



החברה לחקר יהדות ספרד ופזורתה | סוסיאלד די אסטודיאוס ספראדים
Sociedad de estudios sefaradis | Society for Sephardic Studies



מרכז משה דוד גאון
לתרבות הלאדינו
Sentro
Moshe David Gaon
de Cultura
Djudeo-Espanyola



THE JEWISH COMMUNITY
FOUNDATION OF IZMIR



Center Elyachar J.
for Studies in
Sepharadi Heritage

The Eleventh Annual Conference of the Society for Sephardic Studies,

organized in cooperation with the Moshe David Gaon Center for Ladino Culture

of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev,

the Izmir Jewish Heritage Project &

the Jewish Community Foundation of Izmir,

the Center for Sabbatean Sephardic Culture,

and the J. Elyachar Center for Studies in Sepharadi Heritage

Scheduled for October 9-13, 2023 in Izmir,

the Conference will focus on

Sephardic Jews, between Messianism and Modernity

Until the modern era, the overwhelming majority of Jews were born and spent a lifetime in their Diasporic homelands. Quite often, a Jewish family resided in the same area or city for multiple generations. Be that as it may, Rabbinic Jews the worldover neither saw themselves as "locals" nor were they perceived as such by their neighbors. Despite the ancient Jewish presence in towns like Smyrna and Sardis, as well as the unrelenting flow of individual converts to the Mosaic faith, Jews traditionally defined themselves as a community of exiles awaiting the Redemption that will deliver them back to their ancestral land. At the heart of this shared yearning stood the belief in a divinely-appointed leader, *ha-mašiyah* (the anointed one), who would restore the nation of Israel to its former glory.



אוניברסיטת בן-גוריון בנגב
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

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Medieval Spain's Final Solution to the "Jewish question" culminated in 1492 with the Expulsion of those remaining Jews whose antecedents had not been forcibly converted a century earlier (1391) and who rejected the offer to remain in the kingdom as a *quid pro quo* for disavowing their traditional identity. Shaking the entire Jewish world to the core, this turn of events enflamed messianic hopes to unprecedented heights. For centuries, Sephardic Jewry had been the body, soul, and mind of the Jewish Commonwealth. Tangibly-speaking, the world's preeminent Jewish community had long resided on the Iberian Peninsula. From a spiritual-cum-intellectual vantage point, this collective spearheaded the codification of Jewish law and sparked a renaissance of Hebrew language and linguistics, literature, philosophy, mysticism, and more. If the cardinal question of Jewish theology between the latter half of the twentieth and early twenty-first century has been "Where was God in the Holocaust?" its theo-philosophical counterpart during the sixteenth century was "Is He still with us?"

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The tribulations inflicted upon the *Conversos* and the *Megorašim* (expelled) by both waves of mass conversion rendered the timing of the messiah's coming an acute and urgent issue. Whereas the *Megorašim*'s hardship was confined to a fixed period that, for all intents and purposes, ended with the Expulsion and the founding of "Virtual Sepharad" around the Mediterranean basin (mostly within the benevolent Ottoman state and Muslim North Africa, but to certain extent in Catholic Europe as well), the suffering of the *Conversos* at the hands of the Inquisition was a transgenerational trauma. This oppression triggered the establishment of ex-*Converso* communities in Protestant realms, above all Holland and its colonies (where Roman Catholic baptisms in general, and even more so those performed under duress, were not perceived as

binding). Within these domains, Jews could openly return to their ancestral faith. Correspondingly, the hitherto Mediterranean-centric Virtual Sepharad spread its wings across the Atlantic.

A panoply of different answers were given by sixteenth-century Jews to the aforementioned, pivotal question – "Is God still with us?" Some advocated political solutions to the Expulsions, like ratcheting up the Jewish presence in the Land of Israel or uniting world Jewry under a single jurisdiction by reinstating the *Sanhedrin* (the supreme Mosaic tribunal). Conversely, other Jews turned to metaphysical approaches, not least the formation of various mystical schools of thought and practices. In parallel, a handful of Jewish figures claimed—be it publicly or to a select few—that they were either the suffering messiah (*mašiyah ben Yossef*) or the messianic king (*mašiyah ben Dawid*). Towering above the other contenders was the Izmir-born and bred Šabbetai Ševi. At the pinnacle of his sway, Šabbetai was recognized by a vast majority of the Jewish world as their unanointed king. The primary topics of the 2023 Conference—messianism amongst Sephardim and their different outlooks on modernity—are somehow manifested in this controversial figure.

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Until his conversion to Islam, Šabbetai Ševi was indeed the most widely accepted Jewish messiah over the past millennium. Paradoxical as it might be, his enterprise was apparently the main impetus behind the Jews' lurch towards modernity. In the centuries leading up to the Sabbatian revolution, Rabbinic Judaism was typically conceived of and practiced—at least on a declarative level—as a “package deal” (with ex-Convertos occasional breaking this idyll). Even its most radical reformers generally preferred to play the “reinterpretation card,” rather than clamoring for the system's reform. By means of pseudepigrapha and similar tools, a host of far-reaching changes were introduced into Judaism under the guise of revelation or a return to ancient practices. Some scholars even argue that Ševi was the denomination's first radical interpreter to openly treated its entire edifice as a componential structure amenable to deconstruction by a messianic sovereign. As such, Judaism's constituent parts can be reassembled for the sake of hastening

the messianic revolution. Notwithstanding the ritual curses directed at “false messiah from Izmir” and his disciples, the argument can be made that every Jewish ideology and movement to emerge in his wake has adopted and pursued this “componential strategy” of deconstructing and reconstructing traditional Rabbinic Judaism, occasionally consciously claiming Man's sovereignty (as in the case of the Enlightenment, Reform Judaism, the Orthodox Rabbinate and the Zionist movement), now and then without any evident awareness of such autonomy (Ultraorthodox streams), sometimes avoiding any unambiguous stand on the question whether authority lies with God or the community (the Conservative movement).

However, Izmir's significant role in Sephardic history goes beyond the impact of this city, its Jewish community, and its Jews on the

Sabbatian awakening. For example, when highly-secularized European Jews took it upon themselves to instill modern Western ideas, values, and practices among their Eastern brethren, their educational enterprises like *Alliance Israelite Universelle* were met with heavy suspicion and antagonism by the Oriental rabbinic elite; not only because these initiatives were designed to replace the traditional leadership with secular, Westernized elements - but also because they sought to undermine the traditional Jewish way of life. Izmir was an interesting exception to this rule. As Dina Danon posits in her meticulous history on the Jews of Izmir, “From its earliest days . . . in the 1870s, *Alliance* administrators found in the local [Izmir] rabbinate an unflagging ally. . . As Gabriel Arié [a Sephardic reformer] noted, while the *Alliance* had encountered obstacles in its dealings with rabbis in many other communities, *it will be an eternal honor for the Community of Izmir to have had at its head an enlightened and dignified leader such as his Eminence the Chief Rabbi Abraham Palacci, who encouraged with all of his strength the new establishment [the Alliance], served as an example for all of the rabbis and councils that have run the community up until this day, and in whom we have always found the most sincere and devoted support.*”

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The research on the Ottoman Ladino-speaking community's embrace of modernity is still at its nascent stages, but even so the level of the openness of Izmir Jewry's traditional rabbinic authorities' to the new *zeitgeist* seems to be unprecedented even in the Sephardic context. The response of the Izmir's Jewry to the founding of the State of Israel is no less astonishing. If Salonica was the center of Ottoman Jewish learning and Istanbul was the heart of Ottoman Jewish court culture (e.g., *Komplas de Yosef aSadik*), then Izmir can be viewed as the sultanate's hub of Jewish experimentalism. In light of the above, this storied city is the ideal venue for our 11th Conference.

The Society looks forward to bringing together researchers of Sephardic social, cultural, and art history, languages, and literature from before and after the Expulsion of 1492. More specifically, we are encouraging papers on Mosaic, Christian, and Muslim attitudes toward Jewish messianism as reflected in

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the scholars' particular areas of interest. In addition, the Conference will focus on the overlooked Sephardic embrace of modernity and Virtual Sepharad's gradual yet unwavering secularization, whether in the expanse's south—the ex-Ottoman realms—or its northern extremities – Holland, England, and the Americas. While the Academic and Steering Committees hope to draw researchers from many and manifold disciplines (e.g., anthropology, folklore, literature, art, history, geography, and museology) covering a broad gamut of periods and regions, we are especially leaning towards papers on the following subjects:

Messianism

- The roots and branches of Iberian Jewry's messianic traditions prior to the Expulsions with respect to Jewish thought as well as poetry and folktales (e.g., the oeuvre of Shemuel haNagid).
- The Expulsions and secondary exile of certain Diasporas *qua* a laboratory for messianic ideas and movements spurred on by homilies, song, the printing press, and other new forms of communication.
- Hope embedded in small units – messianism ingrained within liturgy, ceremony, folklore, and material culture.

Dialogue with Neighboring Ottoman Cultures

- Common Ottoman culture and particular ethno-confessional identities.
- The urban class, for all the similarities and differences of its various sub-groups.
- The Ottoman context of the Sabbatian movement.
- Feminist aspects of Šabbetay Ševi's revolution.
- Ottoman Christian and Muslim perceptions of their Jewish neighbors' identity.
- The responses of other (heretofore) Ottoman ethno-confessional groups to the challenges of secularism and modernity.
- Ottoman Jewish material culture.
- Ottoman perspectives on Zionism.
- Ottoman Musical culture(s).

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The City of Izmir

- The Ottoman notion of city.
- The Sephardic network of Ottoman cities.
- Social and intellectual history of Izmir and its Jewish community.
- Reflections and images of the city in imagination, art and literature, to include travel writing.

Projecting from the case study of Izmir onto Sephardic Society in General

- *Converso* thinkers' contribution to the idea of "separation between church and state."
- Pan-Sephardic reactions to modernity.
- The secularization of Virtual Sepharad.

Key Dates for Participation in the 11th Conference

For the sake of planning the Conference's excursion to Ephesus and/or Sardis, let us know if you plan on delivering a paper by no later than **November 1, 2022**.

Abstracts must be submitted prior to **December 31, 2022**. For all communications regarding the 11th Conference, please use the following address: gaon@bgu.ac.il.

Every submission will be reviewed by the Society's Steering Committee and the Academic Committee of the 11th Conference.

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Steering Committee

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