

Introduction to the Ashkenazic Rabbinic Library of the Early Modern Period

The seminar will address key developments in rabbinic culture in the Ashkenazic cultural realm during the early modern period, particularly during the 16th and 17th centuries. By the term *Ashkenaz* we will refer to a territory and a community whose spoken language was mainly Yiddish, and which followed the Ashkenazic *Minhag*, a religious code of everyday conduct commonly shared, with slight variations, throughout the Ashkenazic world during that period. Thus, the term does not pertain to historical Ashkenaz (i.e. “Germany”), but rather to a cultural realm spread across different political units, whose centers included Krakow, Prague, and to some extent also Frankfurt.

The basic assumption of the seminar is that the transition from late medieval Ashkenazic patterns of learning, writing, and literary creation prior to the invention of print, to patterns resulting from the appearance of the printed book constituted a crisis. The seminar will examine the claim that the Ashkenazic rabbinic literature produced during the period under consideration is in fact new in many ways and was now faced with a hitherto unknown reality. From certain aspects, this new body of literature may be rendered 'modern'.

In the course of the seminar we will explore the attitudes and mindsets common amongst the cultural elite of the Jewish community in light of the dramatic transition, indeed the crisis, caused by the introduction of the printing press. We will read debates that took place between conservative and radical strands, and encounter such figures as Moshe Isserles of Krakow and Judah Loew ben Bezalel (Maharal) of Prague. We will learn of the transformations that took hold in the main traditional literary genres, including halachic literature, hermeneutics, Midrash, as well as new genres that were the product of those transformations in the Ashkenazic world. Particular attention will be given to the emergence of a religious, non-halachic culture, both low and high, which was profoundly influenced by the appearance of Kabbalah literature in print, especially the appearance of the Zohar in the mid-16th century. By reading such texts, we will learn to identify markers of broader cultural and social change.

The seminar will ultimately address the most important question in the study of the Jewish community in early modern Europe, namely the extent to which it responded to key cultural developments in European society in general, existed parallel to it, or altogether deviates from it.