered minority, inured to extensive pressure for abandonment of Jewish identity and equipped with the capacity to resist such pressures.”²

Chazan further asserted that the arguments in favor of adherence to Judaism that were thus developed during the medieval period “continued to move modern Jews” as well.³

¹ Robert Chazan, *Reassessing Jewish Life in Medieval Europe* (New York: Cambridge U.P., 2010).

² *Ibid.*, pp. 236-237. The other “areas of Jewish achievement” listed by Chazan were:

- demographic growth, which eventuated in the largest Jewish population in the world;
- transfer of the center of gravity in Jewish population from the Islamic sphere, which was in a process of decline, to the Christian sphere, which came to dominate the West;
- readiness for residential relocation, in the service of improvement of circumstances;
- attraction to urban centers;
- capacity for economic innovation and risk-taking;
- shift toward business and finance, which made literacy and numeracy key elements in economic success; [and]
- a well-developed communal structure that buttressed Jewish life on the corporate and individual levels.

³ Thus Chazan asserted (at pp. 246-247):

As was true for Jewish communal organization, maintenance of Jewish identity required major transition from the medieval period into modernity. Enlightenment thinking profoundly challenged the God-centered view of human affairs and placed humanity firmly at the center of all matters intellectual and

Do those medieval arguments and understandings, however, still 'work' today, in our *post-'modern'*⁴ environment? Is there anything in the medieval Jewish achievements that still matter today, and that can still be an inspiration going forward?

For our next special issue, accordingly, we would like to consider *whether*, and if so *how*, medieval Jewish thought, and/or lived experience, might provide resources for the challenges facing 'liberal' forms of Judaism today (*i.e.*, all forms that do not simply 'stop,' in effect, with the Shulchan Arukh and the Chatam Sofer), particularly

spiritual. Medieval Jews could ultimately reassure themselves that their God was the one true God and that their revelation was the one true revelation. These claims, however, resonated far less effectively among modern Jews.

Here, the medieval Jews already pointed the way to a more humanistic alternative. While they continued to believe the truth of their God and their revelation, the exigencies of the medieval Christian assault on Jewish identity and the role of rational considerations in that assault moved the Jews of medieval Christian Europe to advance rational counterarguments. They examined closely key Christian doctrines, such as Incarnation and the Trinity, and argued that these doctrines violated the canons of reason. They scrutinized the lavishness of Church architecture, the Church's valorization of physical images, and the role of saints in Christian religious praxis and argued for the intellectual and moral superiority of more austere Jewish ritual. For the Jews of medieval Latin Christendom, Judaism was obviously the simpler and more rational faith and indeed the more ethically grounded faith as well. As modern Jews faced the challenge of maintaining their identity as a minority community in a dynamic modern environment, these medieval arguments continued to move modern Jews, as they had moved their medieval predecessors.

See also at pp. 245 and 250–251. See also Robert Chazan, *The Jews of Medieval Western Christendom 1000–1500* (N.Y.: Cambridge U.P., 2006) at pp. 282–283.

⁴ Since Chazan refers to "modern Jews" in the *past* tense, we understand him to be characterizing contemporary Jews as post-modern. See Moshe Rosman, "The Post Modern Period in Jewish History," ch. 2 in his *How Jewish Is Jewish History?* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization; 2007).

in the United States, but also in Israel. In short—why medieval matters?

By ‘medieval,’ we start around 700 CE—recognizing, from recent studies of the ‘Rabbinic’ period, that general acceptance (*i.e.*, by the ‘masses’) of the halakhic lifestyle portrayed/imagined in the Babylonian Talmud did not occur until the Geonic/Genizah period.⁵

We end, for this purpose, the ‘medieval’ period at around the late 17th Century—viewing Shabbetai Zevi as the ‘last medieval,’ and Spinoza as the ‘first modern.’⁶

Also, while Chazan focused on ‘Western’ or ‘Latin’ Europe, we hope that our contributors will also give some consideration to the communities of Babylonia, Yemen, North Africa, Spain and ‘Eastern Europe,’ albeit within the foregoing time parameters. (*Cf.* Gotein’s note that ‘business law’ was a ‘live’ issue in Egypt during the Genizah period, in contrast to the situation in Ashkenaz—and so required a group of lay-persons with ‘practical Jewish’ learning to act as judges.⁷)

⁵ See, *e.g.*, Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins U.P., 2003) at pp. 157-159; and Talya Fishman, *Becoming the People of the Talmud* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). See also Chazan, *Reassessing, supra*, at pp. 77-78, noting the selection by Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson of a starting-point for the Jewish Middle Ages at 632 CE, with the early Moslem-Arab conquests. This is contrary to older definitions, which started the Jewish Middle Ages at 315 CE, “when Constantine the Great, under the influence of Christian religious totalitarianism, began to enact against the Jews disabling laws which ultimately reduced them to the status of second-class citizens.” Jacob R. Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World – A Source Book: 315-1791* (NY: Harper & Row, 1965) (originally published 1938, UAHC) at p. xiii.

⁶ On the transitional period from, say, 1550-1750, also known as the ‘early modern’ period in Jewish history, see David B. Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2010); *cf.* Dean Phillip Bell, *Jews in the Early Modern World* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), and Ruderman’s critical comments thereon, in *Early Modern Jewry* at pp. 280-281, fn. 7.

See also, *e.g.*, Yaacob Dweck, *Dissident Rabbi: The Life of Jacob Sasportas* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2019).

⁷ S. D. Gotein, *A Mediterranean Society: An Abridgment in One Volume* (Jacob Lassner [ed.]) at p. 273; see also Mark R. Cohen, *Maimonides and the Merchants: Jewish Law and Society in the Medieval Islamic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

Examples of recent arguments in regard to ‘why medieval matters’ that we (the editors) found interesting, and hope will be pursued, include: (a) Robert Harris’s discussions of the values implicit in the *peshat* commentaries of Rashi’s students;⁸ (b) David Biale’s suggestion that modern ‘Jewish secular’ thought should be understood as characteristically Jewish, insofar as it engages dialectically, and productively, with medieval Jewish thought,⁹ and (c) Heidi Ravven’s contention that a return to the holistic approach of Greek philosophy, as preserved by Maimonides, is a necessary antidote to Augustine’s break with Greek tradition, as followed by Kant and others—whereby Augustine focused instead on the ‘will’ of the ‘individual.’¹⁰

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William Faulkner famously asserted: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”¹¹ For many of us, however, the medieval world is indeed, “past,” and of seemingly no relevance to the challenges facing thoughtful Jews trying to lead meaningfully Jewish lives in today’s context. Perhaps indeed ‘medieval Jewish studies’ is just a form of antiquarianism—surely as worthy an object of study as any other historical episode, but of no practical ‘relevance,’ except for filling-up space on the time-line of Jewish development. The editors of this journal remain uncertain as to the answer, notwithstanding Chazan’s confidence, as quoted above. We look forward, accordingly, to learning from our (anticipated) contributors, and to sharing that learning with our readers.

⁸ See, e.g., Robert A. Harris, “Concepts of Scripture in the School of Rashi,” ch. 7, in Benjamin D. Sommer (ed.), *Jewish Concepts of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction* (NY: NYU Press, 2012).

⁹ David Biale, *Not In The Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2011).

¹⁰ See Heidi M. Ravven, “The Future of Jewish Philosophy in the Academy,” ch. 15, in Hava Tirosh-Samuels and Aaron W. Hughes (eds.), *The Future of Jewish Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

¹¹ William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (1951), Act. 1, Scene 3.

GENERAL SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Content

Zeramim welcomes the submission of essays in any subject of applied Jewish studies – articles analyzing subjects of Jewish inquiry that offer a unique lens on any aspect of Jewish life or thought that affects the present and/or future of how Jewish culture, religion, and/or people operate in the modern world.

Style

Submissions should be intellectually informed by and informative of current understandings in Jewish academia, referencing recent studies. Any terminology or abbreviations likely to be unfamiliar to non-specialists should be succinctly clarified in the article itself. Submissions should be accessible to a lay readership and helpful to professional academics and/or Jewish professionals; an ideal submission should be able to bring a nuanced exploration of a subject to a diversity of readers.

Format

English texts in English should be typed in the font Book Antiqua – with Hebrew in the font Shofar. (Fonts for other languages should be recognizable and legible.) The main text of submissions should be in size 10, and footnotes should be in size 9.5.

Gendered Terminology

Gendered pronouns for entities that might be either without gender (*e.g.*, “God Himself”) or not necessarily restricted to one gender (*e.g.*, “a scholar should doubt himself”) should only be used if the author intends to convey a point about gender by identifying a gender in such situations. Likewise, gender-neutral nouns (*e.g.*, “humanity”) are encouraged instead of gender-exclusive nouns (*e.g.*, “mankind”) unless a point about gender is intended to be conveyed by using gender-exclusive terminology.

Zeramim encourages gender-neutral language (e.g., “God’s self”) and gender-inclusive language (e.g., “a scholar should doubt himself or herself”); we ask our authors to be sensitive to the assumptions involved in such usages and how our readers will perceive those assumptions.

Length

Submissions may be no longer than 10,000 words.

Citation

All articles should include their notes in the form of footnotes (*i.e.*, not endnotes). *Zeramim* does not publish appendices of cited sources. Authors may base their style of citation in any recognized methodology of citation (MLA, Chicago, Manual of Style, *etc.*) so long as the (not comprehensive) guidelines below are met:

- All citations of published works should include the full names of the referenced works along with the works’ authors and dates of publication.
- **BOOKS:** Citations from books should include the names of the books’ publishers.
- **ANTHOLOGIES:** Citations of works from anthologies should indicate the names of the anthologies’ editors.
- **JOURNALS:** Citations from journals should include the journals’ volume and issue numbers.
- **WEB:** Web citations should include a URL and date of access.

Languages

Submissions should be in English but may integrate terms and passages from non-English languages as long as the foreign language text is translated into English. Key characters, terms or phrases in languages written with characters other than those of the Latin alphabet (e.g., Hebrew, Greek, Arabic, *etc.*) should appear in transliteration (and—if able to assist a reader—their

native spellings). Authors may follow any system of transliteration (e.g., SBL, Library of Congress, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, etc.) but should be consistent within a single submission.

Biography

Every submission should include a 2-5-sentence biography of any and all of its authors.

Submitting

All submissions must be sent to submissions@zeramim.org as .docx files, and all appendices to articles must be part of the same document submitted for consideration.

SPECIAL GUIDELINES FOR SUBMISSIONS TO *MIDRASH ZERAMIM*

Midrash Zeramim is a designated venue for publication of creative works that make use of artistic forms to illuminate ideas relevant to thoughtful Jewish lives—whether in the form of visual arts, creative writing or music.

Submissions for *Midrash Zeramim*, though artistic in nature, should include an introductory statement that addresses the point that the submission seeks to make and refers the reader/listener/observer to relevant sources that inspired the contribution and may provide further thought.

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