Ordinary Danish Citizens, but with Another Religion
The ‘Christian’ and Jewish Enlightenment (1760–1814)

The Jewish Community

What was the state of affairs in the Copenhagen Jewish community during this period?

The census of 1787 showed that there were 281 Jewish families in the city, comprising 1,503 individuals. In addition to this, there were 354 Jewish residents distributed among sixteen provincial towns. At this time, Copenhagen’s population was 83,063. In 1801 there were 1,794 Jews in Copenhagen, while the total population of the city was 100,975. There were 666 Jews in the provinces distributed among twenty-eight towns. Throughout the centuries (and in the present in certain circles), there has been a preconception that Jews were extremely wealthy and that they used their wealth in various ways to create trouble for Christians. In this context, an examination of some statistics from that period is enlightening. Mendel Levin Nathanson (1780–1868), the leading figure of the Jewish community at the turn of the 19th century, estimated that about thirty percent of the Jewish families of his day were unquestionably poor, another forty percent belonged to the middle class, but were so badly situated that they “were living from hand to mouth, so to say, and could only manage to keep going by exercising the strictest frugality.” He described the last thirty percent as wealthy. Writing to the king in 1796, Jeremias Henriques reported that 130 of the 230 Jewish families, that is to say, more than half of them, lived in poverty.

From 1766 Jewish congregants gathered in the new Jewish synagogue on Læderstræde, and when it was destroyed in the Copenhagen Fire of 1795, no fewer than eleven smaller private synagogues, or rather prayer houses, opened at various points in the city. This could perhaps seem to indicate a robust religious life, but it also testifies to the individualism that characterized Jewish life, for better or for worse. When David Ruben looked back at this situation almost a half century later, he emphatically deplored the damage done to religious life during this fragmentation. Discipline was impaired, since each congregation had its own rules and regulations, and this meant that the educated did not
attend services and the young did not feel a need to do so, either. They had lost respect and reverence for the house of God; indifference was spreading.

The congregation was organized with the Elders at the head, as it was elsewhere. In a written response concerning one of their disputes, the Elders claimed that since olden times, “their task had been to be in charge of their people, appear before the government on their behalf, and keep order in the synagogue.” In short, they took charge of the administration of the congregation and represented it to the outside world. They were the ones who had contact with the royal government and the City Council. The Chief Rabbi was the spiritual head of the community; his first and foremost task was to interpret the laws of Moses and the Talmudic Law for modern use, to decide on unclear issues, and occasionally to preach or hold speeches. He performed weddings, divorces, and funerals, made wills, testaments, and marriage contracts. The government had decided that the rabbi in Fredericia was not subordinate to the chief rabbi in Altona, and, of course, neither was the chief rabbi of Copenhagen. Services consisted principally of readings from the Torah and of singing led by the chief cantor. Apart from paying the salaries of the rabbis, the synagogue paid salaries or honoraria to the caretaker, messenger, security officer, physician, porter, Torah scribe, birth and wedding attendants, and women who attended at deathbeds.

Naturally, the Jews kept the rules requiring rest on the Sabbath and the rules for holy days. In 1812, Professor Nicolaj Christoffer Kall (1749–1823), whose feelings toward Jews were ambivalent, complained that Copenhagen Jews still kept the Sabbath, during which they would not light lamps or touch money, and they wore special clothing (hats and prayer shawls) to the services. In vain, the Elders led a spirited campaign to be allowed to keep the Jewish burial custom of burying the dead within twenty-four hours after death. Besides the Jewish cemeteries in Copenhagen and Fredericia, a cemetery in Fåborg was established after the local Jewish community had petitioned for one. In addition to the biographical information they provide, the many gravestones preserved in the cemetery in Møllegade in Copenhagen testify to the Jews’ religious ideals, their belief in the help of angels, and a belief in a life after death. There is an account of the prescribed period of grieving, shiva, and written wills have also given us an impression of religious life. For example, the extremely wealthy David Amsel Meyer (1755–1813) wrote in his will that the chief rabbi was not to deliver a eulogy at his burial, but that ten learned men were to read prayers every morning and evening for a year at one of the private synagogues, the Trier Synagogue. And he now had only one entreaty of the Creator—that his death might atone for all his intentional and unintentional violations, faults, and sins. In another will, that of Isaac Moisling, no fewer than 12,000 rix-dollars