CHAPTER SEVEN

LANDHOOLDING, CRAFTS, ENTERPRISES, MEDICINE, AND THE INTERNAL JEWISH ECONOMY

Landholding and Agriculture

Since the early 19th century, Jewish community leaders, educators, thinkers and public opinion in general were unhappy with the “abnormal” structure of contemporary Jewish occupations in Europe, best known perhaps as Ber Borochov’s “inverted class pyramid”. Their misgivings were shared by political authorities concerned with the “occupational amelioration” of the Jews, and of course by anti-Semites who eagerly turned a perceived anomaly into a genetically conditioned pathology. In such climate there was a strong appeal to the idea that Jews had once been sturdy peasants and vigorous tillers of the soil, with examples easily found in the Land of Israel before the fall of the Commonwealth, before the loss of normality in this as so many other regards. In contrast, the Middle Ages, the era of the Ghetto, the usurer, itinerant peddler and other unwholesome trades, appeared as the nadir of collective unhealthiness, both physical and moral. In the 20th century, attempts at agricultural colonization in many parts of the world and of course the Zionist movement and the Jewish State with their pioneer ethos were adding a further moral dimension to the quest. All this could not but influence the historiographical search for Jewish peasants, each historian according to his orientation.

In 1957, Salo Baron put the emphasis on the Jewish contribution to progress when he wrote that “a full length monograph on the Jewish share in the development of the agricultural resources of the Iberian Peninsula and the adjoining Italian and French regions should prove extremely rewarding”. In 1959, Bernhard Blumenkranz published evidence for the existence of “Jewish farmers and vine growers in early medieval Burgundy”. This material served him well to bolster his thesis of 1960 that in this early period there was yet little difference between Jews and non-Jews, in their occupations as well as in other regards. Also in 1960, Eliyahu Ashtor found in Iberia a “body of Jewish peasantry”, “simple Jews”, “farmers who defended their rights most stubbornly”. For Ashtor, this held vital moral meaning:
As long as they were not compelled to transfer to these occupations (trade and other branches of the economy far removed from productive activity and toil), the Jews never, any time or any place, showed a tendency to earn their bread as nonlaborers.\(^1\)

Jewish landholding in medieval Europe is in clear and abundant evidence but has never been explored in its entirety. In numerous places, landed property appears in the earliest extant sources, in some it is the sole proof for a Jewish presence. The most substantial documentation—contracts, leases and sale deeds in Latin—comes from southern Europe, from the Iberian peninsula (here reinforced by Arabic and Hebrew deeds and Halakhic and other internal sources), from parts of Italy, and from southern and central France. No similar record exists for Northern France and Germany, with the exception of the 13th century Schreinsbücher (property registers) of Cologne, which indeed yield precious information for non-Jewish and Jewish properties alike, however only urban ones. Still, as indicated by early Ashkenazic sources of the northern regions, in all probability landholding had also been substantial in the winegrowing areas which have recently been shown to coincide with the areas of early Jewish settlement.\(^2\) These are Halakhic deliberations on property transfers by inheritance, marriage and divorce; on the equitable taxation of landed versus mobile assets; and on the manifold problems around the ritual permissibility of wine production. One can contrast the frequency with which landed possessions are treated in the queries and rabbinical deliberations extant from Iberia and from Northern France and Germany. They figure in both regions, but definitely more often in the former. This would seem to match the exceptionally solid Latin, Hebrew and Arabic documentary record from Iberia. In the peninsula, it seems improbable that significant swaths of land in Jewish ownership have gone entirely undetected. In contrast, were one to go only by the non-Jewish sources, the very existence of landed property in the North would be very much in doubt.

What were the common features associated with landholding, what economic or other functions did it fulfill, what was its impact on the status of Jews in society? Was there a Jewish “peasantry” of the Early Middle Ages?

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\(^1\) Baron, 1957: IV, 316; Blumenkranz, 1959 and 1960; Ashtor, 1992 (1960): I, 267, 268, 271. Baron repeated his assertion of “early medieval Jewish pioneering contributions to European agriculture” in the entry Economic History, EJ 1st and 2nd eds.: vol. 6, 109. The main arguments of this sub-chapter have been laid out in Hebrew in Toch, 2010a.