# Cultures of the Jews, Volume 2: Diversities of Diaspora

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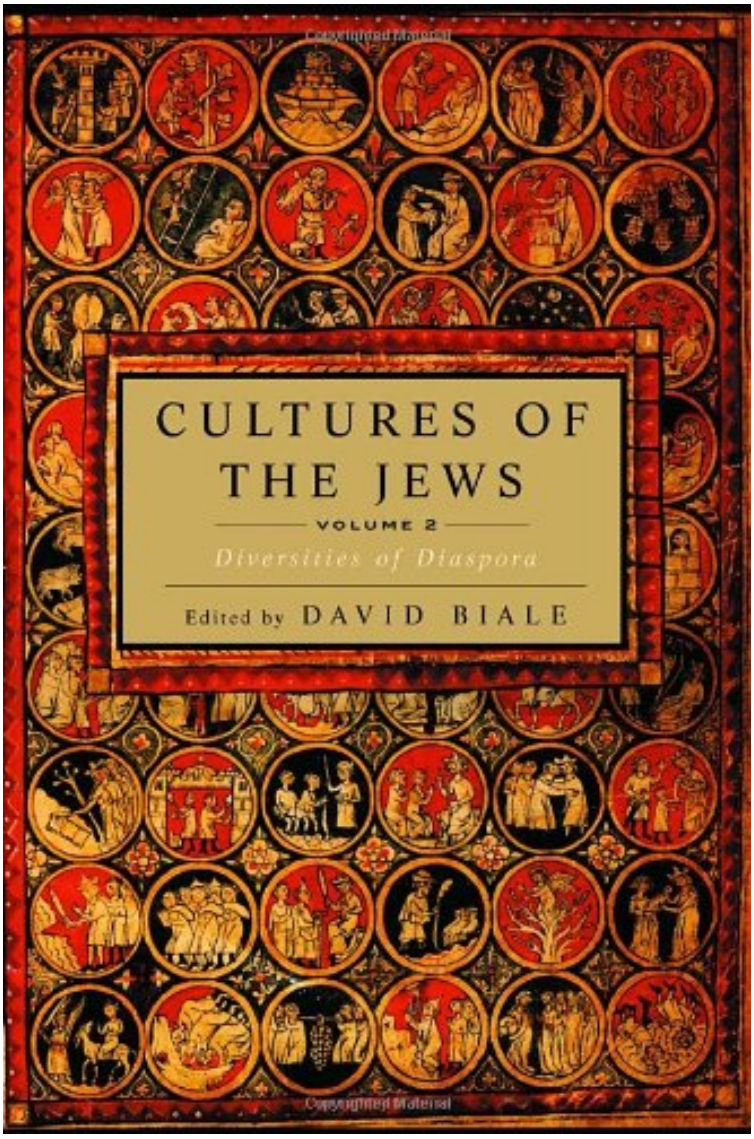




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**From Brand: Knopf Group E-Books : Cultures of the Jews, Volume 2: Diversities of Diaspora** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Cultures of the Jews, Volume 2: Diversities of Diaspora:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Give this book a chance.By ChairI want to bring this scholar into the light of day as the careful and thoughtful writer he is. At the moment I am not prepared to write a review of this book. But, please refer to other reviews of his other books, such as volume 1 of this series.6 of 11 people found the following

review helpful. vol I was great, just starting vol 2By Customerfyi: the one star reviewer above also loved a book praising Kahane and panned a book critical of Pollard. I don't usually review books I have not finished, but since the other reviewer chose to give one star as the first review, I thought her tastes were germane.1 of 31 people found the following review helpful. One of the worstBy Eve B.Because the editor and contributors have such a strong sense of their own self-importance, the book is full of pretend-to-be-deep-thinking simplistic and illogical conjectures.

Scattered over much of the world throughout most of their history, are the Jews one people or many? How do they resemble and how do they differ from Jews in other places and times? What have their relationships been to the cultures of their neighbors? To address these and similar questions, some of the finest scholars of our day have contributed their insights to Cultures of the Jews, a winner of the National Jewish Book Award upon its hardcover publication in 2002. Constructing their essays around specific cultural artifacts that were created in the period and locale under study, the contributors describe the cultural interactions among different Jewsfrom rabbis and scholars to non-elite groups, including womenas well as between Jews and the surrounding non-Jewish world. What they conclude is that although Jews have always had their own autonomous traditions, Jewish identity cannot be considered the fixed product of either ancient ethnic or religious origins. Rather, it has shifted and assumed new forms in response to the cultural environment in which the Jews have lived.Diversities of Diaspora, the second volume in Cultures of the Jews, illuminates Judeo-Arabic culture in the Golden Age of Islam; Sephardic culture as it bloomed first on the Iberian Peninsula and later in Amsterdam; and the Jewish-Christian symbiosis in Ashkenazic Europe. It also discusses Jewish culture in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; the culture of the Italian Jews of the Renaissance period; and representations of folklore and material culture through childbirth rituals throughout the Jewish diaspora.

Lay readers already hooked on Jewish history will be endlessly fascinated, and those seeking a solid state-of-the art introduction to the field will find it here, with ample reference to other, more specialized or canonical works. . . One of the most nourishing Jewish books we've encountered in some time. . . . Wonderful. The Jerusalem ReportThe writers revel in the new vistas opened by a cultural approach, lavishly providing us, in generous detail, with descriptions of a Jewish world more various than historians have allowed us to glimpse. TikkunBiale has gathered a stellar international group of scholars around the grand theme of Jewish cultural history. The tastes of many different intellectual palates will find various satisfactions here. Jewish Quarterly About the AuthorDavid Biale is the Emanuel Ringelblum Professor of Jewish History at the University of California, Davis.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.MERCHANTS AND INTELLECTUALS, RABBIS AND POETS:Judeo-Arabic Culture in the Golden Age of IslamRaymond P. Scheindlin Judah al-Harizipoet, storyteller, and witwriting early in the thirteenth century somewhere in the Arabic-speaking Middle East, relates the following anecdote: Yesterday I spent the day with some friends. We saw a crowd gathered at the city gate and were told by a bystander that they had gathered to watch an astrologer tell fortunes. We pushed through the crowd and found at the center a garrulous old man taking astronomical measurements with an astrolabe and offering his services, advertising himself in elaborate and eloquent speeches. People were coming forward one by one to consult him about their troubles in their work and their private lives, and to learn their own fortunes and those of their children. Each received his answer and paid the astrologers fee. I suggested to my friends that we test his powers by agreeing on a question among ourselves: When will the Jews be redeemed from their exile, and when will the Jewish kingdom be restored? When our turn came, we offered him a good fee if he could tell both the question and the answer. The astrologer performed certain rites with sand and lifted his astrolabe. He seemed ready to reply, but instead of launching into his customary eloquence, he sank into a profound and ominous silence. At last, he turned a furious face on us and exclaimed: I swear by the Creator of the radiant light, the sun and the moon, and every constellation that rises and sets, that you are neither Muslims nor Christians, but members of a despised and lowly people! Could you be Jews? Rightly spoken, we replied. He launched into a harangue accusing us of asking about the end of time and history, of wishing for the downfall of the Islamic kingdom, and of rebelling against the state. The crowd became so enraged that they would have stoned us to death, but someone persuaded them to take us to a judge. The qadi was a sensible man who saw that we werent revolutionaries but just young people out on the town enjoying ourselves. He kept us in prison overnight until the crowd dispersed, and in the morning sent us on our way. A narrow escape, thank God! This story may serve as an emblem of the style and tone of Jewish life in the Islamic world during the age of Islamic ascendancy. At the beginning of the story, the Jewish boys mix with the crowd in the street. They are unrecognizable as Jews by their speech, bearing, or clothing; they wear no special hat or badge. Even the astrologer, who is supposed to have knowledge of hidden things, says, Could you be Jews? indicating that he is not sure. The boys are conscious of being different from the crowd, but the difference they are conscious of is not primarily that they are Jews so much as the social difference. Within the crowd, assembled adventitiously and united only in its fascination with the astrologer, the youths are a preexisting, closed circle of friends. The people in the crowd believe in the astrologer unquestioningly and come forward with serious questions about their lives, but the youths are skeptical intellectuals whose impulse is to test him. Their skepticism has nothing to do with their being Jewish, for belief in astrology crossed religious lines in this period; their test is aimed not at astrology itself but at the

astrologers skill. At the storys beginning, it is not their religion that distinguishes the jaunty youths from the crowd but their class. The youths openly mark themselves as a group apart from the crowd by going in together on a question. They never actually enunciate the question, for their purpose is to make it as hard as possible for the astrologer to succeed and, if possible, to discredit him. It is only logical that the astrologer should have to guess the question as well as the answer, for if the question were simply When will Israel be redeemed? there would be no way to verify the answer; thus, the astrologer has to verify his skill by guessing the question that has been agreed upon. We may assume that the showdown nature of the question would heighten the crowds attention and would therefore have the effect of isolating the group of youths even more. The astrologers speech falls into two parts: the first climaxes with his guess that the youths are Jews; the second is the denunciation. The transition between the two speeches is rich in implications about both parties. The boys callowness is displayed in their blunt reply (contrasting, as it does, with the astrologers eloquence): Rightly spoken! They acknowledge that they are Jews with no shyness or hesitation, having no inkling of the trouble into which this admission is about to bring them. Are they too surprised by the astrologers question to lie, or too simple? Whatever the reason, it never occurs to the boys to take advantage of the astrologers uncertainty, so natural does it seem to them to acknowledge being Jewish. The moment the astrologer expresses his doubt, he abandons his professional pretension to knowledge of mysteries and is transformed into an ordinary person. And with the vanishing of this illusion, the fun also vanishes, both for the youths in the story and for us readers. Our astrologer may or may not be a con artist at the beginning of the storythe conventions of the genre to which the story belongs would have the medieval reader assume that he is a charlatanbut, at the end, we see him as a Muslim who has been shaken by the Jewish youths question (no matter how he divines it). It is a fervent believer who, in his second speech, pours his pious rage (in eloquent Hebrew) on the finally frightened boys. The question of the astrologers sincerity as a fortune teller vanishes into insignificance in comparison with his sincerity as a Muslim. His encounter with the latent messianic hopes of the Jewish youths takes him out of his role as astrologer and turns him into a religious preacher who uses his eloquence to forge the crowd into a group unified in faith and loyalty to their own kind. In the course of this transformation, he ceases to stand above and apart from the crowdin accordance with the normal role of the protagonist in the genre to which the story belongsbut merges with the crowd and vanishes from the narrative. The storys depiction of the Jewish characters as externally indistinguishable from the Muslim masses, circulating confidently among them without being aware of any need for caution, corresponds with the reality of Jewish life in the Muslim world for most of the period of this chapter, at least during the era of Islamic supremacy, from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries. The Jews were similar to Muslims in most aspects of style, interests, ideas, and taste, and their leaders were affected by the same intellectual trends in theology, philosophy, and literature; furthermore, Jews of all classes benefited from the prosperity of the Islamic world. Yet the Jews of Islam were conscious of being members of a group with a different history and a different destiny from those of society at large, as reflected in the question that came most naturally to the minds of the boys: the fate of the Jewish people. Although they moved about comfortably and confidently in their Muslim environment, they were conscious of being in an unsettled state. And, although their peoples exile had lasted more than a thousand years, they were still awaiting the Redemption. It turns out that the Jews were not as safe as they thought, for that sustaining hope for redemption was understood by the Muslim majority as implicitly subversive of both the political status quo and the supremacy of Islam. Yet the danger came more from the popular piety of the masses than from the authorities; the official institutions of the state, as represented by the qadi in our story, actually protected the Jews. The qadi applies classic Islamic law to the boys case in denying the crowd the right to harm them. In fact, he is generous. Islam extended to the Jews and Christians within its territories protection in the practice of their religion, in exchange for payment of a specific tax and for maintaining a low profile. By raising the question of the messianic redemption, the boys actually come close to breaking this last understanding; they come close enough to the line to enrage the astrologer and the crowd, but since they do not actually cross it (by, for example, openly blaspheming Islam or its prophet), they do not forfeit their protected status (dhimma). The story is typical of the Jewish experience, even its social perspective, for it is written from the point of view of the wealthy, educated elite of the Jewish community. This is typical of the literary sources of the age, which are rich in their testimony of this classs thoughts, beliefs, and imaginations, but whose testimony about the Jewish masses is meager. At the same time, our story affords an exceptionally vivid picture of street life, for literary sources ordinarily tell us little about everyday reality. (As we shall see, we have other sources for such information.) Finally, our story illustrates the extent to which literary fashions linked Jewish and Islamic culture. Al-Harizi did not aim to provide readers of a later age with a picture of Jewish life in the streets of Islamic cities; he wrote literature of entertainment, and he related this story as a maqama, a kind of story invented by Arabic writers in the tenth century that was widely imitated by Hebrew writers beginning in the twelfth. Not only is al-Harizis maqama of the astrologer a perfect example of the Arabic genre in Hebrew, but its line of action and its central motifa group of well-to-do young men who are out for fun, who in the process cross the boundary of religious propriety, and who thereby nearly come to grief at the hands of a mobhave a close parallel in an Arabic maqama whose protagonists are all Muslims. History The Jews of Islam may have been highly acculturated to the manners and values of the Islamic world, but they were not an eccentric or marginal community; they were actually in the mainstream of Jewish

history. When, in the seventh and eighth centuries, Arab conquerors seized control of the Persian Empire and the Asian and North African territories of the Byzantine Empire and conquered the rest of North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula, they acquired sovereignty over a significant part of the civilized world. Most of the territories conquered at that timeSpain and Sicily were the main losseshave remained Islamic to this very day. Although in modern times the Islamic world has lost to Europe its earlier advantage in economic, technological, and scientific development, in much of the period from the eighth to the seventeenth centuries it was dominant in all these spheres. Indeed, from the seventh through the thirteenth centuries, Islamdom was the center of the Western world and Europe the periphery; correspondingly, the Jews of the Muslim world were the worlds leaders in wealth, culture, and intellectual achievement. They were also the bulkgenerally estimated as 90 percentof the worlds Jews. The Jews did not blunder into the Muslim world as immigrants or exiles. They were part of the population of Western Asia, North Africa, and Iberia, now called al-Andalus, where medieval Arabo-Islamic culture developed as an amalgamation of Arabic language, Islamic religion, and local culture. Jews were an intrinsic part of this culture. They resembled their neighbors in their names, dress, and language as well as in most other features of their culture, except, of course, in their religion, their sense of their own distinctness, their view of history, and the institutional affiliations that flowed from these differences. In view of the above, the Jewish culture depicted in this chapter will be referred to as Judeo-Arabic culture. Although this term is often used to refer to Jewish writing in the Arabic language, it is useful far beyond the domain of language, for the Arabic character of the Jewish culture we are describing is evident not only in the Jews use of the Arabic language but also in every aspect of their culture during the heyday of premodern Islameven in their practice of religion and in the ways in which they used Hebrew. Thus, we shall use Judeo-Arabic to refer to the culture, and the ordinary language of Judeo-Arabic Jews we shall simply call Arabic. To understand the Jews of the Muslim world during the age of Islamic preeminence, the ordinary modern reader is obliged to reorient himself away from Europe and toward the Mediterranean. There he will find a Jewish community quite different from that of either the modern Middle East or medieval Europe: a community that was on the whole prosperous, little subject to persecution, economically well integrated with the environment, and self-confident to the point of being able to adjust to both the external and the internal features of its environment without fear of acculturation. In addition, this community was so productive in its intellectual and literary activities that some of its products have become permanent treasures of the Jewish tradition, and many of them still have the power to fascinate and inspire us with their craft and beauty. The Islamic conquests created two new conditions that would enable the Jews to flourish and to create the most successful Jewish Diaspora community of premodern times. First, it united them, for the first time since the expansion of the Diaspora in Hellenistic times, hundreds of years before, into one political, economic, and cultural system, a single Islamic empire stretching from the Indus River in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west, including Iberia. Second, it brought relief from persecution, harassment, and humiliation to those Jews who had been living under harsh Christian regimes, especially in Palestine, Egypt, and Spain. The Arabs did not embark on their conquests with the intention of converting the world to Islam. On the whole, people converted because conditions under Islamic rule were favorable to Muslims; likewise, they adopted Arabic simply because it was the language of government and public life. Implacably hostile to paganism, Islam respected both Christianity and Judaism for possessing a divinely revealed book, and it viewed them as its sisters in monotheism. Therefore, the Muslims permitted Jews and Christians to retain their ancestral religions, provided they adhered to certain conditions. The Jews and Christians were regarded as dhimmisprotected subjectsand their status was defined by a set of rules known as the Pact of Umar. Dhimmis were guaranteed their lives and property and were tolerated in the practice of their religion in exchange for payment of special taxes and on condition that they behaved in a manner appropriate to a subject population.