CHAPTER THREE

FRAMEWORKS OF COMMUNAL LIFE AND IMAGES OF LEADERSHIP

We may now approach the complex issue of communal frameworks according to the socio-cultural heritage shared by the Jews of southern Italy and how they developed down to Ahima'az’s time. Although the history of the Jews of the entire Mediterranean area in the early Middle Ages remains quite elusive, recent valuable studies can help us draw a fair, though admittedly approximate, picture. This is done assuming, as a general rule, that from antiquity to the early Middle Ages the communal structure of the Jews of southern Italy must have been similar to that of the so-called Hellenistic Jews of the Mediterranean as it is emerges from the recent work of talented scholars.

Communal frameworks are here viewed as sets of collective values and activities: how people acted collectively and perceived their activities. To begin with, we can state that, as a most general rule, people constantly acted according to custom shaped by both written and oral traditions, the overwhelming majority of which were ultimately rooted in basic religious beliefs variously related to biblical concepts.

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2 The number of studies dealing with Hellenism and Mediterranean Jews is so great that it would be risky to attempt to draw up a satisfactory listing. We will limit ourselves to some among the most recent outlines, all of them providing rich bibliographies: Levine, *Judaism and Hellenism*; Rajak, “Judaism and Hellenism Revisited.” See also the essays assembled in: *Jews, Christians and Polytheists*.

3 As knowledgeable readers will readily recognize, some wordings are pretty much indebted to Susan Reynolds’ challenging picture (Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*), especially inasmuch as the similarity of different geographical settings is concerned, even though she left Jews out of her discussion (p. 3). A similar “global” approach to the Jewish communities of western Europe in the early Middle Ages may be found in Bonfil, “Cultural and Religious Traditions” and is implicitly adopted here as well.
Traditions were constantly subject to adjustment and reshaping, not necessarily coherent but always triggered by the idiosyncrasies of the prominent interpreters of the traditions, the pressure of changing situations, and the appeal of worldviews of their non-Jewish neighbors—in line with what has been suggested in the previous chapter. Law and custom were thus so inextricably bound together in the current Jewish outlook that one can hardly distinguish between them. It is therefore only natural that reshaping adjustments quite often engendered opposing conceptions and practices, particularly during the period in which written transmission of textual traditions was still quite fluid, that is, roughly prior to the twelfth century.

Although local developments did affect the characteristics of specific communities in various manners, both in the Land of Israel and in the Mediterranean Diaspora, there is little room for doubt that throughout the entire relevant period the bulk of communal life was conducted within synagogues and contiguous spaces. A considerable body of research, mainly by archaeologists and art historians, has in the last decades remarkably enriched our knowledge on this issue.\(^4\) We must of course constantly bear in mind the danger of anachronism while referring synchronically to archaeological remains geographically and chronologically distant one from the other, such as the synagogues of Delos, Capernaum, Dura Europos, Sardis, Hamam-Lif, Elche, Ostia, or Bova Marina. And yet, we can quite safely assume that throughout the entire period covered by the *Chronicle of Aḥima‘az* the synagogues of the entire Mediterranean area maintained the general traits bequeathed to the Middle Ages from Antiquity. Regrettably, no archaeological findings of medieval synagogues have surfaced in southern Italy to date. However, inasmuch as one can judge from the available

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\(^4\) Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, is the most extensive survey of ancient and early medieval synagogues. Especially relevant for the present discussion are chapters ten and eleven (pp. 357–428). It goes without saying that all the works listed in the previous notes contain extensive sections concerning the place of the synagogue and its role in communal life. We will specify shortly what is meant by “contiguous spaces.” Following more or less recent archaeological discoveries, Second Temple period and Late Antiquity synagogues were addressed in an exceptionally rich array of works, though still quite lacking complete agreement on a number of points that will not retain our attention here. See Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Land of Israel*; eadem, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Diaspora; Ancient Synagogues: Historical Analysis*; Binder, *Into the Temple Courts; Jews, Christians and Polytheists*; Fine, *Art and Judaism*. The epigraphic evidence was also comprehensively surveyed by Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions*; idem, “Jewish Inscriptions …: Addenda and Corrigenda.”