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Jay R. Berkovitz, *Rites and Passages: The Beginnings of Modern Jewish Culture in France, 1650-1860*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. 333 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.96 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8122-3816-8.

Review by Ronald Schechter, The College of William and Mary.

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Jay Berkovitz's latest book is a remarkable achievement. Whereas most scholarly monographs on the Jews of France cover less than a century, Berkovitz has taken on more than two centuries. His sources include rabbinical writings in Hebrew, hand-written community minutes in a notoriously difficult mix of Hebrew, Yiddish, and Alsatian, as well as periodicals and government records in French and German. The author is equally comfortable discussing the hermeneutics of eighteenth-century rabbinical scholarship, the historiography of the French Revolution, and the anthropological study of ritual.

The first thing that strikes the reader is the book's periodization: 1650 to 1860. How could "modern" Jewish culture have begun in 1650? Historians of French Jewry have typically assumed that the Jews encountered modernity in 1789, or more precisely, 1791, when the National Assembly abolished all legal distinctions between Jews and gentiles. Some recent work has delayed the date of Jewish modernization and noted the persistence of traditional modes of thinking and social organization well beyond the Revolution.<sup>[1]</sup> Yet no one, to my knowledge, has suggested that the Jews of France were modern, or even that they were beginning to be modern, in 1650. As to 1860, this is a relatively straightforward breaking point in Franco-Jewish history, as it marks the founding of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, the Jewish philanthropic society that fought for the rights of Jews and sought to improve their conditions throughout the world.

But what happened in 1650? By the middle of the seventeenth century, and primarily as a result of French conquests in the Thirty Years' War, the kingdom acquired its first organized Jewish communities. Formally expelled in 1394, Jews trickled back beginning around 1550, with a handful of "useful" Ashkenazi families provisioning the army in the garrison town of Metz. A small community of Sephardic Jews emerged in Bordeaux around the same time, but under the pretense of being recent converts to Christianity. (The Sephardic Jews "came out" in 1723, when the crown recognized them as Jews for the first time.) With the Treaty of Westphalia a century later, however, France inherited the small but numerous Jewish communities of Alsace and Lorraine, and the Bourbon monarchs permitted them, along with the Jewish population of Metz, to expand rapidly through immigration.

According to Berkovitz, the Jewish communities of eastern France quickly acquired the characteristics typically associated with modernity. Chief among these was the power of the laity over the rabbis. The longstanding image of pre-revolutionary rabbis exercising civic power over their coreligionists on the basis of Jewish law is only partially correct, Berkovitz argues. Over the course of the seventeenth century, he shows on the basis of communal regulations, increasingly wealthy merchants translated their economic and social capital into political and judicial power, selecting the rabbis (from abroad, so they would not have influential connections locally), crowding into governing councils, and forming their own courts alongside those of the rabbis. At the same time, the rationalizing absolutist state encroached on rabbinical power, prohibiting rabbis from using the weapon of excommunication for non-religious offenses or for seeking justice in royal tribunals. An additional sign of modernity was inter-confessional contact. Whereas historians have presented the picture of (literally) ghettoized Jews cut off from the surrounding society, Berkovitz has found that significant contact existed between Jews and

non-Jews. This contact was not always friendly, and communities—again under the leadership of the wealthiest lay members—adopted increasingly strict sumptuary laws to prevent resentment by gentile neighbors, who encountered Jews more regularly outside the confines of the Jewish quarters and might see fine clothing and jewelry as signs of Jewish opulence. Meanwhile the rabbis, still exercising moral authority, railed against the excessive imitation of gentile practices such as wearing wigs and playing cards, though in their homilies they occasionally referred to Christians as models of ethical conduct.

Given Berkovitz's Tocquevillean emphasis on the modern features of a supposedly pre-modern society, one might expect the author to argue that the Revolution only augmented and accelerated the modernization of the Jewish population. Yet he makes the paradoxical argument, adapting Simon Schama's analysis to the case of the Jews, that the Revolution actually retarded the pace of the modernization. The Revolution, which made citizenship contingent on the abolition of communal autonomy, led to disarray, particularly in the Ashkenazi east; and during the Reign of Terror the hostility toward traditional religion, which included attacks on Judaism, made any organized reform of practice or dogma impossible. Napoleon restored order in this matter but on his terms. In his love of grandeur and pageantry, he revived the ancient Sanhedrin in 1807 and gave it the mandate of assuring the compatibility between Jewish law and French civil law. In return he officially recognized the Jewish religion alongside Catholicism and Protestantism, though he discriminated against the Jews economically in an effort to hasten their "regeneration," a process that entailed weaning them from commerce and money lending, encouraging "useful" occupations, and fostering additional social contact with gentiles. Citing rabbinical precedents for the Sanhedrin's rulings—on such matters as marriage, divorce, and commerce—Berkovitz goes against the grain of a historiography that has frequently faulted the Sanhedrin for distorting Jewish law to please the Emperor.

What was new in the wake of the Sanhedrin, however, was the creation of a Jewish hierarchy in France. The Central Israelite Consistory, following Napoleon's penchant for centralization in religion as in other matters, was based in Paris and led by a Chief Rabbi, along with laymen with a reputation for "enlightenment." Departmental consistories in regions with a significant Jewish population were subordinate to the Central Consistory, and they too were characterized by a hierarchical organization. Though centralization is typically viewed as a feature of modernization, the consistory system ironically stalled the modernization of French Jewry. In a revealing comparison with Germany, Berkovitz notes that loosely organized Jewish communities across the Rhine made it easy for dissenters from traditional religious doctrine and practice to initiate innovations, thus creating the schism between Orthodox and Reform Judaism that persists to this day. In France, the Sanhedrin had canonized orthodox tradition, and Napoleon's imprimatur held long after Waterloo. To be sure, Franco-Judaism, as it has long been called, had characteristic elements, including an emphasis on patriotism as a religious virtue. Yet Berkovitz tells us that "fraternity" between Jews and gentiles and a patriotic devotion to the state were features of pre-revolutionary rabbinical thought as well. Moreover, following the Bourbon Restoration, during which a particularly bigoted strain of Christianity stunted Jewish-Gentile interaction, Judaism achieved official parity with Catholicism and Protestantism. Not only did rabbis typically participate in official events, they, like their Christian counterparts, received a salary from the state, effectively turning them into civil servants. Under these circumstances, outsiders demanding reform had very little leverage.

Elaborating on his comparison, Berkovitz stresses that in Germany Jewish reformers sought to make Judaism civically respectable in large measure so that governments would grant Jews equal rights. In France, by contrast, the Jews already had civic equality and were not desperate to alter the religion that their *patrie* officially endorsed. There were some innovations in France, such as the introduction of the organ into synagogues, the creation of an *initiation religieuse* for girls as well as boys, and the elimination of obscure medieval prayers from the liturgy, but these were a far cry from calls by reformers in Germany to change the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday and permit the consumption of non-kosher

food. And even the small innovations that the French rabbinate approved were in line with a tradition of such adjustments, Berkovitz argues. Ironically, then, the nineteenth century saw an increase in the prestige and moral authority of rabbis among French Jews and gentiles alike—though in the second half of the century challenges from socialists and Catholic integralists increased. Of course, rabbis no longer had the power to judge matters outside of religion, but as Berkovitz shows, such civil power had been limited even under the old regime.

Berkovitz argues that Jewish ritual changed profoundly from the old regime to the post-revolutionary era. “During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,” he writes, “rituals were formative elements of people’s view of the world. Traditional communities developed ritual systems to explain the world and the individual’s place within it” (p. 237). The Jews were no different from other people in this respect. After the Revolution, however, “ritual assumed more of a performative function that dramatized, especially for non-Jews, the epoch-making changes of the day” (p. 238). In my own research I have found that Jewish leaders were highly preoccupied with their self-image both before and after the Revolution, and that during both periods they used ritual to explain “the epoch-making changes of the day,” though certainly the opportunities for self-representation increased with the increasing acceptance of Jews as equal citizens.[2] More importantly, however, the notion that the function and meaning of ritual depends on the historical period in question is a challenge both to anthropologists and cultural historians.

In all, Berkovitz has produced an erudite and persuasive work and a model of interdisciplinary scholarship. A major contribution to the study of European Jewry, *Rites and Passages* is equally relevant to the study of French history, cultural history, and the relationship between religion and modernity.

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## NOTES

[1] Paula Hyman has emphasized the persistence of tradition among Ashkenazi Jews well after the French Revolution. See, for example, *The Emancipation of the Jews of Alsace: Acculturation and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

[2] Ronald Schechter, *Obstinate Hebrews: Representations of Jews in France, 1715–1815* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

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