Abstracts

Privacy and Private in Early Modern Jewish Life
Centre for Privacy Studies

Michaël Green (Centre for Privacy Studies, University of Copenhagen)

“Writing the Private: Jewish Egodocuments of Amsterdam”

The genre of egodocuments (memoirs, diaries, autobiographies, almanachs, letters) offer a unique insight into the ideas the authors of these documents had. In this paper, I will focus on particular examples of Jewish writings in Amsterdam, throughout the early modern period. These examples focus on private and public life of their authors, as well as on the communal life. The “tolerant” climate of the city of Amsterdam allowed the Jewish population to live a rather peaceful life, contrary to those living in other parts of Europe. Therefore, it is particularly important to assess whether there were difference in perception of the “private” and “privacy” between the Jewish population and the Christians. By using methodology developed at the Centre for Privacy Studies, I will demonstrate how this type of sources can be analysed from the privacy perspective.

Rebekka Voß (University of Frankfurt)

“Yiddish Ethical Literature, Privacy, and the Democratization of Knowledge in Eighteenth Century Germany”

Jewish guides to ethical life written in Yiddish, the Jewish vernacular of Central and Eastern Europe, prioritized religious instruction for all Jews, men and women, to eliminate ignorance and establish Jewish belief anchored in knowledge. They were aimed at the majority of Jews
who did not know enough Hebrew to read the classical texts of Judaism in their original language. These Yiddish works were typically studied in privacy, either alone or in a small group, without a rabbinical teacher. In eighteenth-century German-Jewish society, the improvement of the individual was in fact often inspired by Protestant Pietism, rather than the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, as my paper will show. More broadly, I wish to discuss the contribution of pietistic renewal to shaping modernity in major aspects that suggest new conceptions of the individual in society: the democratization of knowledge, the privatization of religion, and religious individualism.

Claudia Rosenzweig (Bar-Ilan University)
“Privacy and Control: Yiddish Texts from Italy (16th century)”

Literary texts from the first half of the 16th century seem to be the product of a culture where the halakhà indicated clearly what was allowed and what was forbidden in every realm of everyday life. Other texts, such as ‘books of precepts’ and ‘customs’, which became more and more popular in Yiddish in the same period, show a shift in the attitude to privacy, and in particular to everything that has to do with the body and sexual life. Privacy here becomes a place of interior control, so that it can be seen that it does not necessarily mean freedom, but in fact often the very opposite. Privacy and control go together. In this paper, I wish to show some textual examples.

Rachel Greenbladt (Brandeis University)
“Domestic Space, Family Space, and Private Space: Glikl and her Contemporaries”

“My dear children,” wrote seventeenth-century Jewish businesswoman and bereft widow Glikl bas Judah Leib, “I began writing this, with God’s help, after the death of your pious father,
since it afforded me some pleasure when the melancholy thoughts were upon me. I passed many sleepless nights in the throes of severe anxiety for we were like sheep without a shepherd—as our faithful shepherd was no more, and I feared I would give way to melancholy thoughts, God forbid.” This intimate writing brings its readers directly into Glikl’s most private quarters. Are we, today, mere unintended interlopers? Or, did Glikl, and perhaps other women like her, have multiple audiences in mind? This paper argues that while early modern women in Europe, including its Jewish women, remained, for the most part, circumscribed in domestic spaces, that domesticity did not always overlap with privacy. The ways in which women wrote can help point to the ways they understood different realms, and negotiated the borders among them.

Bart Wallet (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

“Individual & Community: Locating Private Spaces in Early Modern Ashkenazi Amsterdam”

Whereas in the seventeenth century the Portuguese community was the largest Jewish community in Amsterdam, in the eighteenth century the Ashkenazim took over. This community eventually developed into the largest in all of Europe. Ashkenazi culture is characterized by great stress on community and communal activities. This paper will, in contrast, locate private spaces of Amsterdam Ashkenazim, by using a variety of sources, notably Yiddish chronicles, letters and minute books. The findings will be contextualized by analyzing the similarities and differences with Sephardi and general Dutch modes of privacy, in order to answer the question whether or not we can speak of a distinct early modern Ashkenazi approach to privacy.