First, I would like to provide some chronological and physical-geographical borders of this study. I describe a longue durée, extending from the late Suleymanic age in the mid-16th century to the early 19th, before the great changes of the modern period. The Ottoman world encompassed vast territories in Europe, Asia, and North Africa. At its peak, the Danube was its northern border in Europe, Tunisia its western stronghold, the Caucasus and Iraq its border in Asia, and the Arabian Peninsula its boundary in the south. Above all local differences there was a certain cultural uniformity in the main cities, the administrative and commercial centers in which Jews tended to reside. Islam was dominant in most of the Ottoman provincial cities, defining time and constructing space. The urban lifestyle was basically Muslim in nature, and its material and cultural expressions clearly influenced the religious minorities, as we shall see further on. All eyes were turned towards the Imperial capital—Istanbul, and towards the Sultan’s household.

From the mid-16th century, continuous changes and developments shaped the character of Ottoman Jewry anew. While we are able to discern substantial and significant structural and organizational modifications in Ottoman Jewish communities during the 16th through the 18th centuries, it seems that with but one exception no great change occurred in the general cultural and mental outlook of Ottoman Jewry from the late 16th until the first half of the 19th century. Ottoman Jewry was an urban society par excellence, as Jews were attracted to the major economic centers such as Istanbul, Edirne, Salonica, and Izmir, Aleppo and Damascus, Cairo and Alexandria, whose communities constituted the vast majority of this Jewry. The Jews in the Ottoman Empire underwent processes of mingling and mutual assimilation between members of different kahals.

The actual size of the Jewish population remains an open question, but researchers such as Jacob Barnai (in various works) estimated it circa 150,000.1 As the barriers between the various congregations collapsed and

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1 For demographic estimations as well as the relation between ‘a house’ or a single tax-payer and the number of souls see Yaron Ben-Naeh, Jews in the Realm of the Sultans
their members mixed with one other, many particularistic customs disappeared, and the pluralism in custom and halakhah was replaced by a new eclectic local ‘Sephardi’ custom. Division and tension between Jewish communities now followed other lines: Jews of Iberian descent (Sephardim) vs. those of mid-European and East European Jews (Ashkenazim), Rabbanite Jews vs. Karaites, residents of one city vs. those of another. Tensions would also arise along class and professional lines: between poor and rich, between guilds, local and itinerant merchants, and—of course—between Jews and non-Jews. Feelings of kinship and fraternity were reserved, first and foremost, for relations between an individual and his extended family and only after that for relations between the individual and other members of his ethnic-religious group, guild or other. There were close ties between the Jewish communities of the empire, manifested in family relationships, business contacts, the mobility of rabbis and correspondence on religious legal matters, the tendering of political and monetary aid, and naturally, a constant sense of solidarity and mutual responsibility. There were also ties between the Ottoman Jewish communities and those outside the empire, mainly in northern Italian cities and the western Sephardim, whose capital was Amsterdam.

The multi-ethnic and multi-religious Ottoman state considered all taxpayers within its borders to be its protected subjects. The principle of justice guided the ruler with regard to all his subjects, and the dhimmi communities generally received fair treatment in accordance with the conditions established by Muslim law and tradition. The Islamic legal system determined the inferior status of the dhimmis and imposed upon them the poll tax (jizye) and other restrictions that were intended to degrade and visually mark them. There was no uniformity or consistency in the enforcement of the restrictions. As a rule, the central authorities usually did not initiate the enforcement of the restrictions, and protected the rights of the dhimmis. Harsh acts and monetary extortion on the part of local officials and governors were characteristic of distant provinces. The Muslim masses generally expressed contempt towards non-Muslims and strangers of all types. Greek and Armenian Christians demonstrated hatred towards Jews that had both religious and economic origins. This general state of affairs did not prevent the existence of daily peaceful

(Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2008), 54–80. Amnon Cohen himself dealt with the size of an average family in Ottoman Palestine.