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Wallet, B.

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'The Air of Amsterdam Makes One Wise'. Outlines of a Critical Jewish History of the City

Bart Wallet
University of Amsterdam
b.t.wallet@uva.nl

Abstract
This article studies the rise of Jewish urban history and argues for a diasporic reading of Jewish urban cultures that addresses three lenses: location, bilocation, and dislocation. The eighteenth-century history of Amsterdam Ashkenazim serves as a prime case study for analysing diasporic bilocation and the formation and growth of a local Amsterdam Jewish identity. Spatial practices demonstrate how Jews and non-Jews mixed and testify to the entangled nature of late early modern Jewish urban cultures.

Keywords: Amsterdam, Jewish urban history, Jewish urban cultures, diaspora, Dutch Jewry

Introduction

The relationship between Amsterdam and its Jews is almost proverbial.[1] It is impossible to imagine Amsterdam without Jews, claimed mayor Femke Halsema recently, taking her line from her countless predecessors in innumerable speeches at commemorations and at meetings with the Jewish community.[2] Jews make an important contribution to the urban self-image of a tolerant city. The settlement here in the seventeenth century of Portuguese

1 This is an edited version of the text of the inaugural speech delivered on the occasion of Bart Wallet's appointment as professor of Jewish studies: early modern and modern Jewish history, especially in Amsterdam, at the University of Amsterdam on 26 October 2022.
2 Speech by mayor Femke Halsema at the unveiling of the National Holocaust Names Memorial on 19 September 2021, https://www.amsterdam.nl/bestuur-organisatie/college/burgemeester/speeches/onthulling-nationaal-holocaust/.

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Jews, many of whom had fled the Inquisition, and of the far poorer Ashkenazi Jews is a regular feature of city narratives centred around Amsterdam's tolerant character. It is no accident that the city has chosen the Portuguese Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza as its figurehead, with a statue visible from the mayor's office. The Jews are presented as important evidence of the city's deeply rooted, historical tolerance.

In the old Jewish district, that story becomes tangible. With its imposing synagogue complexes of the Portuguese and High German congregations, the area is a tourist attraction, as it has been for centuries. As far back as early modern times, high-ranking guests were taken to the Jewish neighbourhood and given a tour of the synagogues.[3] This established a pattern that continued when modern tourism came into being. One of the earliest Baedeckers, *Holland und Belgien: Handbuch der Reisende*, published in 1858, features Amsterdam's Jewish district. Those passages naturally look at the synagogues, with particular attention paid to the Esnoga, the proud Portuguese synagogue, and the name Spinoza is mentioned. The diamond industry is also described at some length. The neighbourhood is introduced as follows:

> The streets in this part of town resemble the Judengasse in Frankfurt, with the same dirt and foul smell, the same repositories of old clothing, utensils and suchlike, lugged here from all corners of the world. ... The German Jews too were happy to escape the oppression to which they were quite commonly subjected in their fatherland by emigrating to Amsterdam, which they regarded as a second Jerusalem.[4]

In the twelfth edition of Baedecker's travel guide, published in 1873, a whole section is devoted to 'Das Judenviertel', the Jewish quarter.[5]

When in the early twentieth century the Holland America Line put out a brochure to attract American tourists to the Netherlands, only the

3 In 1642, for example, stadholder Frederik Hendrik came to the Portuguese synagogue with his guest, the English queen Henriette Maria, and their children William and Maria Stuart. See Cohen and Wallet, eds., *Joden en het Huis van Oranje*, 36, 42; for further examples see Kaplan, "Amsterdam's Jewry", 259-283.

4 Translated from the German original. In 1839 the first Baedecker for 'Holland' was published and by 1858 it was already in its sixth edition: Baedecker, *Holland und Belgien*, 261-262.

5 Baedecker, *Belgien und Holland*, 268-269. My student C.A.M. Canisius-Theeuwen wrote a good paper on the subject in 2018 called "Amsterdam Jewish Culture in Travelogues" within the framework of the course Amsterdam Jewish Culture, in which various other travel guides were researched as well as Baedeckers.

Kalverstraat and the Jewish district were included.[6] One English tourist could not fathom such touristic preferences: 'I don't know whether there is anything other than exceptional filth and mess to recommend these foul reeking dwellings of Israel.' It gave him the 'impression of a terrible nightmare'. He asked himself in despair why tourists did not visit the far more modern, spacious, and green Plantage.[7] The Jewish quarter might be poverty-stricken, but it was picturesque, and many believed it to have an 'oriental' character.[8]

Quite a few painters came to the neighbourhood to capture characters and impressions of this part of town. In 1902 Max Liebermann, at the recommendation of his colleague Gerard Johan Staller, rented a front room in the Markensteeg so that he could record what he saw from behind a curtain. An elderly woman was prepared to sit for him as a model, but she had difficulty keeping still and spent the entire time talking – in the Amsterdam Jewish manner, in other words using her hands. When Staller called by, he saw that Liebermann had filled pages with sketches of the woman's talking hands.[9]

While Jews acquired a permanent place in the urban self-image, Amsterdam gained no less a place for itself in the Jewish self-image. Praises were sung to the city soon after the emergence of its first Jewish congregations, and they have sounded in every possible way ever since. The city was graced with special names. When the Ashkenazi Great Shul was inaugurated in 1671, the *parnas* (board member) Sadock Salomons Perelsheim entitled the city *ha-mehulalah*, the glorious.[10] The prominent place occupied by Amsterdam in the international Jewish world was expressed in the honorary title *yr ve-em be-Yisrael*, a city and a mother in Israel (a phrase taken from 2 Samuel 20:19), highlighting the city's metropolitan function for Jews worldwide. 'Little Jerusalem' and 'Jerusalem of the west', were also used, but the most successful of all the city's names is Mokum. It was eventually adopted by the population as a whole and is now widely used as a name for Amsterdam. Initially Amsterdam was simply a *mokum*, a place, one among many. In the Ashkenazi world this was a concept often used to indicate places with large Jewish communities. Mokum Haag was used for The Hague, meilechs-mokum, or imperial city, for Frankfurt am Main, chazzermokum for Schweinfurt and Stro-mokum for Strasbourg. Amsterdam was Mokum

6 "Gemengd nieuws", *Haagsche Courant*, 7 May 1906.

7 "Londensche Brieven: Engelschen in Nederland", *Het nieuws van den dag*, 11 October 1880.

8 Yman, "Brieven uit Amsterdam IX", *Provinciale Drentsche en Asser Courant*, 25 May 1880.

9 "Kunst en letteren", *Deli Courant*, 4 June 1929.

10 Sluys, "Hoogduits-Joods Amsterdam", 306-381, see in particular 326-327.

Ollef, the place that begins with an *ollef* (*alef*), the letter a. But gradually it acquired the second meaning of the letter *ollef*, namely the number one. The city became first among equals, primus inter pares, surpassing all others. So it became simply Mokum, and sometimes even, to stress its identity as a major city, Groot-Mokum, Great Mokum.[11]

Few put into words the Jewish connection with Amsterdam, as expressed in its honorary titles and nicknames, so succinctly as Jacob Israël de Haan. The poem that is perhaps his most famous is carved onto the monument commemorating the clearance of the old Jewish quarter on the Sint-Antoniesluis, and it is still quoted to describe Amsterdam’s special place in the Jewish self-image:

Die te Amsterdam vaak zei: ‘Jeruzalem’
en naar Jeruzalem gedreven kwam,
Hij zegt met een mijmrende stem:
‘Amsterdam. Amsterdam.’[12]

He who in Amsterdam oft said ‘Jerusalem’
and, driven, to Jerusalem came
He says in the voice of a waking dream:
‘Amsterdam. Amsterdam.’

The smell of Amsterdam, especially the Jewish quarter, was hard for some genteel visitors to endure. ‘Impossible to describe the stench that here torments the olfactory nerves of the uninitiated,’ remarked one non-Jewish visitor in 1880. ‘Pickles, mussels, liver, beet, dried and smoked fish, or heaven knows what else that mishmash could be called, work together to spread an atmosphere that is in conflict with the most basic principles of hygiene.’[13] For Amsterdam Jews, however, the air of the city made one wise: *awyre de-Amsterdam machkim*. This was a rather playful appropriation of a passage from the Talmud, which claimed it was the air of Eretz Israel, the land of Israel, that conferred wisdom.[14]

Here I want to examine where precisely the uniqueness lies in what Amsterdam means for the Jews and what the Jews mean for Amsterdam.

11 Honigh, “Groot-Mokum”; Churl, “Mokum, Groot Mokum”; Beem, *Sje-eriet*, 81.

12 De Haan, *Kwatrijnen*, 176.

13 Yman, “Brieven uit Amsterdam”.

14 Beem, *De verdwenen mediene*, 12; the phrase is a variation on Talmud Bavli, tractate Bava Batra 158b.

I have chosen to do so through the lens of the Jewish history of the city. I would first like to explain the importance of this line of approach, before sketching a few basic elements and illustrating them with reference to Amsterdam's eighteenth-century Jewish history.

Jewish history of the city

Inquiries as to the significance of local identities for Jews have for a long time been overshadowed by research into the place of Jews in the nation state. This is attributable to the influential emancipation paradigm, in which Jewish history is mainly studied based on the question of whether, how, when, and to what degree Jews were given equal rights and duties. The concept of emancipation is closely tied to the late-eighteenth-century liberal redefinition of the state and of citizenship, which meant that instead of collective identities, the individual became the primary political agent. The nation state, liberal democracy, and nationalism thereby became the frame within which Jewish emancipation, integration, and participation were placed. Over the past few decades, an impressive body of work has been produced that addresses these questions, with an increasingly intricate interpretation of how diverse nation states did or did not give Jews the opportunity to integrate into society. The stage this research tradition has currently reached is clearly laid out in a recently published history on the subject by David Sorkin.[15]

In his book, Sorkin points out that emancipation does not always need to take place by the liberal route of individual citizenship but can be corporative in nature. Jews can gain new rights and duties as a community, giving them more opportunities in society and providing them with greater equality.[16] This is an important train of thought to explore further. Is it in fact true that, as the now established historic image suggests, it was only with emancipation – in France in 1791, in the Batavian Republic in 1796, in many European countries only later, in the nineteenth or even the twentieth century – that forms of integration and Jewish strategies of belonging emerged? Is this linear image, however nuanced its presentation, not ultimately an illuminated frame that obscures the layered nature of the past? That question is only becoming more urgent now that historians are in search of approaches 'beyond the nation state'. The extent to which the

15 Sorkin, *Jewish Emancipation*.

16 Sorkin, *Jewish Emancipation*, 8.

national paradigm has settled into place as self-evident is extreme, and it therefore needs to be held up against the light.[17]

It is precisely on that point that Jewish urban history can have an important part to play. Local identities, I would argue, often preceded national identities, and even after the rise of the modern nation state they continued to have an important, sometimes critical, sometimes supportive function.[18] In short, before Jews became Dutch, they became Amsterdammers, or Zwollenaars, Leeuwarders or Oisterwijkers, according to their place of residence.

Under the influence of the spatial turn of the 1980s, interest has emerged over the past few decades in spatiality, in the local and the city in Jewish history writing.[19] In such work the city and more broadly the process of urbanization has often been connected with an analysis of modernity. The city becomes a symbol of modernity, while Jews in their turn become a 'signifier of urbanity'. Jews are said to have an 'urban vision' or an 'urban state of mind', making the city a Jewish space par excellence.[20] I do not wish to become involved here in the debate about Jews, urban life, and modernity, but mainly to remark that cities were important Jewish spaces in the middle ages and the early modern period as well. The premodern city, with its walls, offered Jews additional opportunities; the walls meant the city automatically had a functioning *eruv*, an enclosure within which Jews could be allowed to carry objects on the sabbath. After a city's walls and ramparts were demolished in the nineteenth century, this became a good deal more problematic. The traditionally privileged halachic position of the city has been designated 'rabbinic urbanism'.[21]

The spatial turn in Jewish studies has led roughly speaking to two clusters of research. The first consists of Jewish city biographies, in which the history of a Jewish urban community is reconstructed for a given period. There are now city biographies for Jewish Poznan, Kyiv, Odesa, Munich, and New York, to name but a few.[22] Secondly, thematic studies have been published that take as their starting point the concept of 'urban cultures' and go on

17 This analysis underlies, among other things, 'transnational history' and 'global history'. See for example Adam, "Transnational History"; Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt*, 13-22.

18 Compare here also the analysis by Prak, *Citizens without Nations, 789*.

19 Lipphardt, Brauch, and Nocke, "Exploring Jewish Space".

20 Schlör, "Jews and the Big City".

21 Herz, "'Eruv' Urbanism".

22 Teller, *Living Together*; Meir, *Kiev, Jewish Metropolis*; Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa*; Bauer and Brenner, eds., *Jüdisches München*; Moore et al., *Jewish New York*.

to chart how Jews filled urban spaces dynamically and how urban culture, with its opportunities and constraints, helped to shape Jewish life.[23]

If we look at the historiography of Jewish Amsterdam against that background, we arrive at a remarkable conclusion. For the seventeenth century a number of excellent studies are available, describing the Portuguese Jewish community in particular.[24] A considerable amount of research has also been carried out into the legacy of emancipation, looking at how Jews became new Dutch citizens, and at the role played by Jews in Dutch political movements, such as socialism.[25] Even more striking than the extent to which history writing about Jews in modern times is dominated by emancipation and the nation state is the fact that the eighteenth century is largely absent.[26] This is all the more remarkable given that it was precisely in that period that the Ashkenazi community in Amsterdam grew rapidly, the Jewish community expanded to ten per cent of the urban population and the city itself grew to become the largest Jewish city in Europe. Amsterdam was rightly called a Jewish metropolis in those years. A study of Jewish urban culture in Amsterdam in both early modern and modern times is more than simply needed to fill a lacuna. It is a line of approach that will deepen the study of the diversity and stratification of the city of Amsterdam, and contribute to the broader Jewish-historical debate about the place of Amsterdam in trans-local networks like the Sephardic and Ashkenazi diasporas.[27]

A diasporic history

What should such a Jewish city history look like? Amsterdam is my case study here, but naturally this is a question that applies just as much to

23 Brauch, Lipphardt, and Nocke, *Jewish Topographies*; Gromova, Heinert, and Voigt, eds., *Jewish and Non-Jewish Space in the Urban Context*; Ben-Naeh, "Urban Encounters".

24 Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation*; Kaplan, *An Alternative Path to Modernity*; Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans*; Levie Bernfeld, *Poverty and Welfare*.

25 Michman, *The History of Dutch Jewry*; Michman and Aptroot, *Storm in the Community*; Sonnenberg-Stern, *Emancipation and Poverty*; Wallet, *Nieuwe Nederlanders.*; Bloemgarten, *Henri Polak*; Hofmeester, *Jewish Workers and the Labour Movement*.

26 What has been done in that regard relates mainly to book culture, with important publications such as Berger, *Producing Redemption*, and Bar-Levav, "Amsterdam and the Inception of the Jewish Republic of Letters".

27 I deliberately opt here for trans-local rather than transnational, in order to stress the city as the primary locus and because as a concept it is better suited to charting the historical (dis-)continuity between the early modern and the modern period. See Freitag and Von Oppen, *Translokalität als ein Zugang zur Geschichte globaler Verflechtungen*.

other urban centres. One of the central debates concerns whether the city is primarily the backdrop against which the Jewish community developed organically and relatively independently, in continuity with earlier Jewish history, or whether the Jewish community should rather be understood from the perspective of the dynamics of the city. This debate, entered into initially by Yitzhak Baer and Salo Baron, continues to this day and touches upon an important issue in Jewish history: what is the precise relationship between Jewish history and history as a whole?[28]

For several decades, the classic model created by Jacob Katz defined the field. He claimed that until the beginning of modernity, Jewish communities formed a closed, traditional society, walled off from the majority culture. Only to a limited degree did exchanges take place between the two. In describing this premodern situation, Katz used the word 'ghetto', not just in the spatial sense but above all metaphorically. It was modernity and emancipation in particular that took Jews 'out of the ghetto'. The walls were demolished and Jews could integrate into broader society.[29] Although Katz's model has since been sidelined critically by many, the underlying thinking, which presumes two independent societies, has left a deep and lasting impression. This expresses itself not just in a linear concept of Jewish history, from isolation and exclusion to emancipation and integration, but in the idea that the two 'societies' are communicating vessels. The more that Jews participated in society at large, is then the idea, the less Jewish they were, and vice versa.

A dichotomous approach of this kind is far from satisfying and fails to do justice to the countless ways in which Jews combine participation in their own community with participation in broader society. For an alternative approach I would like to build upon several insights from diaspora theory. Jewish communities are regarded as the classic example of diasporic communities. But what does this involve? The usual definition, as put into words by William Safran among others, states that it is a matter of:

> 'expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics:
> 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original 'center' to two or more 'peripheral', or foreign, regions;
> 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history, and achievements;

28 Olga Litvak, "Urban Diaspora".

29 Katz, *Out of the Ghetto*.

3) they believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it;
4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate;
5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and
6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.'[30]

This definition is centred around two notions, that of a 'homeland' as a centre on the one hand and on the other an existence in 'exile', on the periphery, making diaspora a diachronic concept. The Boyarin brothers have presented an alternative definition of a diaspora, summed up by Daniel Boyarin as follows:

> A synchronic cultural situation applicable to people who participate in a doubled cultural (and frequently linguistic) location, in which they share a culture with the place in which they dwell but also with another group of people who live elsewhere, in which they have a local and a trans-local cultural identity and expression at the same time.[31]

This definition replaces the physical 'homeland' with a synchronous trans-local embedding in an imagined cultural community. Here a doubled cultural location becomes the essence of what a diaspora is. Applied to the Jewish case, Jews are simultaneously part of the local, regional or national space and part of a trans-local Jewish community. The identity of a local Jewish community thereby becomes the result of that doubled cultural location. Applied to Amsterdam, this means that the local urban culture places its stamp on the way in which Amsterdam Jews participate in the trans-local Jewish community, while their location in the broader Jewish

30 Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies", especially 83-84. This quotation can also be found in the below book by Boyarin, on p. 26.
31 Boyarin, *A Traveling Homeland*, 19.

world in turn gives colour to the way in which Amsterdam Jews are active in the city and to how they live their lives.

Whereas in current scholarship the two definitions are often set against each other, I would like to advocate combining them, to arrive at a rich, layered concept of a diaspora. In other words, a diaspora should be understood both diachronically and synchronically. Diachronic elements include how the experience of migration shaped Jewish communities, and the relationship they adopted not just with the Holy Land but also with regions they had left more recently, such as the Iberian Peninsula, the German territories, Central and Eastern Europe. Synchronic elements include the simultaneous, dual participation of Jews in urban and trans-local Jewish contexts and how new forms of local Jewish identity arose from them.

In the case of Jewish urban history, this involves an appeal for a layered diasporic history with three lenses: location, bilocation, and dislocation. Under 'location' falls the way in which Jews related to the urban space, to the opportunities and constraints the city presented, and how they took their place in the urban texture. 'Bilocation' is more particularly about the trans-local network, participation in a dynamic broader Jewish culture, and how urban and trans-local positioning together produced a specific local Jewish profile. 'Dislocation', finally, focuses on the diachronic experience of forced or voluntary migration, on experiences of uprooting and rejection, on how migration experiences formed a unique identity, and also how the city itself could restrict and exclude Jews and become a place of departure.

There are two advantages to this approach. Firstly, it provides a set of instruments for looking at the forms the doubled location took in each historical period, within the context of that time, and it does not a priori place Jews and local engagement in opposition to each other. Secondly, it avoids the trap of an overly linear emancipation paradigm and offers the opportunity to chart the dynamic of Jewish belonging both in the period before emancipation in 1796 and afterwards.

The emergence of a local Amsterdam-Jewish identity

For the formation of a local Amsterdam-Jewish identity, we need to look at the early modern period. From the moment the city accepted first a Portuguese Jewish nation, then a High German Jewish nation and even briefly a Polish Jewish nation, it had various, clearly delineated Jewish

communities, each with its own structures.[32] Migration continued unabated until the end of the eighteenth century, and the High German Jewish nation in particular increased markedly in size. These Jewish newcomers found themselves in a country that, odd as it seemed, did not have a monarch. It was a Republic. The Republic of the Seven United Netherlands was a fairly loosely organized association of provinces that had diverse profiles and interests. Within those provinces, and certainly in the most prominent among them, Holland, cities had a strong voice. The leading role of cities in providing protection and security translated into a highly developed local patriotism, in which Jews also participated.[33]

The Jewish newcomers were firmly embedded in broad trans-local networks, with Portuguese and Yiddish as their main vernacular languages. Amsterdam grew to become a centre for both diasporas. The Portuguese community maintained intensive contacts with the Spanish and Portuguese Jewish communities in the port cities of north-western Europe and the new world. At their own educational institution, Ets Haim, teachers, cantors, and rabbis were trained to work for that entire trans-local network. The High German congregation had close ties with the Ashkenazi hinterland, which stretched across the Rhineland into the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The Amsterdam book industry attracted countless Jewish intellectuals and rabbis to the city, carrying their manuscripts with them in the hope of finding a good printer.[34]

The organization of Amsterdam's Jewish communities clearly reflects this doubled location. Here I take the example of the High German nation, simply because so much research has already been carried out into the Portuguese congregation. From the establishment of an independent High German Jewish congregation in 1639, separate from the Portuguese sister community, its management was in the hands of the *parnassim*, men who together formed a governing board. In conformity with mediaeval Ashkenazi tradition, the rabbinate was still closely involved with the board in this early period. A person might be a *parnas* and a rabbi by turns. The *parnassim* were elected by the members in a democratic procedure.[35] When new regulations were adopted in 1711, drawn up in consultation with the Portuguese congregation and approved by the burgomasters, the degree to which the governing

32 For the broad sweep of the history of the Jews in the Netherlands, see Blom et al., *Geschiedenis van de joden in Nederland*.

33 On this subject see also Wallet, "Amsterdam in de Jiddisje geschiedschrijving".

34 Schrijver, "Jewish Book"; Wallet and Zwiep, "Locals".

35 Sluys, "Hoogduits-Joods Amsterdam", 309-312, 318, 323.

board of the congregation and the structure of the membership reflected broader Amsterdam political culture is striking. The board had become oligarchic in character, reflecting the way the burgomasters of the city operated. Members could no longer vote, but there was an electoral college in which *parnassim* and former *parnassim* jointly coopted the new board members. This electoral college corresponds to Amsterdam’s Oud-Raad, in which former aldermen, former burgomasters and sitting members of the municipal government chose the new burgomasters. Both in the city and within the High German congregation, this brought about a concentration of power in the hands of a smaller and smaller number of prominent families. Meanwhile, distance had been put between the board and the rabbinate, which was accountable to it.[36]

The membership reflected the times too. Amsterdam, like many early modern cities, distinguished between full citizens (*poorters*), residents (*ingezetenen*) and strangers (*vreemdelingen*). The *poorters* were descended from the families that had founded the city and collectively established its facilities, such as churches, schools, hospitals, and orphanages. They and their descendants had a right to use those facilities and to be politically active. *Poorters* also had access to the guilds, corporations of professional groups with their own social services. Newcomers could buy in for a considerable sum and become *poorters* themselves. Those without the means or desire to do so became residents. They were allowed to live in the city and paid taxes, but they had no political rights. Strangers, finally, were regarded as just passing through. They could be either ejected or tolerated, so they occupied a vulnerable position at the margins.[37]

The regulations of 1711 laid down a comparable structure for the High German Jewish nation. Descendants of the founders and those who had subsequently bought in were *yechidim*, full members. From the nineteenth century onwards the term ‘enrolled members’ came into use. These *yechidim* could rent a seat in the synagogue, be given *mitsvot* (honorary functions) to perform during religious services and fill administrative posts. They were allowed a final resting place in the graveyard in Muiderberg. Anyone who could not afford to buy in belonged with the *toshavim*, the congregants. They too paid their dues as members of the Jewish congregation, according to their means, but they could not acquire a permanent seat in the synagogue or hold managerial positions within it. After 1714 a new graveyard was opened

36 *Takanot ha-kehillah de-kehal Ashkenazim de-k”k Amstilerdam* (Amsterdam: Anshel Shochet, 1711).

37 Kuijpers and Prak, “Burger, ingezetene, vreemdeling”.

for this category of people at Zeeburg, closer by and therefore less expensive when it came to transport. Lastly there were the *orechim*, strangers, who had no status in the congregation and often needed charitable support.[38]

In early modern Amsterdam, therefore, a High German Jewish nation functioned that on the one hand was part of an Ashkenazi administrative tradition, but on the other had obviously acquired local characteristics. This might suggest that we are looking at a self-contained Jewish society, separate from the broader non-Jewish society, but that would be a mistaken conclusion. The way in which a minority community could participate in society in the early modern era was precisely by means of a corporative association. It meant a Jewish community could defend its interests and contribute to urban society as a whole.

To understand this properly it is important to fully contextualize our definition of what power is. According to the emancipation model, Jews gained access to politics only from the beginning of the nineteenth century, while the period that went before is characterized by the existence of a fragile Jewish community without any power that was subject to the caprice of others. David Biale has rightly pointed out that power is a dynamic concept; what power is and how it is exercised changes from one period to the next. He defines power in short as 'the ability of a people to control its relations to other peoples as well as its own internal political, cultural, religious, economic, and social life.'[39]

Looked at against that background, the Portuguese and High German Jewish nations in Amsterdam in the early modern era certainly did hold power. Through their own organizational structures they had access to the powerful of the city, they negotiated the place of Jews in urban society, and they had the means to govern their own community. Because of their clear organizational structures, Jews in the corporative early modern urban landscape were able to occupy a position of their own.

The precise nature of that position was determined by a continual process of negotiation. This was not a sign of weakness but of strength; Jews knew the rules of the political game and participated in urban politics as a collective. The Jewish community enjoyed a relatively high level of autonomy, but individual Jews could always turn to the city authorities as a court of appeal. In 1735, for example, a conflict arose between several members of the congregation and the *parnassim* about the congregation's financial management, in which the burgomasters mediated. The town messenger

38 Wallet, "Leden, congreganten en vreemdelingen".

39 Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History*, 7.

came to the synagogue to announce the decision: the *parnassim* must take on a bookkeeper, the regulations must be revised and anyone who caused 'disorder or division' must be punished. The way the *parnassim* were referred to by the burgomasters is telling: as 'pious and peaceful Parnassins and residents of this city'. They were administrators of a body within the city and at the same time Amsterdam residents.[40]

In this relationship of negotiation, the *parnassim* too indicated clear boundaries. When in 1752 someone wanted to buy full membership, in other words to become a *yachid*, and signed a protest to the authorities when this was refused, the *parnassim* stuck by their decision. The man was a *kohen*, a member of a priestly family, and he had entered into a marriage that was forbidden by *halacha*, Jewish law. So he could not be permitted to become a full member, nor to recite the priestly blessing in the synagogue.[41]

The particular position of the Jewish community in urban society was expressed in other fields too. A large number of the guilds in Amsterdam were reserved for *poorters*, although there were a few guilds that admitted Jewish residents of the city. The Jewish communities, which by this point accounted for some ten per cent of the city's population and were therefore a force to be reckoned with, were on good terms with several guilds, including the bakers' guild. Since baking was a profession reserved for *poorters* and the Jewish communities wanted to ensure they were using bread that did not violate halachic laws, agreements were reached. Some bakers employed *mashgichim*, supervisors working on behalf of the Jewish community. This meant Amsterdam Jews could buy their challahs for the sabbath and matzahs for Pesach from non-Jewish bakers.[42]

Similar arrangements were made by the tailors' guild. Jews were allowed to trade in second-hand clothing, but not to make garments themselves. But there are specific *halachot*, rules, for clothing, according to which certain fabrics must not be combined (*sha'atnez*). In 1743 the tailors promised to use only hemp yarn approved by the chief rabbi and to stick to all the other halachic rules, 'of which we declare ourselves to be very capable'. Both examples show how the non-Jewish population became familiar with the Jewish community and adapted to it.[43]

40 City Archives Amsterdam/Stadsarchief Amsterdam (SAA), archive of the Nederlands-Israëlietische Hoofdsynagoge (NIHS), inv. no. 13, fol. 165-170.

41 SAA, NIHS, inv. no. 13, fol. 15-17, 684-688.

42 SAA, NIHS, inv. no. 13, fol. 18, 214-215, 425-428; inv. no. 14 fol. 10-12.

43 SAA, NIHS, inv. no. 14, fol. 13-14.

It was a different story with wine. Jews were not admitted to the wine-sellers' guild. Kosher wine was therefore sold to Jews by seafarers and wholesalers. They could sell it only in small amounts, however, which caused perpetual problems. The city authorities were sensitive to criticism on this matter and recognized that Jews needed wine for their religious feast days. So in 1750 a list was compiled of Jewish wine sellers who were given special permission to buy in and sell larger volumes of wine.[44]

These forms of early modern integration, of the fitting into urban society of the Jewish community as a corporate body, are visible not only at the level of politics and governance but within what in German is called *Alltagsgeschichte*, the history of everyday life. One good example of this are the Amsterdam *loegjes* (local spelling for *luchyes*), Yiddish almanacs that were printed in large quantities from the early eighteenth century onwards by the printing families Drukker, Proops, and Rofe.[45] These almanacs were cheap and conveniently small in size, so Jewish pedlars could take them on their travels during the week, when they often sold manufactured goods and trinkets that they carried in a basket on their backs. The almanacs very much bore the stamp of Amsterdam. They specified the times at which the city gates were opened and closed, and all the routes for the sail-and-horse-drawn boats (so-called *trekschuiten*) were given as starting in Amsterdam. They included dietary advice, geared to seasonal vegetables and the fish catch, but the main element was the calendar, organized by Jewish month. That was far from all. Alongside the Jewish calendar was the Christian calendar, complete with all the Christian holidays and anniversaries, saints' days and sometimes even the Latin names of the Sundays. This shows the extent to which the mostly poor Amsterdam Jews lived with two calendars. They knew which portion of the Torah was due to be chanted on the next Shabbat, but they were also aware of the religious feast days of their Christian neighbours. The *luchot* perhaps demonstrate more than many other sources the bilocation of the Jews of Amsterdam.[46]

All this led to the emergence of an increasingly clearly defined Amsterdam Jewish identity, as the eighteenth-century Yiddish chronicles testify. Abraham Chaim Braatbard, Zalman ben Moshe Prinz and Bendit

44 SAA, NIHS, inv. no. 13, fol. 630-632; inv. no. 14 fol. 15.

45 Along with my colleague Marion Aptroot of the Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf, I am preparing a number of publications about the Amsterdam *loegjes* (luchot) in the broader context of the early modern Western European *luchot*.

46 See for example *Luach shel shnat 5474* (Amsterdam: Hayyim Drukker, 1713), *Luach shel shnat 5504* (Amsterdam: The orphans of Shlomo Proops, 1743) and *Luach shel shnat 5515* (Amsterdam: Hirts Levi Rofe and son-in-law Kosman, 1754).

ben Eizek Wing each wrote a chronicle of the city of Amsterdam, weaving together events within the city and within the Jewish community into a single narrative. The extent to which the authors identified with the city becomes clear when Prinz, for example, writes from the perspective of '*mir Amsterdamerz*', 'we Amsterdammers'.[47] Material culture also includes clear examples of Amsterdam-Jewish bilocation, such as *rimonim* (the ornaments that decorate the handles of the Torah scroll) shaped to look like the tower of the Westerkerk, complete with its three Amsterdam crosses.[48]

The shared space

All of this took place within the spatial context of the city of Amsterdam. According to an analysis by Edward Soya, spaciality is 'simultaneously... a social product (or outcome) and a shaping force (or medium) in social life'.[49] Urban elites, organizations, but also average citizens create the city. They plan buildings, roads, and parks. Meanwhile those same residents are moulded by the opportunities and limitations presented by the existing urban space. The city is therefore not a static quantity but dynamic. Just as the city makes an impact on its residents, its residents give shape to the city.

The study of urban spatiality is promising as a way of acquiring a proper understanding of the position of Amsterdam Jews. It provides a point of comparison within Amsterdam and with other cities that had large Jewish population groups. While in many early modern cities Jews were allocated a specific district, a ghetto closed off at night with gates, this did not occur in Amsterdam. Jews were allowed to settle wherever they liked, although they mostly lived in the new residential neighbourhoods on the east side of the city, called Vlooienburg, Uilenburg, Marken, and Rapenburg. Other immigrants settled there too. Since the most prominent Jewish facilities, including synagogues, schools, and kosher shops, were to be found there,

47 Zalman ben Moshe Prinz, *Kronik min shnat tamad 'ad shnat takmach* (Amsterdam: s.n., 1788) fol. 3v. For more on this historiographic tradition, see Wallet, *Links in a Chain*.
48 Such *rimonim* were in use by the Portuguese congregation in Amsterdam. See Vlaardingerbroek, ed., *The Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam*, 162. But they were also in private hands, for example those of the Fundam family: Wesselius, "The First Talmud Translation into Dutch". The Jewish community in Suriname also had one, which is now part of the permanent collection of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. For similar examples, see also Grimwade, "The Form and Decoration of Silver 'Rimonim'".
49 Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, 7.

these districts continued to attract Jewish newcomers.[50] But they were always mixed neighbourhoods, housing German Catholics and Lutherans, Dutch Protestants, and Amsterdam's first Black community. That diversity meant that Jews and non-Jews developed an *omgangsoecumene*, to quote a term used by Willem Frijhoff: an 'ecumenicity of everyday life'. In the neighbourhood, on the street, in the shops and in trade, people worked and lived together. Sometimes this chafed and sparks flew, but often it went very well.[51]

As far as I have been able to determine, there was only one attempt to turn the Jewish district in to a real ghetto. In the middle of the eighteenth century, at a point when the number of Ashkenazi Jews was increasing rapidly, several residents of the Sint Antoniesbreestraat and the Nieuwe Hoogstraat organized a petition asking the municipal authorities to maintain the Sint Antoniesluis as the boundary of the Jewish 'quarter'. For some time past, 'Jews and especially the worst and lowest sorts among them, have been spreading beyond the aforementioned St. Anthonys Sluys into districts of this city in which Jews have never lived before, and there have not only caused the greatest possible inconvenience to the Christians living in their neighbourhood by their shabbiness but moreover disadvantaged in the extreme those same Christians in their trade, dealings, and respective means of subsistence'.[52] The High German Jewish nation reacted sharply to the petition. The arguments deployed are telling. They had become 'residents of this City', and as such they too had a right to 'the natural liberty to choose and keep the most commodious living place within this City, just like other residents, and as they had in former times, for hundreds of years hither'. Speaking here are Jews who have become Amsterdammers. They are demanding their rights and successfully defending their position.[53]

The petition achieved nothing and as the Jewish population grew, the Jews started to spread out further over the city. Meanwhile, most continued living in the eastern districts because, the High German nation contended, the Jews there 'among themselves and so with more freedom and security in the face of those who take offence, can perform their public ceremonies and other things with more sensitivity and less incommodiousness than if they lived as they used to, flung far from each other, scattered here and

50 For the broader debate about what constitutes a Jewish neighbourhood, see Gantner, "Interpreting the Jewish Quarter".

51 Frijhoff, "The Threshold of Toleration".

52 Vaz Dias, "Een verzoek om de Joden in Amsterdam een bepaalde woonplaats aan te wijzen".

53 SAA, NIHS, inv. no. 13, fol. 719-726.

there across the city'.[54] In this respect the High German nation was right: public space in the eastern neighbourhoods was used intensively by Jewish residents. During Sukkot, huts made with branches stood in the street, poor *shnorrers* begged openly, at Rosh Chodesh (new moon) prayers were said in public, on Shabbat men walked to the synagogue wearing their *talit* (prayer shawl), while on Sundays the area was full of activity once again.[55] It was that which made the public space into a contested space, where Jewish and non-Jewish appropriation clashed. The *pinkasim*, the Yiddish books of protocol of the High German nation, include reports of negotiations with the city authorities about how Shabbat rest and Sunday rest could be brought into balance. Jewish street vendors, for example, were requested not to accost with their merchandise churchgoers making their way to the Zuiderkerk on Sunday mornings. Only when Purim fell on a Sunday was an exception made; they were allowed to sell wares on the streets freely and everyone went outdoors in costume.[56]

In conclusion

When on 2 September 1796 the National Assembly of the Batavian Republic decided to give Jews the same rights as other citizens, Amsterdam Jews already had a pronounced local identity. They defined themselves as Amsterdammers, living and working in mixed neighbourhoods where through continual negotiation they helped to give shape to the urban space. The Jewish nations had their own political role within a corporative society, shaping it with increasing self-consciousness. Jews were residents of the city, they belonged with Amsterdam and Amsterdam belonged with them. How that local identity then developed after 1796, when a process of nationalization set in, is a different story. But it is clear that a new Dutch national identity was able to build on a solid local Amsterdam Jewish identity.

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54 Ibidem.

55 SAA, NIHS, inv. no. 4, fol. 2, 102, 103; inv. no. 15, fol. 703-707.

56 SAA, NIHS, inv. no. 4 fol. 188.

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About the author

Bart Wallet is professor of Jewish studies: early modern and modern Jewish history, in particular of Amsterdam, at the University of Amsterdam. He is co-editor-in-chief of *Studia Rosenthaliana* and an editor of the *European Journal of Jewish Studies*. His current field of research is the dynamics of Jewish urban cultures.