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Links in a chain: Early modern Yiddish historiography in the northern Netherlands (1743-1812)

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Publication date
2012

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Wallet, B. T. (2012). *Links in a chain: Early modern Yiddish historiography in the northern Netherlands (1743-1812)*.

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Conclusion/Summary

In the long eighteenth century Amsterdam was the cradle for a small yet significant corpus of Jewish history texts. History books, chronicles, pamphlets and historical poetry were produced in both the Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities. Surprisingly, and in contrast to the vast majority of preceding Jewish historiography, these texts were written not in Hebrew but in the vernacular of the communities, respectively the Iberian languages and Yiddish. This dissertation has concentrated on one part of this larger corpus, namely the Yiddish history book and chronicles written after the publication in 1743 of Menahem Amelander's *Sheyris Yisroel*.

Modern scholarship had thus far almost entirely overlooked this corpus, resulting in a gap between sixteenth- and nineteenth-century Jewish historiography. What does it entail when we include Amsterdam Yiddish historiography within the larger narrative of the history of Jewish historiography? To answer this question, I first focused on a presentation of the various historical texts, which included, besides the well-known *Sheyris Yisroel*, several chronicles and fragments. The next step was to analyse the nature of this body of historiography, the idea of history behind it, and its sources and methodology. All this together provide the pieces for picturing the character of eighteenth-century Amsterdam Yiddish historiography.

The first thing to stress is the continuity between earlier Jewish historiography, as described in the second chapter, and these Yiddish historical texts. *Sheyris Yisroel*, presented as the continuation to *Sefer Yosippon*, was envisioned to be an integral part of preceding historiography. Besides the commercial reasons for this, Amelander also adopted the same methodology and interests. Like many of his medieval and early modern predecessors, Amelander regarded the task of the historian to be one of primarily composing a compilation of materials from various sources, including earlier historical texts. *Sheyris Yisroel* could therefore be described, as could *Sefer Yosippon*, *Shevet Yebuda* and a number of other histories, as being 'anthological historiography'. This methodology also meant that Amelander included Jewish historiographical traditions, such as 'the chain of tradition' and martyriology, in his own historical narrative. Next to methodology, *Sheyris Yisroel* is also characterized by the same stress on diaspora history as *Leidensgeschichte*, caused by the non-Jewish majority towards a Jewish minority, but is balanced by the wealth of internal Jewish *Geistesgeschichte*.

Sheyris Yisroel, thus, was clearly intended to be a continuation of earlier Jewish historiography and should be interpreted primarily as such. The chronicles that continued

Amelander's narrative each sought ways to connect their own histories to *Sheyris Yisroel*. In these history books, however, other Jewish historiography is barely present (with the exception of Abraham Trebitsch's Bohemian *Qorot ha'ittim*). This mainly concerns the character of the continuations to *Sheyris Yisroel*, which all concern contemporary history and should therefore be characterized as *Gegenwartschronistik*. All together, however, the Amsterdam Yiddish historical texts should be considered as the subsequent links in a continuous narrative of Jewish historiography.

But this is not all that should be noted about the characteristics of Amsterdam Yiddish historiography. There were also significant changes as compared to earlier Jewish historiography, including the change of language. As shown in chapter 3, the transfer of the genre of historiography from the Hebrew to the Yiddish domain was prepared by the rise and popularity of Yiddish translations of Hebrew history books. Amelander stepped into this tradition by first editing a new Yiddish *Sefer Yosippon*, before composing his own historical narrative *Sheyris Yisroel*. In opting to employ Yiddish as their primary language of history writing, the Amsterdam historians contributed to what could be called the early 'emancipation' of Yiddish. The choice of language also influenced the intended public. This readership was no longer only the Hebrew-reading elite, male dominated and largely from the religious establishment, but now counted the vast majority of Ashkenazim, including women and even children. Yiddish historiography, thus, was able to reach a much larger reading public than Hebrew historiography ever had.

No less innovative is the conscious fusion of Sephardic and Ashkenazi traditions in *Sheyris Yisroel* and the interest in both Sephardic and Ashkenazi history in the whole body of Amsterdam Yiddish historical texts. For the composition of his historical narrative Amelander relied on both Sephardic and Ashkenazi sources; he described the histories of both traditions in an even-handed and balanced manner, avoiding Ashkenazi bias or dominance. He described both traditions separately in different chapters, yet he did not regard them as parallels or as competitors but rather as two legitimate elements of Judaism. The continuing chronicles to *Sheyris Yisroel* are all clearly written from an Ashkenazi perspective, but all include the history of Amsterdam Sephardim.

A third innovative characteristic is that the historical texts made extensive use of non-Jewish sources. They did so consciously and, although sometimes hiding exact non-Jewish sources, vehemently defended the use of non-Jewish material. *Sheyris Yisroel* was a Jewish mirror to the Dutch edition of Basnage's *Histoire des Juifs*. However, whereas Basnage's history

book was a sequel to Flavius Josephus, Amelander's book was presented as the continuation of Josephus' supposed Hebrew chronicle *Sefer Yosippon*. Dutch-language history books, pamphlets, letters and newspapers all served as sources for the various Yiddish historical texts. Some of these sources were typical products of the media revolution in early modern Europe and the growing availability of news to wider audiences. The Yiddish historical texts profited significantly from offshoots of this media revolution.

Amelander's politics of source selecting is described in Chapter 5 as an example of gatekeeping brokerage. We should thereby differentiate between within-group and between-groups gatekeeping. The first concerns the Hebrew sources, whose contents were cleansed of excessively intellectual and overly mystical passages before being presented to the Yiddish public, whereas between-groups gatekeeping describes Amelander's politics towards his non-Jewish sources. He stripped from these sources any evident Christian interpretations and convictions, criticisms of traditional Jewish sources and views, and over-attentiveness towards Sephardim and intellectual history. The result was a new Yiddish historical narrative, with elements from both Hebrew and Dutch sources, but one in a completely new context and in a new master narrative.

The idea of history behind *Sheyris Yisroel* is amenable to traditional Jewish perceptions of the past, yet at the same time evidences distinctively early modern features. The history described in the book is typified as Diaspora history, to which classic rabbinic theological convictions were applied. Diaspora was considered to be a result of Jewish sins and a punishment from God; however, just as God's negative promises turned out to be true, Amelander held to the belief that the positive ones would also be fulfilled. He defended history writing as such mainly with the standard catalogue of history's benefits. Yet he stressed, more than most of his predecessors had, the practical values, for contemporary society, of knowing history.

Specific to Amelander's early modern approach is the emphasis on Jewish history after 70 CE as the history of 'the remnant of Israel' – as the title indicates. In the choice of this title Jewish history became connected to the other part of Israel, which had disappeared in the shadows of history but remained, according to traditional rabbinic convictions, somewhere as an identifiable entity. The Ten Lost Tribes were at once a theme connected with pre-Diaspora Jewish history and with post-Diaspora Jewish history, as it was supposed that in the messianic future the remnant of Israel and the Ten Lost Tribes would be reunited. Amelander turned to these convictions in the composition of his history book when he decided to encapsulate the

narrative of Jewish Diaspora history with first and last chapters that address the search for the Ten Lost Tribes. This altered the traditionally rather somber depiction of Jewish Diaspora as being predominantly *Leidensgeschichte*. The narrative structure of *Sheyris Yisroel* suggests that Sephardic and Ashkenazi diasporas had met in Amsterdam, a historical event to be situated on the eve of the reunification with the Ten Lost Tribes. The tone of the two chapters on the Ten Lost Tribes is optimistic and expresses the view that with the growing expansion of colonial empires and discovery of new territories the Ten Lost Tribes could well soon be found.

Amelander's successors do not address questions about either the legitimacy of history writing or any theological-philosophical evaluations of Jewish history. The genre of the chronicle implied fixation on chronological developments within contemporary history, without prerequisite overview for developing an evaluation of past events. The choice, however, to interpret certain contemporary events – such as the Patriot Revolt in the 1780's or the Batavian Revolution in 1795 – by connecting them to biblical events via inclusion of citations from Tenakh, testifies to a continuity of Jewish historiographical models. The extensive attention to political and military history, on the other hand, often without specific relation to the history of Amsterdam Jews, demonstrates the growing interest in general history.

These innovative characteristics can be explained by the specific context of early modern Amsterdam. It was here that the Sephardic and Ashkenazi diasporas met, thereby breaking through the relative isolation of each tradition. In Amsterdam, Sephardim and Ashkenazim lived alongside each other, worked together and became familiar with each other's traditions. The Jewish book industry in particular was one of the semi-neutral zones where Sephardim and Ashkenazim collaborated and engaged in intellectual encounters. The transfer of knowledge from Sephardic sources to the Ashkenazi domain was facilitated by the continuous exchange of ideas within book shops and printing presses. Amelander and Braatbard both worked within the book industry, a setting which created opportunities to know not only about the Sephardic tradition but also European culture in general. Dutch books, pamphlets and newspapers circulated in Jewish printing firms, which were always part of the larger context of Amsterdam's book industry.

The Amsterdam context is also significant in explaining Amelander's optimistic eschatological philosophy of history. Amsterdam, being an important agent in colonial trade, was also an intersection in the European communication network. New information – about exotic lands and countries and their histories, old and new colonies – arrived from overseas

with returning merchants and seamen. Leaflets with such stories enjoyed widespread popularity amongst the Dutch population. Amsterdam Jewry shared this interest, but interpreted such news from a distinct, Jewish perspective, one in which the Ten Lost Tribes and the messianic age played a major role.

Finally, the Amsterdam context can be referred to in explaining the early ‘emancipation’ of Yiddish. The Dutch Republic in early modern Europe was among the pioneers in the vernacularization of learning. The Dutch language was used not only for publications aimed at the broad public but also for scholarly purposes for which Latin had previously been the only language. The transfer of historiography from the Hebrew to the Yiddish domain is a clear pendant to this larger process of growing significance for the vernacular.

Amsterdam Yiddish historiography, thus, can be characterized as simultaneously traditional and innovative. With reference to postcolonial theory, Amelander has been described in Chapter 3 as a hybrid intellectual, and, in Chapter 4, *Sheyris Yisroel* as a hybrid work. Hybridity is a typical feature for societies in transition and for intellectuals between different cultural traditions. The concept thus applies well to eighteenth-century Ashkenazi Jewry, especially in Western Europe. As with European culture at large, for Ashkenazi Jewry the eighteenth century was one of transition, but in a way that the traditional and innovative formed a complex unity. What in a later period would be set in opposition to each other, now coexisted peacefully. Amsterdam Yiddish historiography remained fully part of traditional Jewish historiography – in its methodology, legitimation of history writing and contents – yet at the same time was turning towards a new, broad Ashkenazi audience, shifting language and developing distinctive early modern interests.

The agents in the rise of Amsterdam Yiddish historiography – namely, the authors – were all part of what could be labeled as the secondary elite or intelligentsia of Ashkenazi culture. Most of these figures had enjoyed a traditional education, in which they became familiar with the traditional corpus of texts. They knew Hebrew and often, as was the case with Amelander, could write in the language. Within the setting of the Jewish book industry they could easily access all relevant sources. But what distinguished them from the rabbinic elite was that they did not obtain positions within the establishment, and socioeconomically stood much closer to the vast majority of Ashkenazim, who were poor and fluent only in Yiddish. The relatively young book industry was one of the spaces between the Hebrew establishment and the Yiddish majority, and it served as a harbor for the secondary elite. The secondary position

explains the transfer of knowledge from the Hebrew domain, to which the historians had access despite not belonging to its elite, to the Yiddish domain, which in social terms was significantly closer to them.

The success of *Sheyris Yisroel* is evidenced both by the fact that the book's narrative was continued by a number of successors (the topic of Chapter 7) and by the transmission history of the book itself (Chapter 8). The continuations of *Sheyris Yisroel* had their own distinctive characteristics, but most were city chronicles and only dealt with contemporary history. Yet, as 'epigones' they continued Amelander's history book. The term 'successor chronicles' is introduced to grasp the idea of a continuity within history and history writing. The genre, which has roots in ancient times and was standard in medieval periods, had changed in early modern times into a typical, traditional type of historiography. In the eighteenth century an author's opting for the genre of 'successor chronicles' was clear indication of a traditional conception of history. The nature of Amsterdam Yiddish 'successor chronicles' was therefore also highly influenced by the traditional character of the genre. This did not, however, within the borders of the genre prevent their testifying to a changing appreciation within general society and to an interest in politics and military history.

The transmission history of *Sheyris Yisroel* makes evident that the 'open book tradition', itself rooted in medieval manuscript culture, was until the twentieth century still functioning within Ashkenazi culture. The paratext and contents of the book are continuously adopted towards new audiences, via inclusion of new information but also by omitting large parts of the original. The book was translated into Hebrew no less than three times, into Dutch once, and once from Hebrew back into Yiddish. Although the book was canonized in the eighteenth century, in the nineteenth century – despite a debate between adherents of Eastern European Haskalah and Orthodoxy over the book's nature – *Sheyris Yisroel* became part of what Shmuel Feiner named the third track of modern Jewish historiography. In 1743 Amelander's *magnum opus* had been a daring undertaking – being the first universal Jewish history book in ages – but a century later its role had changed. The book became an earmark of Orthodoxy and a counterhistory to new historiography inspired by the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Presently, it is still in the margins of early twenty-first-century Ultra Orthodoxy that Amelander's book continues to play a role.

To conclude, Amsterdam Yiddish historiography was simultaneously not only neatly connected to previous medieval and sixteenth-century Hebrew historiography but was also developing the genre further through innovations. The track of nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft*

des Judentums historiography largely overlooked – intentionally or not – Amelander and his epigones, yet *Sheyris Yisroel* continued to reach a large Ashkenazi public.