OF ORPHANS, MARRIAGE, AND MONEY: MATING PATTERNS OF ISTANBUL’S JEWS IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

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The findings presented below offer a glimpse into the world of the Jewish family in Istanbul in the first half of the 19th century. This brief glance is part of a larger work in progress on the history of the Jews of Istanbul in the Ottoman era (1453–1923). Of course, family life is only one aspect among many of this history; yet the wealth of sources at my disposal makes it an especially fruitful and fascinating area of study.

In the first part of the above mentioned work, concerning the history of the Jewish community from the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople to the death of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent (1453–1566), I present a tapestry of Jewish family life in Istanbul, a community made up of interwoven strands of local Greek-speaking Jews and emigrants from Italy, the Iberian peninsula, and to a lesser degree, the lands of Ashkenaz. Notwithstanding the diversity of Jewish society in the capital, the nature of the Jewish family there was very clear-cut: a patriarchal, Mediterranean family whose primary raison d’être was perpetuating the family name (and bloodline). Since it was the male heirs who bore this name, a further defining characteristic was the desire to keep the family’s assets in their hands; accordingly, the ancient Jewish laws of inheritance were maintained, giving precedence to male heirs over female ones and to the heirs of the male over those of the female.

An additional feature of the Istanbuli Jewish family of this era is the perception of the woman as a means of strengthening the family lineage.

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1 The first volume of this opus has already appeared: Minna Rozen, A History of The Jewish Community in Istanbul: The Formative Years (1453–1566) (Leiden: Brill, 2002, 2010); see in particular 99–196.
She was the chattel of her father, and later, her husband; but either way, she was the repository of the family’s honor. In the event of a divorce, contemporary rabbinic rulings generally favored the interests of the husband. If the woman was a widow, the interests of the late husband’s heirs took priority. Under such circumstances, her male offspring could be taken from her by the husband’s family after reaching two years of age, and in any event, from the age of six. Her daughters remained with her, since in any case they did not perpetuate the line; often, the mother was forced to sign an undertaking that if she remarried, her daughters from her first marriage would go with her and would not remain under the aegis of their late father’s family. Under this pattern, the choice of a marriage partner was governed almost entirely by business considerations, and the spouse, for the first marriage at least, was selected by the parents. The final decision of course rested with the father, but the women of the family exercised great informal influence on the choice of a wife for a family member, in particular if she was not from the extended family itself. In a family from the middle class or higher, that is, one that owned property that would pass upon marriage from one family to the other, love was utterly irrelevant. Another outcome of this situation was the high incidence of marriage within the family, in particular to a male from the male line, such as: an uncle from the father’s side, a male cousin from the brother’s side, a second cousin from the paternal grandfather’s side. Such marriages allowed a wealthy father who wanted a comfortable life for his daughter also after her marriage to provide her with a generous dowry without fear that her premature death would cause the assets to pass to a different line, as would have been the case according to halakha (Jewish religious law).

Monetary and property concerns dictated that a young child orphaned of his father would be raised by his father’s family from approximately age six at the latest, and would generally also marry a woman from within that family. This ran counter to halakha, which stipulated that an orphan should not be entrusted to those who were likely to inherit him, since in the case of an orphan who had inherited abundant assets, there was liable

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5 Lamdan, Separate People, 171–195; Rozen, Jewish Community in Istanbul, 162–179.
6 Lamdan, Separate People, 88–95; Rozen, Jewish Community in Istanbul, 179–185.
7 Rozen, Jewish Community in Istanbul, 120–129.
8 Ibid., 124–127.