

Ethnicity and Beyond

Theories and Dilemmas
of Jewish Group Demarcation

Edited by Eli Lederhendler

STUDIES IN
CONTEMPORARY JEWRY

Institute of Contemporary Jewry
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Volume XXV

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Preface

Quite some years ago—in 1987, to be specific—Ezra Mendelsohn devoted the symposium in the third volume of *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* to the topic of “Jews and Other Ethnic Groups in a Multi-ethnic World.” The intervening years have witnessed important transitions in both the terms and the questions that scholars bring to bear on the subject of “ethnicity” in general, Jews in particular, and the nature of the interactivity between Jews and others. In the realm of American academic life, especially, forays into the question of Jewish ethnicity in the past two decades have faced a significantly altered terrain.

Perhaps more than anything else, the influential turn to multicultural (often in place of multiethnic) paradigms signaled a significant challenge to those involved in contemporary Jewish studies, because—as the distinguished American cultural historian David Hollinger has pointed out—the foundational notions of multiculturalist ideology rested on a prior classification of nearly all “culturally diverse” groups along non-essentialist but still quasi-fixed axes determined by “color” (the “racial pentagon”). Under that particular aegis, there was little to be said concerning the “minor” specificities that were once the bread and butter issues of ethnic and cross-ethnic studies, such as those distinguishing between Americans of Irish, Italian, German, Jewish, and Polish origin. “The key point about multiculturalism,” Hollinger recently reiterated, “is that there has been almost no place in it for Jews.”¹

Hollinger’s suggested alternative, as he pointed out in an address to American Jewish historians, is a bid to move beyond the ethno-communal paradigm to adopt a post-identity-politics, post-ethnic, “post-Jewish” historiography. That is: to break out of the mold of constructed boundaries that has predefined the labels of recognized “diversity” (and its limited number of beneficiaries) and embrace instead “the insight that the creative influence of religious and ethnic communities often lasts well beyond the time when individuals and families have been deeply embedded in [their own particular] communities.”² To fix what may be “wrong” with the multicultural agenda, Hollinger prescribes, we have to reinvent a definition of ethnicity that, in itself, is “post-ethnic” in its sensibilities and priorities. His notion of “post-ethnic” and “post-Jewish” (also “post-Black” and “post-Catholic”) points toward a sensitivity to demographics, politics, and ideas as filters of “ethnic” influences in the wider public sphere.

Having had occasion in some of my recent work to note the paradoxical spin-offs of recent research on the ethnic aspects of Jewish social identity, I, too, have voiced some concern over the utility of the older terminologies.³ And in his own reconsideration of the larger themes and conflicts raised in the contemporary study of Jews and

Judaism, one of my close colleagues in Israeli academia, Moshe Rosman, also chose to tackle the new disposition of older definitional problems. “How Jewish is Jewish history” as he put it, when Jewish society is “a ‘hybrid’ component of the ‘hegemonic’ society and culture . . . within which Jewish identity, culture, and society are ‘constructed’”?⁴

Taking the discussion to a further level would seem to be a worthwhile venture. That was my agenda when undertaking to invite a group of leading and innovative scholars to participate in a wide-ranging discussion of the terms “ethnic,” “ethnicity,” and “identity” as these apply to Jews, past and present, individually and collectively. Beyond bold, general statements that delineate the relevant concerns in the widest sense but leave us wondering about their implementation, I felt that it might be possible in a series of smaller, sharply defined studies to generate further insight into the actual permutations and uses of these categories, in the light of recent theory.

Although originally we had hoped to be more global in our reach, the vicissitudes of academic publishing produced a more America-centered discussion than we had planned for. That is not necessarily a bad thing, given the fuller and multifocal treatment thus accorded to the American and American Jewish case. Nor does the current group of essays constitute in anyone’s mind anything more than a partial foray into an ongoing discussion.

Nevertheless, it pleases me that the first essay in the present series, authored by Ewa Morawska (herself a transnational scholar in every sense) devotes much attention to several non-American case histories before embarking on the discussion of an America-based study—ex-Soviet Jews in Philadelphia, whose post-migration experience is compared with that of a similar population in Tel Aviv.

Equally general in its geographical applicability is Uzi Rebhun’s analysis of the plural dimensional aspects of ethnic research, which in some crucial ways forms a counterpart to Morawska’s basic arguments.

Tony Michels is one of a number of scholars who have been engaged in close dialogue with Hollinger’s notions regarding post-ethnicity.⁵ In the symposium in this volume, Michels’ essay most clearly represents the historical discipline, bringing us a case history from the period between the two world wars. In line with the social-scientific approaches delineated in most of the other essays, Michels’ contribution suggests a way in which ethnic Jewishness and “ethnic identity” generally might be utilized in novel, sometimes counterintuitive ways.

With Joel Perlmann’s discussion of interethnic marriage and its relationship to the demographics of ethnic group stability, we enter into two crucial spheres of discourse: first, the definitional basis for “ethnicity” in the American context, and second, the contextual intergenerational framework that is necessary for any serious understanding of ethnic phenomena. Perlmann’s defense of the contextualized and specific utility of “ethnicity,” even in a discursive realm that acknowledges the murky origins of the term “ethnic” as distinct from “racial,” is a critical move that offers to defuse the fraught politics of the theoretical debate in this regard.

In Perlmann’s essay as well as in the unconventional fieldwork underlying the sociolinguistic survey reported on by Sarah Bunin Benor and Stephen M. Cohen, ethnic markers are distinctly behavioral. That is, particular behaviors (marriage and child rearing, institution-building, religion, and language) are the foreground of what

is meant by “ethnic” identity—as opposed to inchoate concepts such as “symbolic ethnicity” that pertain rather to subjective and intangible aspects of self-identification with group labels. In their essay, “Talking Jewish,” Benor and Cohen provide examples that seem to affirm what Hollinger suggested: to reiterate, that “religious and ethnic communities [exert an influence that] often lasts well beyond the time when individuals and families have been deeply embedded in [their own particular] communities.” Thus, as reflected in this study, while not only Jews may be expected to “talk Jewish,” “talking Jewish” is still bound to crop up in particular ways in in-group conversations. However, their study also seems to suggest other ramifications: namely, what can occur when some people become re-embedded in communities at the sub-ethnic level. Thus, “talking Jewish” gives some indication that Jews distinguish themselves from other Jews, as the authors argue, by infusing their vernacular English with Jewish-based particularity.

In undertaking a reevaluation of “identity” as a standard, if much-debated, component of the “ethnicity” field, Bethamie Horowitz distinguishes between the individual-level and the group-level dimensions, and indicates how the terminology in the field has shifted, as mediated by changes in American culture and social relations.

In preparing this symposium, we have departed from previous practice by inviting comment on their colleagues’ presentations by several other scholarly experts. Both Riv-Ellen Prell and Jonathan D. Sarna are particularly well qualified to serve as commentators on the American Jewish experience, and their remarks help us, as readers, to take stock of the entire group of outstanding essays in this diverse discussion.⁶

Finally, it should be noted that the fine essay by Hagit Lavsky on German Jewish migration history in the interwar decades of the 20th century, published separately as a freestanding article, could also have been included in our wide-ranging discussion of ethnic phenomena. Migrant populations, after all, are the historical agents directly responsible for the addition of new ethnic categories in their receiver societies. Lavsky carefully denotes the subtle calibration of German Jewishness, not just according to global group labels but also with regard to distinct class, age, occupational, and institutional variables, as these were articulated in the encounter between immigrants and the receiver societies. Moreover, she sheds light on the way in which those differences came to be negotiated quite differently in three separate countries: the United States, England, and pre-state Israel (the Palestine *yishuv*), leading to a post-migration constellation of three different ex-German Jewish identities. This painstaking statistical and historical study, therefore, should certainly be read in tandem with the symposium on ethnicity and the Jews, even if its primary focus is not on the reevaluation of ethnicity theory per se, but rather the redefinition of key issues in German Jewish migration history.

This 25th volume of *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* appears at an important juncture in our own institutional history. The trio of extraordinary scholars who were responsible for founding the journal and guiding all of its previous volumes into print—Ezra Mendelsohn, Peter Medding, and the late Jonathan Frankel—are a hard act to follow. My own thanks to them joins the heartfelt gratitude of all of my colleagues on the staff and editorial group that now continues the work of publishing a quality annual survey of contemporary Jewish scholarship. Joining the editors’ group as of this year are my colleagues at the Hebrew University and members of the

Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry: Richard I. Cohen, Anat Helman, and Uzi Rebhun. I wish also to thank the Samuel and Althea Stroum Fund and the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation for providing us with the resources for publishing this volume.

Last but certainly not least, Laurie Fialkoff and Hannah Levinsky-Koevary are, as always, the lifeblood of this enterprise. The continuity in service and expertise that they have provided over the years has been doubly felt in this transition year, for which all of us are truly appreciative.

E.L.

Notes

1. David A. Hollinger, "Communalist and Dispersionist Approaches to American Jewish History in an Increasingly Post-Jewish Era," *American Jewish History*, vol. 95, no. 1 (Sept. 2009), 17. See also Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: 1995); idem, "Jewish Identity, Assimilation, and Multiculturalism," in *Creating American Jews*, ed. Karen Mittelman (Philadelphia: 1998), 52–59; cf. Richard D. Alba, *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America* (New Haven: 1990).
2. Hollinger, "Communalist and Dispersionist Approaches," 21.
3. Eli Lederhendler, *Jewish Immigrants and American Capitalism, 1880-1920: From Caste to Class* (New York: 2009), ix–xviii.
4. Moshe Rosman, *How Jewish is Jewish History?* (Oxford: 2007), 53 (see also the review by Nils Roemer in this volume, 170–172).
5. See Hollinger's comments on Michels' work ("Communalist and Dispersionist Approaches," 12, 16) and Michels' rejoinder in the same publication: "Communalist History and Beyond: The Potential of American Jewish History," *American Jewish History*, vol. 95, no. 1 (Sept. 2009), 61–71.
6. Uzi Rebhun's contribution to this volume, originally framed as a third commentary, appeared to us as a self-sustaining argument in its own right, and is therefore presented as such. This late editorial decision explains why his essay was not commented upon by our two discussants.

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Symposium

Ethnicity and Beyond: Theories and
Dilemmas of Jewish Group Demarcation

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Ethnicity as a Primordial- Situational-Constructed Experience: Different Times, Different Places, Different Constellations

Ewa Morawska
(UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX)

This essay argues for a flexible, context- and actor-dependent understanding of ethnicity, and illustrates this proposition by means of three sets of historical cases of Jewish communities compared and contrasted over time and across space. The first set examines the same group compared over time: commercial middle-class Jews in Venice during the period of residential dispersion (14th and 15th centuries) and in the ghetto era (early 16th through 17th centuries). The second comparison reconstructs the changed compositions of ethnicity over time among the same people, German Jewish intelligentsia in the socialist movement in Berlin at the turn of the 20th century and in the interwar period. Finally, the third set compares the same group across space: Soviet/post-Soviet Jews in Tel Aviv and in Philadelphia from the late 1980s until the present.

The concept of ethnicity in the social sciences has usually referred to common descent and culture that provide the basis of group social boundaries and members' identity.¹ While social scientists generally agree on the general referents of the concept of ethnicity, they have vigorously debated the nature of this shared bond. Three distinct understandings have been proposed. The earliest one views ethnicity as a primordial attachment to one's group and its values and traditions. Primordial attachments are those that stem from the "givens," or more precisely (as culture is inevitably involved in such matters), the assumed givens of social existence. The congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on are seen to have an ineffable and at times overpowering coerciveness in and of themselves. One is bound, ipso facto, to one's kin, one's neighbor, one's fellow believer—not merely because of personal affection, practical necessity, common interest, or incurred obligation, but also, in great part, by virtue of some unaccountable absolute import attributed to the very tie itself.²

The second understanding of the nature of ethnic ties and identities, formulated in opposition to the primordial thesis, represents them as contingent on circumstances and thus, by definition, impermanent. The circumstantial representation of

ethnicity has two subtypes: situational and instrumental. Situational ethnicity refers to memberships and identities that are deployed or made relevant by in- or out-group actors in response to specific societal situations and are likely to change accordingly. The instrumental understanding of ethnicity views it as activated by group members to serve specific material or political purposes and reshaped according to these ends.³

The third understanding views ethnicity as a social construction by actors of loyalties and identities in the process of engaging their environment. This approach shares with circumstantial representation a notion of ethnicity as emerging from the interaction between social situations and in-/out-group actors, but it is less circumstantial in that it allows for ethnic formations to endure beyond the demands of the moment.⁴ Belonging as well to the representations of ethnicity as a constructed phenomenon is the notion of symbolic ethnicity, which refers to an optional association with “things ethnic”: social ties, cultural rituals, and/or self-identification by choice rather than by social prescription or a current set of circumstances.⁵ An important distinction between this view and the social construction understanding is that symbolic ethnicity can be an individual orientation or practice that is not anchored in its carrier’s social surroundings.

While the advocates of the different representations of ethnicity sketched here continue to debate their positions, a novel and interesting proposition has recently appeared to resolve the differences among them, by allowing for context-dependent and, thus, changing constellations of primordial, circumstantial, and constructed components to make up ethnic practices and identities. I find particularly promising Steve Fenton’s proposition to treat primordial, situational, instrumental, and constructed ethnicities as *ideal types* to be tested and revised against the specific historical conditions in which concrete ethnic practices and identities of particular group members evolve and transform.⁶ Changing economic, political, and social-cultural circumstances, this approach posits, induce social actors—here, ethnic group members—to give their ethnic practices and identities specific meaning, relevance, and functions; or, in terms of the understanding proposed here, to form particular constellations of primordial, circumstantial, and constructed elements of their ethnicity in their interaction with the host environment.

The concept of ethnicity has generally been used in relation to established native national minorities and to populations of foreign origin settled in a host country. In this essay, we will be concerned with both of these cases. The syncretic conceptualization of ethnicity that I am proposing here allows for different combinations of both in-group and out-group elements. These include the use of language, cultural orientations, customs, religious beliefs and practices, social networks, and identities. Moreover, the specific constellations of these features and the scope and intensity of their primordial and situational components depend on the historical circumstances of ethnic group members’ experience in relation to the majority or receiver society.

A similar idea of the interactive and, thus, flexible notion of ethnicity in its application to the Jewish experience was once offered by Raphael Patai in his historical overview of Jewish communities “the world over” across time, who noted that:

a certain degree of acculturation to the non-Jewish environment has taken place in every Jewish Diaspora. . . . Each of these Jewish ethnic groups exhibits its own combination of Jewish and non-Jewish traits. The Jewish traits themselves are of two kinds: old ones, going back to earlier ages and countries of Jewish sojourn, including some . . . that date back to Biblical Hebrew origins; and new ones, which themselves may be several generations old, but which have developed locally and therefore are likely to represent a certain divergence from corresponding traits that are the result of other local developments.⁷

The syncretic approach proposed here calls for identification of the specific characteristics of the surrounding society and the ethnic group itself that make up the context in which the particular meaning of ethnicity is being defined in each examined historical case. In line with David Myers' formulation in his reflections upon Jewish identities across various geopolitical contexts, Jewish ethnicity is viewed here as "a hybrid creation composed of different strands of influence" that are exerted by changing circumstances of Jewish lives.⁸

Here it should be noted that existing, especially comparative, studies of ethnic groups' identities and social-cultural practices point to some general factors that contribute to the specific constellations of ethnicity across time and space. These include, on the side of the receiver society, attitudes and practices of exclusion and inclusion of "others" by the dominant or majority group(s) in the realms of economy, civic-political life, social relations, and cultural participation. Ethnic group characteristics that usually have an impact on the form and "contents" of ethnic identities and practices include the number as well as the residential and occupational concentration of group members; their economic position vis-à-vis the dominant/majority group(s); the similarity or difference of the typical cultural capital of group members in relation to that of the dominant or majority group(s) in the receiver society; the relative inwardness (exclusivity) or openness of group self-representations, religion, and shared social-cultural practices; and the proportion and social-political role of the post-migration, native-born members (second-generation-plus) of the group.

Comparative studies are particularly useful in highlighting the importance of the circumstances in which ethnicity is being defined.⁹ Social-historical studies of Jewish communities with a systematic comparative objective traditionally have been rare, in part because of the isolation of Jewish historiography within its own field, and in part (not unrelatedly) because of the notion underlying these studies of the transtemporal uniqueness of Jewish history.¹⁰ The comparative examination here of time- and place-specific contingencies of Jewish ethnicity shares its purpose with a collection of essays titled *Comparing Jewish Societies* (1997), probably the most explicitly methodologically informed work in this field published in recent years. Like Todd Endelman, the editor of that volume, I would like my analysis to "make a case for viewing Jewish history in a comparative perspective."¹¹ The "external" comparisons (Jewish groups compared with non-Jewish groups) in the Endelman volume aim to counter Jewish historians' traditional representations of Jewish experience in terms of its taken-for-granted uniqueness. The primary intention of my "internal" comparisons, which examine sets of Jewish populations or groups across time and space, is to demonstrate the integral embeddedness of Jewish experience in its historical surroundings and, thus, its context-dependent and changing character.

The examination of the five comparative cases presented here—Venetian middle-class Jews in the period of residential dispersion in the 14th and 15th centuries and the ghetto in the 16th and 17th centuries; Jewish socialists in Berlin at the turn of the 20th century and in the interwar period; and present-day Soviet/post-Soviet Jews in Tel Aviv—is based on my analysis of secondary sources, about 60 studies in total, followed up where possible by my interrogation of their authors.¹² Information about the sixth case, Soviet/post-Soviet Jews in Philadelphia as the compare-and-contrast match of Tel Aviv Jews, comes from my own ethnographic study of the Jewish community in the former city.¹³

An important caveat is in order before we proceed with the analysis. Against this author's conscience but due to the lack of relevant information in the sources that served as the basis of this project, the comparative examination presented here is sadly genderless. A critical consideration of the gendered nature of Jewish identities and group membership is particularly lacking in studies of middle-class Italian Jews and German Jewish socialists in the periods of interest here (in both cases, in lieu of systematic gender analysis, sporadic references are made to individual women of outstanding status in the public forum or, more often, to "Jewish women and family life").

In each set of comparative cases I first summarize the larger-society economic and political context in which each examined group lived and, within it, the group's social and demographic characteristics. I then identify the major features of ethnic identity and participation of the examined Jewish groups as reconstructed from available studies (or, more precisely, following the interpretations I found most persuasive). Next, I point out the main characteristics of the surrounding environment and the Jewish groups themselves that have contributed to those particular ethnic configurations.

Commercial Middle-class Jews in Venice: Residential Dispersion (14th–15th Centuries) versus Life in the Ghetto (16th–17th Centuries)

It was only in the later part of the 14th century that an estimated 700–800 Jews residing in the area of Venice (many of whom were occupied in being pawnbrokers to the city's poor or else were secondhand merchandise traders) were authorized to live in the city itself, provided that they would settle only on *terraferma*, the Venetian mainland, and would spend only short periods of time in the capital city.¹⁴ By the turn of the 16th century, a growing number of Jews—expellees from Spain and southern parts of Italy, refugees from the wars conducted by the Venetian republic with its competitors, and international traders from the Ottoman empire—began to settle in Venice. This growing "spread" of Jews "all over the city" bothered many Venetians and especially the Catholic clergy. Consequently, in 1516, the Venetian government issued a decree requiring all the Jews to reside together. Accordingly, they were "segregated on the island already then known as the *Ghetto Nuovo*¹⁵ [and], when the space available on that island proved to be insufficient, the Jews were assigned two additional adjacent areas, the *Ghetto Vecchio* in 1541 . . . and the *Ghetto Nuovissimo* in 1633."¹⁶

By the mid- to late 16th century, the ghetto housed between 2,000 and 3,000 Jewish persons, constituting between 1 and 2 percent of the Venetian population. It became an integral part of the city's social order, which consisted of "legally defined estates endowed with specific privileges, and . . . corporations with expressly declared rights and duties, specializing in particular fields of social and economic action." One such "corporation of specialists within this highly regulated society was the *Università degli Ebrei* . . . and the Jews could also be said to form an estate of outcasts, lower in status than all the recognized Christian orders [that is, noblemen, merchants, artisans, and clergy]."¹⁷ During this time, the traditional occupations of Venetian Jews in pawnbroking services expanded to include local and international trade, ranging from trade in secondhand merchandise to extensive overseas import-export operations. There were also long-established Jewish physicians, scholars, teachers, and artists.

Different groups within the Jewish community specialized in different occupations. By the turn of the 17th century, the corporation of Jews in Venice comprised three Jewish "nations" (as they were termed). The oldest settlers were the Germanic and Italian Ashkenazic Jews who were concentrated in banking, pawnbroking, and secondhand trade. The other two groups, both of them Sephardic Jews, were occupied in international trading; these were the Levantines originating in the Ottoman lands, and the Ponetines, or "westerners," who came to Venice from Spain, Portugal, and the Low Countries.

The base component of group membership among Venetian Jews in the 14th- and 15th-century period of residential dispersion was a fused ethno-religious identity. Although the Judaic faith and social-political location in the host society remained largely undifferentiated, the deeply habituated *religious* component of this identity was experienced by its bearers as primordial or inescapably given. In contrast, the social (as in relations and exchanges) and cultural (as in interests and pursuits) dimensions of ethnic identity and membership of Venetian Jews in that period represented a blend of primarily Jewish components and, of lesser scope and impact but nevertheless notable, broader (Christian) society influences. This latter element of Venetian Jews' ethnicity, reasserted in their encounters with the local Christian society (its political authorities as well as economic and cultural actors and agencies) in which the Jews were subordinate and insecure players, had a constructed and situational rather than primordial character.

In comparison, while the still fused ethno-religious principle remained crucial to the later, ghetto-era ethnic identity and group membership of Venetian Jews, its social-cultural component (the familiar "sounds, colors, tastes, and odors" of everyday life in the shared space)¹⁸ had also acquired a primordial character, which at the same time sustained or even enhanced the religious one. It was on the basis of this dual-anchor (Judaic religion as the fundament of their identity and social-cultural immersion in their own group), along with their relative security (thanks to legal provisions that affirmed ghetto residents' status as Venetian citizens and allowed for a large measure of self-government), that 16th- and 17th-century Jews in the city interacted with the outside society. In comparison with the era of residential dispersion, when the social pillar of Jews' ethno-religious identity and group membership was weaker and their civic-political security was notably less stable, the situational

component of ghetto-era ethnicity of Venetian Jews considerably diminished in the overall constellation. Their ethnic identity and pursuits retained an admixture of the broader society's influences through cultural and social ties maintained with the city's Christian residents. But the constructed component of their ethnicity remained unavoidably in place in Jews' relations with the outside society: dominant Christians' continued perception of Jews as inexorable (if tolerated) "others" and the evident constraints to which they were subject as citizens could not but sustain in Jewish residents the urge to present themselves to their neighbors as law-abiding and loyal Venetians and, among themselves, to reiterate a strategy of self-representation that stressed the importance of stability and quiescence.

The changing circumstances of Venetian Jewish existence shaped their differently nuanced ethnicities in each of the two periods considered here. In the period of residential dispersion in the 14th and 15th centuries, the chief condition that shaped ethnic identity and group membership of Venetian Jews was the taken-for-granted integral place of religion in people's—Jews' as well as the surrounding Christians'—everyday lives. For both Jews and Christians, Judaism was also the distinguishing characteristic of Jewish group membership: Jews perceived themselves and were perceived by Christians in ethno-religious terms.

The second circumstance shaping Venetian Jews' ethnicity in the period of residential dispersion was the residential dispersion itself, combined with civic-political constraints imposed by the republic's authorities, such as a prohibition on the erection of synagogues and on the establishment of in-group organizations, both of which significantly impeded the social base of local Jews' ethno-religious membership. Moreover, periodic reassessment by the government of residential permission for the group, as well as the restrictions placed on Jews' economic pursuits, undermined their sense of stability. The residence permit (*condotta*), the (low) interest rate allowed to be charged in money-lending to Christians and the (high) taxes levied on Jews were periodically reassessed by the Venetian government. Moreover, in order to prevent close relations between Jews and Christians and to make the former clearly distinguishable from the latter, all Jews coming to the city were made to wear a yellow circle on their outer clothing. Although the Venetian government did not force Jews to accept baptism, as was the case in other Italian towns in the 14th and 15th centuries, Jews were not allowed to build synagogues or Jewish schools in the midst of Christian neighborhoods, lest these "contaminate Christianity with Judaism."¹⁹

The third important circumstance influencing the composition of 14th- and 15th-century Venetian Jews' ethnicity, and somewhat counterbalancing the official restrictions, was the relative tolerance and openness of Christian Venetians of the time, combined with the great appeal of their Renaissance culture to educated Jews. Renowned across Europe, Renaissance Venice's prominence in literature, arts, and science afforded a splendid opportunity for a flourishing Jewish literary culture, including the printing of Hebrew religious books, poems, scholarly inquiries, and other literary works. While directly inspired by the Jewish religious tradition, this growing literature, as well as musical and theatrical performance culture, was evidently influenced by Italian Renaissance trends and ideas. Venetian Jewish scholars' participation in scientific research was equally notable. Even though theological

projects and artistic and scientific activities were mainly pursued by Jewish religious sages and scientists, and not by the representatives of commercial occupations, the latter were unavoidably affected by (Christian) Renaissance philosophical ideas, aesthetic tastes, and literary trends. The influence of the outside culture was also visible in the Jews' dress and manners, which followed the current fashion.

Venetian Jewish bankers' and merchants' daily social contacts included their co-religionists, naturally, but also Christian residents of Venice as well as visitors to the city. Relations with the Christians were primarily but not exclusively economic. Social contacts with non-Jews were facilitated both by the Jews' residential dispersion and by Christian Venetians' generally friendly attitude toward them. Thus, middle-class Venetian Jews met socially, attended cultural events, gambled, and even drank together with Christians—whom they resembled in comportment, manners, and local interests. Jewish merchants' familiarity with the Italian or, more precisely, Venetian language (among themselves they spoke a Judeo-Venetian dialect) was an important facilitator of these contacts.²⁰

The fourth circumstance shaping ethnic identity and group membership of Venetian Jews in the residential dispersion era, underlying the above factors, was what Robert Bonfil has called "the basic ambivalence of the Jewish condition" in the city. From the beginning of their settlement in Venice, Jews received contradictory signals from the host society, its officialdom, and rank-and-file residents. On the one hand, they were welcomed to Venice—in fact, city authorities actively encouraged them to come, in order to provide specific functions needed for the city's social peace (money-lending to the poor), the wellbeing of its affluent classes (medical services) and economic growth (for traders)—and, as such, their lives and property were legally protected. On the other hand, they were constrained in their life options and treated as inferior outsiders whose fate as Venetians was not in their own hands.²¹

As noted, Venice's Christian residents were often friendly toward Jews, and this facilitated social and cultural contacts between the two groups. At the same time, Jews were perceived irrevocably as "others" by their Christian neighbors—in terms of religion, of course, but also commonly (as convincingly argued by Richard Sennett) as representatives of a different, lower, physical species.²² Occasional attacks on Jewish persons and property, prompted by the anti-Jewish preachings of visiting friars, added to Jews' sense of insecurity.

We now consider the major factors in the surrounding society and among Jews themselves that shaped the Venetian Jews' ethnicity in the ghetto during the 16th and 17th centuries. These comprised four sets of circumstances, some of which were holdovers from the previous era, but which now came together in a new constellation that produced a qualitatively different outcome.

The first circumstance was the persistence of the fused, ethno-religious basis of Jews' identity and group membership, reflecting the traditionalism of their own lives and the endurance of the accustomed perceptions of Jews (and, for that matter, of other non-Christians residing in the city) by their Christian neighbors. The second circumstance introduced an important change in the functioning of this ethno-religious basis: the formation of the ghetto and its effects in the realm of legal protection and the relative civic autonomy of the Jewish community, and the impact of all this upon the social-cultural lives of its members.²³

The Jews' existence in Venice in the ghetto era was subject to the same general principle as before: they were welcomed by the city's government as performers of important economic functions and as such they were protected by the law, yet their ultimate fate was outside of their control. But the institution of the ghetto introduced a crucial difference. First, in contrast to the earlier period of residential dispersion, the establishment of the ghetto allowed Jews to live in the city under an explicitly stated legal provision to this effect, which offered the Jewish community a new sense of stability. Second and importantly, like other occupational and religious corporations in the city, the *Università degli Hebrei* had a self-government that allowed the Jewish community a certain autonomy. Representing the three Jewish "nations" residing in the ghetto, the Jews' self-governing institution was responsible both for the maintenance of internal order and for the regulation of Jews' commercial activities. It also acted as a negotiator (with limited powers) of the terms of renewed charters and fiscal obligations of the Jewish community, apportioning payments and collecting them in the form of specific taxes.²⁴

Permitted now to erect synagogues in the enclosure of their own neighborhoods, Venetian Jews built no less than eight houses of prayer by the mid-16th century, which also served as centers of religious education and talmudic study for the (male) residents. They were now able to pursue their religious practices in the open. They were also involved in diverse cultural activities. Several confraternities, or voluntary associations, served the social (including entertainment) and practical needs of the residents. Highly regarded printing houses produced books in both Hebrew and Italian (by the 16th century, bilingual competence became widespread in Jewish cultural and scholarly circles). Established in the previous era, medical studies gained popularity among middle-class Venetian Jews; the nearby Padua Medical School attracted a considerable number of Jewish students from Venice, many of whom were sons of affluent merchants.

Group social life intensified, compared with the earlier period of residential dispersion, as Jews were cramped into an overcrowded ghetto, sharing the same space and separated from others. Inside, social contacts of ghetto inhabitants took place primarily within the boundaries of the three nations: German/Italian, Ponentine, and Levantine.²⁵

The third factor shaping the composition of Venetian Jews' ethnicity in the ghetto era was the sustained influence of the outside world through cultural and social contacts with the city's Christian residents. To be sure, the intensity of social and cultural exchange between ghetto residents and non-Jews outside had probably diminished overall in comparison with the earlier period. Moreover, intensified efforts of Catholic Counter-Reformation agitators to isolate the Jews, followed by heightened Christian fears of the "Jewish disease" during and after the Venetian plague in 1629–1631—and, more generally, the gradual decline of Venice as a cultural and economic center—further contributed to the weakening of social interactions between Jewish and Christian Venetians. Yet contact between the two groups by no means disappeared. It continued, first and foremost, in the economic realm, but also socially and during Christians' visits in the ghetto to attend cultural events such as public lectures of celebrated Jewish scholars, and musical or theatrical performances.