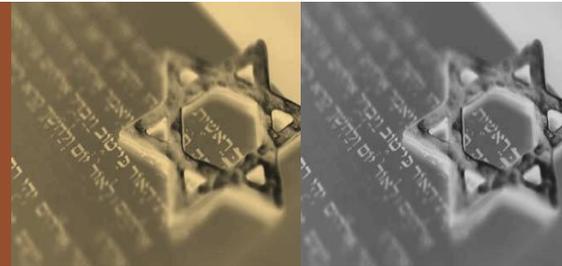


# CHAPTER SIX

## SO WHAT DID THE WHOLE THING LOOK LIKE? THE STRUCTURE AND INSTITUTIONS OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY



### INTRODUCTION

In the last chapter we examined the reasons for the centrality of the Jewish community and the values that underlay the lives of the Jewish people in Diaspora as seen by the Rabbis. We also examined what ordinary Jews would tend to need from a traditional pre-modern community. In this chapter we will examine how the Jewish community was structured and how the values and beliefs that lay behind the whole Rabbinic system produced an institutional structure that reflected them. We will examine the institutions of the community and we will acquaint ourselves with the main types of personality that could be found in such communities. We will then go on to examine the way that individual communities fitted into a wider structure within a given centre and finally we will look at the issue of relations between different centres.

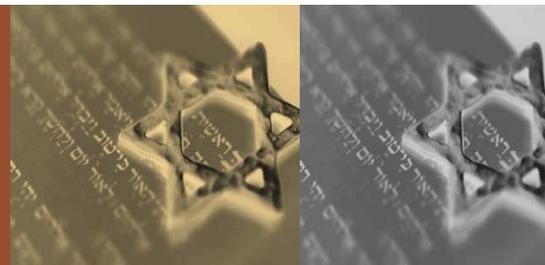
As the sages of Babylon (the first great Diaspora Rabbinic centre) worked to elevate the Rabbinic value system and to construct a way of life based on those values that they saw as central (Torah study, practical halacha in all spheres of life, concern for those in need), they developed a model of community. It seems safe to say that the model developed both consciously, because they saw community as a value in itself, and as a by-product of the other values and ideas that they were developing.

For example, as their whole idea of kashrut developed and became increasingly complex, it became clear that the majority of Jews would need an expert slaughterer to ensure the kashrut of the animals to be killed: this necessitated people having access to a "professional" slaughterer, a shochet, rather than everybody being responsible for their own kashrut. Another example comes from the development of the prayer system, a major concern of the sages as they worked to replace sacrifice, the previously central component of God-worship at the time of the Temple, with organized prayer. As we saw in the last chapter, the concept of communal prayer in the framework of a minyan for Shabbat and festivals and certain regular needs (mourners' prayers etc.) necessitated a collective of Jews. Through developing these concepts and ideas, the rabbis and sages strengthened the necessity for community.

But more than the indirect development of community through the development of a system that worked only if Jews were clustered in groups, which made it difficult to be an isolated Jew, the sages also had a direct concept of community. They saw it as essential for Jews to live in communities, especially since the majority of Jews were now living in Diaspora in communities that might have some autonomy and control of their own lives but were utterly lacking in sovereignty.



## COMMUNITY THE RABBINIC VIEW



It is time now to turn to the institutions that lie at the heart of Jewish community life. The Babylonian sages worked to develop a sense of Jewish life that depended on the centrality of a number of institutions. In true Rabbinic fashion, they never present a coherent philosophy of community. We are left to understand their ideas through a series of statements that are scattered over the immense sea of Rabbinic literature. The central literary and ideological production of the scholars of Babylon was the Babylonian Talmud whose acquaintance we made in the yeshivot of Babylon in chapter three. This was based as we have seen on the Mishnah of R. Yehuda HaNasi, and was organized according to the same categories as the Mishnah. It represents a monumental commentary and extension to the Mishnah as the discussion of the Mishnah becomes the basis for wide ranging discussions which involve a number of different genres, some legal and others, narrative, philosophical or poetic/literary.

We now bring one of the most central statements from the Babylonian Talmud on the question of Jewish community. It is an excellent introduction to the Rabbinic concept of community, and examining it will enable us to understand the future development of Jewish communities all over the world. The future of the Jewish people for at least fifteen hundred years would develop under the aegis of Rabbinic Judaism and the rabbi's agenda.

*A Talmid Chacham (a scholar) is not permitted to live in a city that does not have the following ten attributes:*

- [a] A court empowered to punish the guilty*
- [b] A communal tzedakah fund, monies for which are collected by two people and distributed by three*
- [c] A synagogue*
- [d] Sufficient bathroom facilities*
- [e] Toilet facilities*
- [f] A doctor*
- [g] A blood letter [i.e. a popular healer]*
- [h] A scribe*
- [i] A butcher*
- [j] A Torah teacher for children.*

*Talmud Babli: Massechet Sanhedrin 17b*

Let us use this Talmudic statement to examine the Rabbinic concept of community and to take a tour through the sort of community that they saw as necessary for the Jewish people.



It will be noticed that the subject of the statement is the scholar, the talmid chacham. It will also be noticed that there is no mention of a Rabbi. The reason is clear. The rise of the Rabbi as a paid community functionary comes comparatively late in the Jewish story, not predating the Middle Ages. At the centre of the traditional Jewish community was a class of scholars whose main purpose in Jewish communal terms was the interpretation and expounding of Torah and the written law. They would also teach and make judgements in cases of dispute, but their livelihood came from their craft, trade or profession. They were a necessary component of community but not an official part of it.

The assumption of the Talmudic text is that there will be a group of scholars in the locality as an unofficial leadership. From around the fourteenth century, we start to get a paid "professional" rabbinate emerging, as communities feel the need for a full time official. It can be suggested that if this Talmudic text had come from a source from the fifteenth century onwards, it might be led off by a reference to a rabbi. Increasingly, from then on, the Rabbi of a community had a recognized authority and becomes a key figure in community leadership.

"Rabbis" have different titles in different places. In the west the word Rabbi was used, as opposed to Babylon and its satellites where Rav was more commonly used. In the lands of the east, we find a variety of titles including Haham and Marbitz Torah. Whether in their professional or voluntary unpaid capacity, they were a "must" for every Jewish community. According to Rabbinic ideology, this was the most important group in the community and a viable community life without representatives of this "class", was unthinkable.

We must mention another category of leader that the text takes for granted. Even after the rise of a professional rabbinate, each community would have some kind of non-Rabbinic leadership often known as the 'parnassim' of the community. These were in charge of the general supervision of the community. They can be called a 'lay-leadership'. They were not, on the whole, paid for their services and they were usually drawn from the wealthier members of the community. The precise way in which they acted varied from place to place, but all over the Jewish world, a function like this existed.

Let us now turn to the ten categories of institution and official who compose the "ideal" community in the Talmudic excerpt. We will take them in turn.

### ***A.* A court empowered to punish the guilty**

A court would be essential for a community that ruled itself by its own system of law, the halacha. The autonomy of the Jewish community expressed itself largely in the right to use Jewish law and halacha as the guidelines and the underpinning for the way of life of the entire community. The enforcement of the way of life was the province of the Jewish court, the Bet Din, with an official or unofficial group of judges, dayyanim, drawn principally from the scholarly class. Disputes would be brought to the Bet Din and every attempt would be made to keep such disputes



away from the outside courts of the land, to which Jews almost always had access if they desired. The outside authorities gave legal backing to the Jewish courts, allowing them not only to function but also to punish offenders. Many Jewish communities had some kind of a jail or prison for offenders. The placing of the court at the top of the list reflects the central idea of Jewish community. The nation has its own legal system. Inside the Jewish community, it is the basis of the way of life.

### **ב. A communal tzedakah fund, monies for which are collected by two people and distributed by three**

Tzedakah - the duty to try and create a better world by helping those who are not so fortunate and who need support - is one of the major values of Rabbinic Judaism. It is clear that it would be expected to express itself inside the Jewish community. At different times and in different places, the specific application of the principle of tzedakah would express itself differently, but all Jewish communities would be expected to put great emphasis on it and to find ways of expressing the value in institutionalized terms. Sometimes the tzedakah would be partly directed outside the community itself – as in the need to ransom captives - but most money would be directed inwards to help the poor and indigent, to provide dowries for poor or orphaned brides, to look after orphans, to provide a soup kitchen for the beggars or a shelter for passers-by and many other pressing needs. Even at times of terrible poverty which afflicted whole communities and areas, the idea of mutual aid was never lost. The expectation of individuals would be that they would help those in need, either by monetary contributions, or by providing other services (visiting the sick, helping to care for bodies before burial or other examples of what is called gemilut chasadim).

### **ג. A synagogue**

The synagogue originated well before the end of the second Temple period. There are those who place its origins in the Babylonian exile. Others see it as a product of the Second Temple period. However, whenever it actually started, what is clear is that before the destruction of the second Temple, it had a subordinate role to the Temple. It was probably principally a place where the Torah was read and taught, but its emergence as a ritual centre - **the** ritual centre – in Judaism is reserved for the period after the destruction. It was then that slowly but surely it came into its own, filling a vacuum caused by the destruction of the central place where Jews had become accustomed to making a direct connection to God and offering their sacrifices, so necessary in a system which emphasized the sacrifice, for example, as the major way of atoning for sin.

After the destruction, no community could afford to be without a synagogue of some kind or another, which acted as a focal point for community activities and the main communal ritual centre in the community. The centuries following the destruction saw the development of a full synagogue ritual taking place including the construction of prayer services and the transfer of certain functions that had previously marked the Temple service to the synagogue. Together with the



synagogue itself we see the development of a related institution, the Bet Midrash or study house. This would often take place in part of the synagogue building itself and expressed the Rabbinic commitment to Torah study as a major value.

- D. Sufficient bathing facilities**
- E. Toilet facilities**
- F. A doctor**
- G. A blood letter [i.e. a popular healer]**

The next four things we take together, as they bring us into a very different realm of communal life. Jews have always been particularly sensitive to the demands of hygiene and medicine. Taking care of the needs of the body has been considered a religious duty. In a society in which the human body was seen as containing the image of God, it was natural that great care would be taken to guard against things which would weaken such a treasure. The religious duty to maintain hygiene goes together with the added religious duty to maintain spiritual purity. Water was seen as necessary for purification but it was also seen as essential for personal hygiene and Jewish society throughout much of history was much more conscious of the need for personal hygiene than the societies in which Jews lived.

Many communities, both in the west and the east, would have some kind of a communal bathhouse, invariably attached to the mikveh but separate from it. The mikveh does not appear on the list from Sanhedrin (it has been suggested because it would be impossible for a Jew, even one living in isolation, to manage without some place which functioned as a Mikveh, which is not the case for the other things mentioned here), but it too, would be an essential part of any community.

The importance of ritual cleanliness which originates in the Torah, was clearly important to most classes of the population in the late second Temple period. In the post destruction era, many of the laws of impurity fell into irrelevance because they had been connected with sacrifice and thus no longer were needed. However, ritual bathing retained great importance in the eyes of the population throughout the Jewish world. Certain functions still necessitated the use of a mikveh. Women after menstruation needed to purify themselves before resuming sexual relations. Proselytes needed purification as part of the conversion ceremonies and brides before marriage needed to go to the mikveh. In addition, it was customary in many communities to use the mikveh (especially among men) on the eve of Shabbat and festivals. For all these reasons a mikveh was an essential institution in any community. It was often built into the synagogue, emphasizing the ritual importance of the mikveh as an institution, but in some communities it would be part of a different self contained building which would include the bathhouse.

The first healers in the Bible were the priests who were seen as the agents through whom God healed the sick. Subsequently, the practice of medicine was seen as one



of the most honoured of all professions and the Rabbi-doctor was a common figure in Jewish society. Perhaps the most famous scholar in the middle ages was Maimonides, the Rambam, who practiced as a doctor in Egypt and wrote many medical treatises in addition to his halachic and philosophical works.

Jews wrote widely about medicine and were a major agent in transmitting the advanced medical knowledge of the Arab world to Europe in the middle ages. In a world in which many professions were not open to Jews, medicine was one of the only professions of status which Jews could practice freely. Jewish doctors were almost always highly respected by the societies where Jews lived.

An important aide to the doctor was the healer and blood-letter. The pre-modern medical world believed that bloodletting was an important medical practice allowing fresh blood to circulate and old or diseased blood to leave the body. The Jews agreed with this practice and indulged in it on a regular basis, although both the Talmud and many medical authorities such as Rambam himself, advised that it should be performed in moderation.

## **H.** A scribe

A scribe was an essential functionary for a Jewish community. Any society that runs according to the rule of law and bases itself on the written records of the court system, is going to need a scribe. Writs of divorce (the get) also necessitated a scribe. In addition a scribe might be needed in the preparation of economic documents and legal certificates important for the community's relations with outside society. These all called for great expertise since, being seen as religious documents, they had to be written in a very precise way. Thus, even in a generally educated society where the expectation was that men, especially, were generally literate, there was always a need for the professional scribe. The word used here – levler – should not be confused with another important functionary of the Jewish community, the sofer stam – who wrote the texts of Torah scrolls, tefillin and mezuzot. The Jews were always a people who respected the written word and saw many texts originating with God. Torah scrolls, tefillin and mezuzot were all seen as absolute pre-requisites for Jewish life and there had to be someone on hand who could both supply these objects and examine them and repair them in cases of suspected damage.

## **[i] A butcher**

A butcher was essential for any Jewish community. The word used here – tabach – refers to the joint profession of slaughterer and seller of meat. The laws of shechita as expounded in the Torah became much more stringent and detailed in the hands of the Rabbis. Whereas originally it was felt that any adult was capable of performing shechita according to the demands of the ritual, with time it became a much more professional calling and in many parts of the Jewish world in the Middle Ages, certificates were issued to certain individuals to act as licensed slaughterers for the community as a whole. The strict provisions of Kashrut necessitated a professional



capable of understanding and maintaining the strict demands of shchita, slaughtering according to the detailed ritual demands of the halacha.

### [j] A Torah teacher for children.

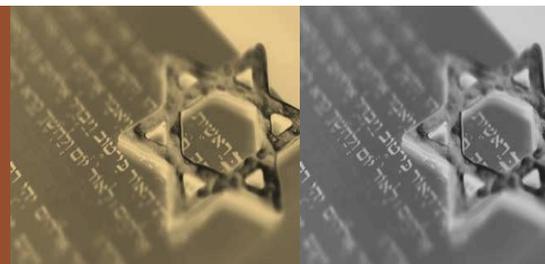
Education was a major value of Rabbinic society. The Torah had placed emphasis on this aspect of life, but Rabbinic society placed the value of education at the top of its agenda. Perhaps the major value of Rabbinic society was expertise in the holy texts and this necessitated an education, at least for the males in society who were seen as the agents of halachic knowledge in Jewish society. Formal education of boys in particular into the world of Judaism was a major need of society. According to the Torah, the primary responsibility for education children fell on the father and was expected to be done within the framework of the family. However, in reality, most male children received a formal education within their community as well as whatever education they received at home.

Girls in most places were expected to learn their religious and social requirements from their mothers although we have details of a number of educational institutions for girls in different communities in the pre modern age.

In many places the community was expected to concern itself with the provision of teachers for those young children who needed an education, and in addition, in most communities, private individuals would earn a living through teaching children. The question of higher education, however, for those children who had passed through the elementary system, varied from community to community. There were some larger communities which established institutions of learning (along the lines provided by the model of the great Yeshivot that developed in Babylon in places like Sura and Pumbedita). But others had no such institutions and many students would have to travel to other larger communities in order to receive advanced instruction. However, the value of Torah study was so central and universal within Rabbinic society that it was inconceivable to think of a Jewish community which would not attempt to provide a basic education for its members. Thus the demand within a community would not necessarily be for an organized higher education, but rather for teachers (either public or private) who could start the whole education process off with a basic programme of instruction for children.



## DID THE COMMUNITY ANSWER THE NEEDS OF THE PEOPLE?



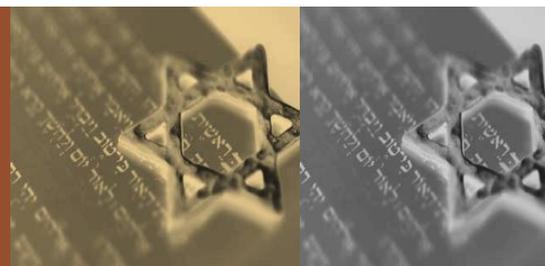
We have come to the end of our tour round the traditional Jewish community in the pre-modern age. The piece from Massechet Sanhedrin has provided us with a perfect entry point into the institutions of Jewish society within the traditional community. We have seen clearly how the institutions and major functionaries of the community reflect the clear value system that defined Rabbinic society. This system, emphasizing values of Halacha, ritual, education, tzedakah, health and welfare would remain the basis of Jewish society right through until the beginning of modernity. At that point, when the confrontation with modernity occurred, in different communities at different times, the community would undergo considerable transformation as we shall see in the next chapter. Until that point, however, the contours of community would adhere to the Rabbinic agenda. It was within such a community, with its variety of institutions, that the needs of the Jews would have to be met.

In the last chapter we looked at the needs of the Jews. Here we have looked at the institutions that were meant to answer those needs. Would the two be a perfect fit for each other? Usually not. There are plenty of examples of tensions known between the leadership and different groups within the membership of the community in diverse periods and places. But they were close enough to allow the community to continue to exist for thousands of years in a basically similar form. If the distance between what the people needed from community and what the community was supplying them was too great, presumably there would have been enormous tensions which would ultimately have overthrown the community, replacing it with something more worthy from the people's point of view.

A strong institutional and value system within the community would provide the basis for a distinct Jewish life, differentiated from the life lived by non-Jews in the same localities. Powerful communal norms would help to reinforce these values throughout the community. There were plenty of sanctions and punishments available for individuals who rebelled against communal norms and thus such rebellion was rare. Those who did not want to accept communal norms invariably left the community altogether and converted to another religion. The Jewish community became the framework for living a clear and recognizable Jewish life. That variations might develop in different parts of the Jewish world was natural. However, the basis remained the same throughout the Jewish world until modern times.



## HOW IT WORKED AN EXAMPLE FROM LIFE



Let us see a real picture of a Jewish community at work in a particular area. The example we choose is the Polish community of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Natan Neta Hanover was Polish Jew who, in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century, after a series of tragic events had ravaged the Jewish community, wrote a book in which, among other things, he portrayed the Polish community as it had been before the tragedy. His picture is undoubtedly idealized and sentimentalized. Nevertheless, it gives some insight into the community life in Poland at its height.

In this piece, he talks of Tzedaka in the communities of Poland.

*And now I shall begin to describe the organization of Polish Jewish life which was entirely of a righteous, upright, proper, and enduring character. It is said in Pirkei Avot: Simon the Just...used to say: "Upon three things the world is based; upon the Torah, upon the religious service, and upon the practice of charity:" [At the end of chapter one of Avot it is written;] Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel used to say: "By three things is the world preserved; by justice, by truth, and by peace." All these six pillars upon which the world stands were found in the land of Poland...*

*There was no limit to the practice of charity in the land of Poland. First, as to the sheltering of strangers. If a scholar or a preacher, a guest, should happen to come even to a community where they issue meal and lodging tickets for strangers, he would not have to degrade himself by accepting a ticket but could go to some officer of the community and stay wherever he liked. [The ticket system did away with the humiliation of begging. But a scholar did not even need tickets.] Then the shamash of the community would come and get his credentials and show them to the treasurer or to the executive officer in charge of the community that month. They then would give him a gift - whatever they thought proper - and would respectfully send it to him through the shamash, and he would then lodge with some citizen as long as he wished.*

*With other wayfarers who received tickets it was like this: they would be given a note and could lodge with a householder whose turn it now was – for as many days as they wished. At the very least, every order was good for three days. They would give them eat and drink, evening, morning, and afternoon, and when they were about to continue on their way they would provide them with food for the journey and send them on from town to town by horse and wagon.*



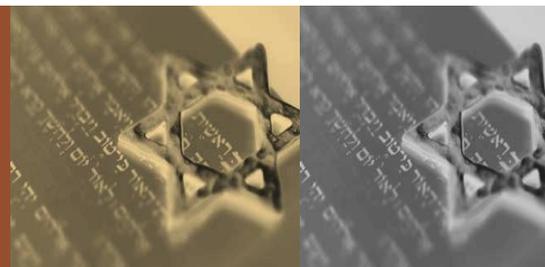
*If young students or lads or householders or girls came from other towns or distant lands, they would at once clothe them. He who wanted to learn a trade would be turned over to a master-workman... If a person wanted to study, they would hire a teacher to instruct him...Who, if not the rabbinical students, are to be regarded as royalty?*

*There were, likewise, some very fine laws providing for the poor girls in every province, and no girl, no matter how needy she was, ever reached her eighteenth year without being married off. Many pious women busied themselves with this good work. May God give them their reward and have mercy on the remnant of Israel!*

*Natan Neta Hanover*



## INTERACTING COMMUNITIES GOOD FOR THE JEWS...



So far we have looked primarily at the individual Jewish community, but it is important to understand that it was very rare for communities to function on the completely individual level. Usually, individual communities co-operated with other communities in their area and operated in some respects as part of a larger framework. There were two reasons for this. The communities wanted it because it reflected their needs and worked to their interests, and the outside (non-Jewish) rulers wanted it because it reflected **their** needs and worked to **their** interests.

It could work to the interests of the Jews for many clear reasons. If we have said that many Jews would feel isolated in a hostile world in which they were a minority, contact with other Jews would give a greater sense of togetherness and a feeling of being part of a larger unit that would help Jews feel less isolated.

In addition, co-operation would allow a rationalization of resources. This means that not every community would have to do exactly the same things. For example, the larger communities could house the larger yeshivot and institutions of learning, which would be open to whoever would want access to them from the smaller communities.

Moreover, religious authorities from different communities would be available to back or to advise the local community rabbis. Often a clear informal hierarchical structure would develop in an area as different local rabbis turned to others to back their decision or to consult on difficult points of law. At the top of the pyramid would often be the greatest scholar in that part of the world. Even here, there could be an appeal to a higher authority - a Rabbi or Rabbinic institution in a completely different part of the world that were seen as being the final authorities for questions. When Babylon was the unquestioned centre of the Jewish world, for example, queries poured in there from all parts of that world as developing communities sought guidance from the greatest scholarly institutions in existence.

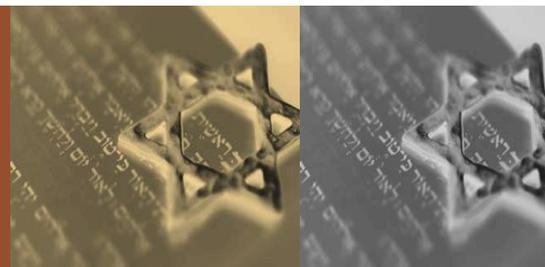
Co-operation and contact between communities would also provide a larger pool of potential social contact and this was important for the institution of marriage. There would be more potential choices available as partners. Tzedakah would also be more effective if it was based on co-operation between different communities. Such co-operation would clearly work to the benefit of the Jews as a collective. That is something that we learn from Natan Neta Hanover.



Co-operation between communities could give economic advantages if the Jews wanted to combine together in their own associations to defend their interests against, say, the guild or unions, mentioned in the previous chapter. In times of trouble, when physically threatened, there could be co-operation, either on the level of helping to defend one another (rare, but it happened) or on the level of helping refugees from other places (more common). In addition, a series of communities working together in a given area might be able to induce a ruler with incentives (monetary gifts or higher taxes) or even to threaten a ruler with sanctions if he or she did not come to the aid of Jews at times of trouble. Now all these actions were things that individual communities might do, by and for themselves, but several communities operating together would undoubtedly do them better!



## AND FOR THE RULERS...



But we have said that such co-operation between Jews over an area would be advantageous to the rulers of the area too. Let us examine why.

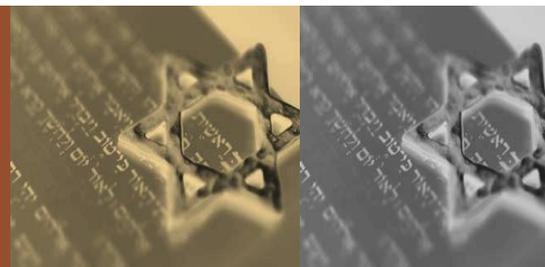
What we need to understand is that the Jewish community in each area of country was basically seen as a collective body answerable to the ruler of the area. There was no relationship in legal or financial terms between individual Jews and the authorities of the country other than in very specific cases where a particularly important or rich individual Jew might be concerned. It suited the rulers because it made things much easier for them. They gave the Jews control over many aspects of their own lives and, in return, the Jewish authorities did the leaders' work for them. The rulers did not need a big bureaucracy to deal with the Jews. The Jews would run their own community and collect their own taxes and all it would demand was an official or two who would be put above the Jewish authorities.

Thus the Jews were seen as a collective body and in one way or other, they were granted considerable control over their own way of life as long as they worked within the parameters that the law of the rulers allowed them. The rulers almost always chose to deal with the leaders and officials of the community, presenting their demands concerning the Jews to these leaders and allowing them to organize the response however they wanted internally. Let's take the example of tax collection for example. In many lands, a collective tax demand would be issued to the heads of the community and they would have to decide on the internal division of that sum among all the members of the community, who would pay to the community funds from which the desired sum would be transferred to the authorities. The Jews would do the collecting and the leader's representative would obtain the money from the Jew or Jews whose responsibility tax collection had been. Sometimes this was done on a local level and occasionally, especially in the case of large urban centres, the Jewish community of the town would have to negotiate a separate deal with the authorities.

In all these scenarios, however, the Jews were seen as a body, and the Jewish community of an area or a country was allowed control over its own inner life – limited autonomy. As long as they filled the demands of the outside authorities, Jews were allowed on the whole to get on with their own inner communal lives. This of course, suited the Jews very nicely. They could run their internal affairs through the framework of halachic law. They could teach their children what they wanted and the law courts would consist of rabbis, halachic experts.



## LARGE SCALE STRUCTURES THE CENTRE AS A WHOLE



In some places, as varied as Babylon in the Talmudic era or Eastern Europe in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the Jewish community in a large area erected an official structure of centralized control over the individual local communities. Sometimes the central structure interfered more in the lives of the local communities and sometimes it almost left the communities alone. Invariably however, even in the more organized and overbearing centralized structures, the individual communities retained a strong degree of autonomic control over their inner life and organisation. In a sense, each community, apart from the smallest, was to a large degree self-sufficient in terms of answering the social, cultural, ritual needs of their members and doing what they could, too, in economic and political terms.

Let us see how this would work by taking one of the most significant examples of centralized large scale autonomy that we have in the whole Jewish historical story, the overarching communal organization in Poland known as the Council of the Four Lands or the Va'ad Arba Artzot - ועד ארבע ארצות.

The Council, an organization consisting of Jews representing the four different parts of Poland, was formed in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. It used to meet twice a year at the times of the great agricultural fairs which dominated the economic life of Poland at that time. There were two groups of Jewish representatives who formed the Council, which as a result, was divided into two committees. One consisted of the parnassim – the non-Rabbinic officials - of the larger communities. These were usually drawn from the wealthiest groups of Polish Jewry. The others were the Rabbis, and only the greatest Rabbis of Poland – which at that time was a great centre of Torah – were part of the Council.

This double leadership had been a feature of Jewish community since earliest times, as we have mentioned. From the earliest period of our history as a People, the period of tribal settlement in Canaan, we hear of Cohanim, priests responsible for the ritual aspects of tribal life and the elders (zekanim) who looked after the details of regular everyday life. In Babylon, we have the same situation with the religious leadership in the form of the heads of the yeshivot, the Geonim and the lay leadership, headed up by the leader of the Jewish autonomy in Babylon, the Resh Galuta (or head of the Exile) as he was called. And there were plenty of tensions between them! And here we see the same split in leadership, clearly reflecting the split nature of the Jewish people as a religious nation. On one hand the Jews were a nation, different from other nations perhaps because of their peculiar history but a nation nevertheless. On the other hand they were a religious group, bound together



by a common belief system and a common understanding of God's place in the life of the world in general and the lives of the Jews in particular. We will reflect on the potential tension between the two identities of the Jews as a collective, when we examine the changes that occurred in the modern era.

In the Council of Four Lands, we hear more of harmony than of tension in the relations between the two parts of the Council. Let us hear a general description of the work of the Council from that same Natan Neta Hanover whom we have already met. In this excerpt from his book, he discusses the judicial system of the Jews of Poland.

*Justice existed in Poland... There were courts in every town, and if people did not care to try their case before the court of their own town they could go to a nearby court. And if they did not care to try their case before a nearby court, they could go to a superior court, for in every province there was a higher court... There were many other large communities and each one of them served as the seat of the chief court for its district.*

*If however, different communities, through their leaders, would start legal action among themselves [because they were in dispute with each other, over issues such as tax disputes] in order to try their case they would have to appear before the leaders of the Council of the Four Lands - may their Rock and Redeemer guard them - who met twice a year. This was an assembly which included one official picked from among the leaders of every town. They, in turn, were joined by six outstanding rabbinical scholars of Poland, and all these together were known as the Council of Four Lands. They used to hold sessions annually at the Lublin fair between Purim and Passover, and at the Yaroslav fair in the month of Ab or Ellul.*

*The leaders of the Four Lands were just like the Sanhedrin [the Jewish council in the late second Temple period which met in the Temple]...for they had the power to judge every Jew in the kingdom of Poland: to issue prohibitions, to enact ordinances, and to punish people as they saw fit. Every difficult case was brought to them and they decided it. In order to lighten their task, the leaders of the Four Lands would choose judges from the various provinces and these men were called Provincial Judges. All civil cases would come before these Provincial Judges, but cases that involved fines, the priority of possession, and other difficult matters were tried by the leaders of the Four Lands themselves - may their Rock and Redeemer guard them. The law suit of a Jew would never come before Gentile judges, nor before the court of any magnate, nor before the king himself - may his glory be exalted. If, however, a Jew should attempt to try his case before the judges of the Gentile courts, he would be severely reproached for he made it appear that "our enemies are our judges"(Devarim Ch. 32 v.31) [It was a very important principle that no Jew should ever turn to a non-Jewish law court. That would be seen as treason to the community.]*

Natan Neta Hanover



We get a hint of the power of the Council from this piece. The Council led the Jews with great authority. One historian noted that it governed the economic life of the Jews, protected Polish Jewry at the king's court and in the nobles' Parliament, collected the taxes, regulated religious observances, organized the court system and itself sat as the court of final appeal. And this was in the largest and fastest growing Jewish community in the world at the time in question. If in 1500, there were something between 15,000 and 30,000 Jews in all of Poland, by the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, the high point of the council, the number had risen to something between 250,000 and 450,000 people. That same historian said that it was practically a Jewish state in Poland. He was not far wrong.

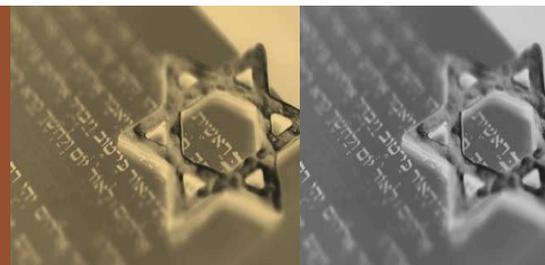
In its strength and influence both for the Jews and the non-Jews, the Council was certainly not a typical example of a Jewish autonomic structure. But the principle was repeated on a much more restricted scale in many other places. It was good for the Jews and it was good for the rulers of the states where the Jews lived.

Now that we have examined the relations between individual communities and a larger structure of Jewish autonomy in the same area or country, it is time to turn to the relations between communities in different areas.



## CONNECTIONS BETWEEN DIFFERENT CENTRES

### THREE EXAMPLES



Communities had relations with each other across political borders and national boundaries. These relations took a number of different forms. Sometimes it was communities looking for halachic guidance from authorities who sat in other parts of the world. A large amount of inter-community contact of this kind was connected with issues of Agunot, 'chained women' who needed recognition that they were free to marry, after their husbands, for example, had gone missing – presumed dead - in different parts of the world. At other times it might be financial help or other physical help after a destruction. Communities tended to help each other if they could and if the need arose. And why not? If we want to be cynical about it we can call it a kind of mutual insurance policy. It would be worthwhile helping other communities because you might be the community in need next time. But if we wish to be a trifle nobler, we could simply say that people felt connected and as such felt a sense of responsibility towards Jews living in different places. כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה - all Jews must take responsibility for each other - was a phrase which had meaning to many Jews.

We will give here three examples of such help across community boundaries. For the first story, we come to the door of the great scholar Maimonides in his house in Fostat in the old Jewish quarter of Cairo.

#### Example Number One

We have had to wait hours for this audience. The great scholar has been busy all day in his job as physician to the royal court. Coming home late he has been busy with the needs of the Jewish community for the people who see him as a leader. It is close to midnight before he comes to the door. In his hand there is a document with the ink on it still wet. He apologises for the late hour and invites us in, asking for a chair to be brought because it is difficult for him to stand. He tells us that he has only a few minutes. He has not yet seen his family since leaving the house in the early morning. But he is willing to see us nevertheless.

*"You must excuse me for sitting. It's been a very long day. Every day is a long day. The demands of the royal court, the demands of the community – it is very hard. You have heard that I haven't seen my family. And I have been waiting all day for a few hours of peace so that I can write. I understand that you want to know about the connections between communities. Well, connections exist and although I have only a few minutes, I will give you an example.*



*That's why I bring you this parchment. It's what I am writing at the moment. It's a letter, one of a series that I have sent to the community in Yemen. They are a poor community, very isolated. They pay a price for their isolation. They have never produced a scholarly centre. They have no scholars. I think that is why, when they had a problem, they turned to me. They are so isolated that I wouldn't have heard of their problem but a few months ago I received a letter from one of the community leaders, Ya'akov ben Natanel Al Fayummi.*

*The problem that he outlined is very complex. Suffice it to say that they are under tremendous pressure to convert to Islam. Making the problem more difficult is that there is a Jew there who is claiming to be the Messiah and he has aroused quite a following among the Jews. He seems to be calling for some kind of mixture between Judaism and Islam, a strange and dangerous hybrid. The real problem is that the Jews there don't know how to tell a messianic pretender - what we might call a false prophet - from the real messianic figure.*

*I have spent months delving into the issue and trying to help them make the distinction. This man is dangerous to them and is succeeding in leading them astray. They really believe that he is who he says he is. The only way to convince them is for them to understand exactly what the sources say. But there are many traditions about the Messiah. Which are authoritative? Which must they listen to? Which must they ignore? They need a guide for this – they can't do this on their own. That is the meaning of this letter that I will send tomorrow if I can finish it.*

*I also try and help them in other ways. They are in such a hard situation. Whenever I feel myself overwhelmed and exhausted, I think of their situation and I realize that I am lucky indeed. Yemen is now under the control of Egypt so I try and put in a good word for them at the court whenever I can. I am urging our treasury to cut their taxes, to make it easier for the Jews there. I hope that it will bear fruit but these things take time. I must go now. I hope the example I have given you helps you."*

## Example Number Two

Our second example is from centuries later on. It concerns Dona Gracia Nasi, an extraordinary woman who made her mark in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. Born in Portugal to a family of converted secret Jews, what are often called 'Conversos', hers is a long and complicated story of outstanding leadership. After the death of her husband, a merchant, she left Portugal and made her way to Antwerp where she carried on the family business. In secret, however, she organized an 'underground railroad' to help secret Jews escape from Portugal and get to safer places. From there she moved to Italy where she reappeared publicly as a Jew. It was there that she continued to fight for the rights of conversos.

*"I am happy to meet you. I am losing faith in some Jews. If you are serious in learning and helping, I will help you in your search. Let me tell you a story which will explain why I am so disappointed. I have just lost a battle and it is the Jews who have failed me.*



*In brief, I tried to organize an economic boycott among the great Jewish merchants of Turkey against the port of Ancona in Italy. Twenty five Conversos were killed there by the Inquisition and the Duke who owned the town did not lift a finger to help them. I thought to destroy him financially by showing him how anyone who moves against the Jews will be punished. It could have been wonderful. Ancona was largely dependent on its trade with the Turkish Empire. Most of the important merchants in the empire are Jews. Economics as politics. If it had succeeded, it would have changed the Jewish position in the world. We have no political power but we have economic power and we have solidarity, or so I thought. If it had succeeded no-one would have dared to tangle with the Jews or the converses.*

*Many great merchants started to support me. The boycott started to work. All my Turkish merchants transferred their business to the neighbouring town of Pesaro. Ancona was in trouble. The port was in danger. We were winning. We were teaching the non-Jews a lesson. But what happened? The stupid Jews of Ancona could not see past their own noses. They couldn't think of the greater good. They started protesting that their businesses were being ruined and they sent letters to my merchants begging them to stop the boycott. And our soft hearted Turkish Jews gave in. They stopped the boycott in order to help the Ancona Jews. Those Jews won. All the rest of the Jews and the conversos lost. We had a chance to change Jewish history and it was lost, wasted. But if you want an example of Jews trying to help other Jews, you must learn this story by heart. One day they will realize the importance of what we were trying to do and they will tell the story in centuries to come."*

### Example Number Three

Our third story comes from a real life letter. It was sent from Lisbon, Portugal by Don Yitzchak Abarbanel to his friend Yehiel of Pisa in 1472. Abarbanel was a courtier at the court of the Portuguese king, when the latter went to war against some towns in Morocco in North Africa. After conquering various towns, the king brought back 250 Jewish captives from the port of Arcilla. Abarbanel tried desperately to raise the money necessary to ransom them and to free them. He finally succeeded but at a tremendous price in terms of money and effort as this letter tells.

*"...I cannot refrain from telling you about our own troubles and sorrows, which we, the leaders of this community, have to endure. I must ask you to listen to a story of a poor people, namely the community of Arcilla, which is under Islamic rule. You will certainly share my sorrows... They have deprived me of my peace for six months.*

*Our king, may he live long, rose and conquered many lands. His cavalry, skilled horsemen from distant countries, made a fine show. After having gathered ships and crews, he went over to Africa for conquest and besieged the large city of Arcilla.*

*The army captured it and committed wholesale pillage, though the king and his princes did not touch the booty. The population of 10,000 people was either killed or*



*captured. Afterwards he occupied the famous city of Tangier. Although the Lord saved the Jews from the massacre at Arcilla, because they lived dispersed in the city - as a matter of fact no Jew lost his life - yet 250 Jewish prisoners were captured and brought here exhausted by hunger and without any means. When we saw the Jews sold as slaves, the leaders of our community decided to restore their freedom and ransom them with our money.*

*...I and another leader were sent from one city to another with the purpose of freeing the Jews from their terrible situation... We have made such journeys repeatedly, and have been able with the mercy of the Lord to ransom 150 persons during a short time. In this city there are now 220 people whom we have helped to gain freedom. The amount spent for this purpose was ten thousand doubloons in gold. And as these poor people had been robbed of everything, and had neither clothes nor food, and were, in addition, unable to make themselves understood in the language of this country, we had to look for people who were able...to provide them with all necessities. It will still take some time before they have learnt the language and the habits of this country.*

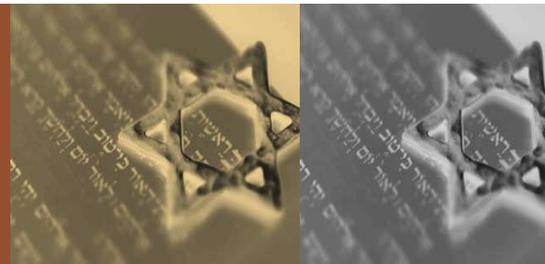
*Now, this night has at last brought the hour of success, when they are settled in their dwellings. They offer thanks to the Lord, saying: 'We were slaves for a short time, but the Lord has delivered us from slavery to freedom. Now we are free as all Jews are'. May the Lord now deliver also the others – about thirty - who are still in captivity. They are not yet ransomed because they have fallen into the hands of hard masters. They have been carried to a distant land, and are not yet here. May the hour of their liberation be close, and may the Lord gather soon the dispersed members of Judah from East and West.*

*All this was a great burden for me, day and night. The Lord knows how little I have told you about this matter. Nowhere, indeed, have so many Jewish men and women been led into slavery. And, God is my witness, the ears of every Jew who hears this must tingle, and he must "clap his hands and shake his head".*

*Yitzchak ben Judah Abarbanel*



## SUMMING UP THE STORY SO FAR...



In this chapter we looked at the make up of the individual community. We then went on to examine connections between communities within the same population centre. And we have closed by looking at connections between different centres. We have brought this chapter to a close with Maimonides, Dona Gracia and Yitzchak Abarbanel, each of them a great Jewish leader, each of them involved in international attempts to save a Jewish community from spiritual or physical harm. We have seen some of the ways in which communities tended to help each other. There was a sense of responsibility that carried past borders. The Jews were a people that were scattered in different places all over the world. They felt connected, parts of one people – in spite of all the differences between them – and as such, when they could, they tended, most of the time, to try and help each other. That was not to last. The modern age would undermine that feeling of solidarity to a large extent, as it would undermine, too, many other things in the Jewish community story. That is the subject of the next chapter.

