Far Apart but Never Closer: Diasporic Unity in Twelfth-Century Jewish Travel Literature

AARON FORMAN

Carleton College

Introduction

JEWISH TRAVEL LITERATURE PROVIDES a window into the cultural conditions that shaped Jewish identity during the Middle Ages. Although few accounts survive, those that do illuminate the authors' perceptions of the importance of Jewish history and the sentiment of connection that transcended political boundaries in the medieval world. For Jews, who occupied a tenuous and marginalized position under both Christianity and Islam, unity was crucial to both the psychological justification for persistence as well as the practical necessity of escape in the event of persecution or expulsion.[1] 1 The increased accessibility of travel in the twelfth century affected the Jewish notion of peoplehood, evidenced in travel accounts that sought to represent a diverse global diaspora as a single unified people. A variety of letters, intellectual dialogue, and commercial activity evidence connections across the Jewish world, but Benjamin of Tudela and Petachia of Regensburg's travel narratives of the late twelfth century uniquely provide the infrastructure for conceptualizing two perspectives on unity and globality in the Jewish diaspora of the Middle Ages.

A series of wars in the Roman province of Judea during the first and second centuries of the common era resulted in a mass exile of the Jews and the initiation of a period of Jewish history defined by diaspora.[2] While Jews had always been one people, exile from their homeland isolated communities from one another and the destruction of the Temple enabled the emergence of divergent cultural practices and claims to religious authority. The travel accounts studied here provide fascinating insight into the construction of Jewish diaspora identity as a global phenomenon.

In the summer of 1099, Frankish Crusaders bribed their way past the fortified cities of Palestine's coast and besieged Jerusalem for five weeks.[3] On July 15, the Crusaders breached the city's walls, the Jewish defenders who fought alongside the Fatimid Muslim garrison fled to their synagogue, and the Crusaders burned the synagogue to the ground, killing all of the Jews inside.[4] While the conquest resulted in the utter destruction of many cities and Jewish communities in Palestine, Joshua Prawer convincingly demonstrates in *The History of the Jews in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem* that "once the kingdom had reached a degree of stability, some time during the first quarter of the twelfth century, the Jewish communities sprang to life again."[5] The Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem created a maritime connection between western Europe and Palestine that facilitated Jewish pilgrimage and immigration, though not by design.[6] This unique moment of trans-Mediterranean

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[1] Mark Cohen, *Under Crescent & Cross: the Jews of the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 115.

[2] Moshe Aberbach and David Aberbach, *The Roman-Jewish Wars and Hebrew Cultural Nationalism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 87; Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 16.

[3] Joshua Prawer, *The History of the Jews in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem* (New York: Oxford University Press New York, 1998), 14, 17.

[4] Prawer, 23.

[5] Prawer, 63, 93.

[6] Prawer, 138.

political connectivity resulted in a phenomenon: the proliferation of Jewish pilgrimage and travel accounts documenting the journeys of European Jews to the Holy Land and beyond, which Prawer describes as "a newly emerging genre."[7] Prawer further shows that Jewish attitudes toward the Holy Land changed substantially with Saladin's military victories of 1187, situating Benjamin and Petachia at the culmination of a tradition of traveling and pilgrimage made possible by the existence of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem.[8]

Most of the sources that document medieval Jewish travel easily fit into the categories of either commerce or pilgrimage. Cairo Geniza documents from the eleventh and early twelfth centuries offer evidence of mercantile exchange among Jews throughout Europe, North Africa, the Near East, and India.[9] However, they were never written for the sole purpose of recounting a journey, and their perspective therefore does not engage the cultural customs of a specific group across multiple regions. Meanwhile, the shorter accounts of Holy Land pilgrimages written by Jacob HaCohen prior to 1187 and Samuel ben Samson (1210) lack extensive ethnographic and geographic observations outside Palestine.[10] Benjamin and Petachia each set out on a journey with the goal of capturing information about far-removed Jewish communities and compiling an amalgamation of population statistics, geographical information, and local folklore traditions into a single comprehensive document, promoting a perspective of diasporic unity among those whom they considered to be Jews in all parts of their known world. Benjamin and Petachia's groundbreaking travel narratives worked to counteract the previous centuries of cultural separation by recording and transmitting the customs of Jewish communities over an extensive geographic space, producing unity through collective knowledge of the various cultural customs that they identified as Jewish along their routes.

I Historiography

Influenced by Geraldine Heng and Kim Phillips, proponents of the idea of a global Middle Ages, I look to travel narratives as a mechanism to demonstrate the perceived mental state of unity among Jewish populations from Spain to India, transcending the distinctions and boundaries that appeared during later historical periods.[11] These two scholars advocate for historians of the Middle Ages to reconceptualize the medieval world as a society whose boundaries, both political and ethnic, were more permeable than scholars previously believed. Furthermore, they push to decentralize the Eurocentric framework developed during the Renaissance that constructed the very idea of something called "the Middle Ages."[12] Phillips' characterization of the complexity of Jewish identity gives rise to questions of self and other, home and exile, and east and west within the vast Jewish diaspora.[13] This paper invokes European Jewish sources, the only known substantial examples of medieval Jewish travel itineraries, to examine Jewish identity in the global medieval world. Although political conditions, intellectual debates, and cultural forces threatened to divide the Jewish community of the Middle Ages along various boundaries, the travel narratives of Benjamin and Petachia that specified and documented interest in the global Jewish diaspora reflect the outlook of the two individuals, both rabbis and therefore local leaders, who created the

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[7] Prawer, 169.

[8] Prawer, 149.

[9] Shlomo Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 5.

[10] Jacob HaCohen and Samuel Ben Samson in *Jewish Travelers in the Middle Ages: 19 Firsthand Accounts* ed. Elkan Nathan Adler (New York: Dover Publications, 1987), 92-99 and 103-110.

[11] Geraldine Heng, "Early Globalities, and its Questions, Objectives, and Methods: An Inquiry into the State of Theory and Critique," *Exemplaria* 26:3 (2014); Kim Phillips, "Travel, Writing, and the Global Middle Ages," *History Compass* 14:3 (2016).

[12] Heng, 236.

[13] Phillips, 86.

volumes, and also evidence the attitudes of their communities and audiences.

Describing medieval Christian travel literature, Paul Zumthor notes that the texts "exerted an enormous influence on those who read or heard them, both for the facts they revealed and for the significance they assumed in the collective mentality."[14] By collective mentality, he implies that the genre's readers and listeners used travel to establish a sense of community, that of Europe, separate from the exotic peoples the travelers described in distant lands.[15] In *Reorienting the East: Jewish Travelers to the Medieval Muslim World*, Martin Jacobs argues that the opposite is true of the medieval Jewish travel canon: Jewish travelers did not see the East as an exotic other like the later European Orientalists, but rather as a society to which they looked for inspiration in Jewish governmental autonomy, Jewish institutions of learning, and religious coexistence. Jacobs asks "did the existence of Jewish communities throughout the then-known world allow Jewish travelers to see sameness within the otherness of foreign lands?"[16] I support Jacobs' conclusion that Petachia projected an ideal Jewish community whose level of piety his home society should aspire to achieve onto Eastern Jews, while Benjamin looked to their political autonomy and unity under the Exilarch, a powerful leader of the Jewish community in Baghdad, as a model for a consolidated Jewish political structure.[17] Further, I hone in on how the two travelers' statements on the nature of education, community, and leadership enforced an intangible bond that encompassed a medieval Jewish culture not bounded by geographic barriers. My approach contributes to this conversation by presenting the travel narrative as a reflection of a particular mindset, the pursuit of global Jewish unity, that catalyzed the journeys of Benjamin and Petachia.

Determining the reason behind Benjamin's journey has generated a range of possible explanations. In a 2013 article on Benjamin's representation of a Jewish community in Ethiopia, François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar argues that

> "the 'tacit agenda' of his account, if not his travel, is to encompass, in the form of an itinerary, the whole Jewish diaspora of the time, from its westernmost to its easternmost reaches (that is, from Spain to China), thus creating the fictitious and somewhat nostalgic narrative of a cohesive community."[18]

Martin Jacobs agrees, holding that "while the historical reliability is up for debate, it was clearly meant to deliver a consoling message to the traveler's home audience."[19] In their study of how education shaped Jewish history, Maristella Botticini and Zvi Eckstein add that Benjamin's goals were "to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, to learn about how Diaspora Jews lived, and to describe the many prosperous Jewish communities in the world."[20] Finally, in his examination of Jewish life in Sepharad (Iberia), Jeffrey Gorsky outlines other potential theories for why Benjamin undertook the journey, which include the creation of a guide for Jewish merchants and traders, as well as a compilation of potential destinations to which Jews could escape if they faced persecution

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[14] Paul Zumthor, "The Medieval Travel Narrative," in *New Literary History* 25:4 (1994), 809.

[15] The status of Jews in European Christian travel writings would be a fascinating direction for future research. Because Jews comprised a significant minority in many European cities, I posit that European Jews would have been part of the known "us" against which Christian travelers set the subjects of their narratives. In contrast, Jewish travelers identified more strongly with Jews in the lands they visited than their Christian neighbors in their own cities.

[16] Jacobs, 2.

[17] Jacobs, 135; Jacobs, 174.

[18] François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar, "Desperately Seeking the Jewish Kingdom of Ethiopia: Benjamin of Tudela and the Horn of Africa (Twelfth Century)," *Speculum* 88:2 (2013), 385.

[19] Martin Jacobs, *Reorienting the East: Jewish Travelers to the Medieval Muslim World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 35.

[20] Maristella Botticini and Zvi Eckstein, *The Chosen Few: How Education Shaped Jewish History, 70-1492* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 159.

in Spain.[21] Although Benjamin himself does not state an explicit purpose for his journey, the idea of establishing unity among the diaspora is tied to every potential explanation in the historiography.

The focus of this paper is uniquely suited to apply a limited set of sources in medieval Jewish travel to the emerging category of global Middle Ages scholarship. Connecting Kim Philips' global Middle Ages lens to Martin Jacobs' analysis, I offer an approach that reimagines how Jewish identity manifested itself in the twelfth century. My perspective looks to these narratives to not only discuss the communities the travelers visited, but also the assumptions that they demonstrate as prevalent in the home communities of their authors. The travel accounts of Benjamin of Tudela and Petachia of Regensburg provide unique observations into the interactions between Eastern Jewish communities with one another and the creation of boundaries to determine who was and was not a part of their community.

Elka Weber's analysis of medieval Jewish travelers to the Land of Israel explains that travel literature is an accessible, non-privileged text in contrast with sacred texts such as Torah and Talmud that define Self and Other as a matter of divine law.[22] By utilizing "their understanding of the holy books as a starting point — but not their only referent — in their constructions of people they meet," Weber understands that Jewish travelers merged the practice of Jewish religion with other cultural observations to inform their narrative.[23] Acceptance of the privileged text, the Hebrew Bible, formed a fundamental connection that manifested itself in different ways throughout the travel literature. Examining the travel literature as a category generates a more thorough understanding of the cultural production that travel literature performed as it brought stories and ideas about the Near East to different parts of Europe.

Medieval Jewish culture prioritized the perpetuation of a distinct identity from one generation to the next, even when doing so made acceptance by the majority culture more difficult. Because Jews were outsiders to the majority population, the existence of Jews in different places provided psychological motivation that preserving the Jewish faith was a worthwhile endeavor, and that a cultural, and not strictly religious, understanding of the diversity of Jewish life was important to the well-being of the diaspora as a whole. In this paper, Jewish travel literature functions as a mechanism for examining the lived experience of medieval Jewish life in a way that is more reflective of the general population, beneath the rabbinic responsa (Jewish legal rulings) and Andalusian poetry crafted exclusively for the religious and educated elite. I strive to tell the story of how the medieval Jewish world perceived itself, drawing on sources with a greater capacity to reach the emotions and desires of regular people through their accessible and non-privileged status.[24]

II   Nachmanides' Fear of a Divided Diaspora

Divisions and disagreements within the Jewish community are as old as the religion itself (for example, Joseph and his brothers), but the diasporic condition that emerged from the Roman expulsion in the first and second centuries threatened Jewish unity in unprecedented ways. By the Middle Ages, Jews had adjusted their traditions to local contexts, with a small minority remaining in the Land of Israel. The Maimonidean controversy represents a prime example of a division in Jewish society that originated as an intellectual disparity but quickly transformed into a divide based on geography and cultural identity. The controversy refers to the French rabbinic herem, or prohibition, on the study of Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed and Book of Knowledge*, two of

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[21]Jeffrey Gorsky, *Exiles in Sepharad: the Jewish Millennium in Spain* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 83.

[22]Elka Weber, "Sharing the Sites: Medieval Jewish Travellers to the Land of Israel" in *Eastward Bound: Travel and Travellers 1050-1550* ed. Rosamund Allen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 36.

[23]Weber, 36.

[24]Weber, 37.

Maimonides' most famous texts which followed an Islamic tradition of using classical philosophy in the study of religious texts.[25] The following short summary of the Maimonidean controversy elucidates how Nachmanides (The Ramban), a prominent thirteenth-century Sephardic rabbi, sought to avoid conflict between the Sephardic and Eastern followers of Maimonides and the Ashkenazi followers of Maimonides' French counterpart, Rashi. Perceiving a potential cause for internal division within the Jewish community over how different schools interpreted Maimonides' works, Nachmanides sought compromise and reunification.[26] The controversy and Nachmanides' pursuit of resolution illuminates that a leading medieval scholar approached the possibility of conflict between geographically distant Jewish communities, in this case France and Yemen, as an existentially negative outcome for all Jews and promoted the preservation of global unity through compromise.[27]

Nachmanides' 1232 "Letter to the French Rabbis" established the Ramban as a mediating figure who worked toward overcoming divisions between rabbinical authorities who represented different segments of the Jewish population. Nachmanides had a Sephardic background, and his work was well respected within the Sephardic tradition. Southern France had a sizable population of Sephardic Jews, who immigrated from Spain after the Almohad expulsion in the mid-twelfth century. Therefore, the Maimonidean controversy functioned as a dispute over the role of classical philosophy in Jewish thought as well as a potential point of division between Jews of different geographic regions.

Early in the letter, Nachmanides rhetorically inquires, "to how many Epicureans (God-deniers) and profaners of Talmud has [Maimonides] responded with correct words?"[28] Nachmanides believed that Maimonides had a positive impact on Jewish society by galvanizing enthusiasm for the study of Jewish texts, by glorifying the Talmud (the fundamental text of rabbinic Judaism), and by rebutting its detractors.[29] Particularly noteworthy is Nachmanides' representation of the loyalty of the Jews of Yemen to Maimonides as both a person and a Jewish leader. Nachmanides warns that the Jews of Yemen will "turn against the Torah / defying against the words of the French rabbis... The Torah will become as if it were two Torahs, and all of Israel will become two societies."[30] According to Nachmanides, the Jews of Yemen were so loyal to Maimonides that they would be willing to violate Jewish law in rebellion against the French rabbis in response to the proposed *herem*. Nachmanides imagined that such a rift between groups of Jews would be detrimental to the perpetuation of unity in the diaspora, which he clearly valued. Nachmanides' letter focused on preserving unity and avoiding the ostracism of an entire school of Jewish thought that would accompany the prohibition of these texts. Both the French rabbis and the Yemenite Jews fit into the larger category of Rabbanite Jews who accepted the authority of the Talmud, so Nachmanides sought to prevent a schism within the Rabbanite community.

Nachmanides' letter demonstrates a palpable worry over division within the Jewish diaspora, particularly between groups that had diverged in their cultural customs and intellectual outlooks on Jewish texts. In her study of Nachmanides' use of biblical references as a literary technique throughout the letter, Patricia Bizzell synthesizes that Nachmanides "was successful not only in mitigating the damage done by the French rabbis' *herem* in the short term but also in softening

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[25] Bizzell, 115.

[26] In this context, "Eastern" refers to the Jews of the Islamic world who were neither Ashkenazi nor Sephardic.

[27] Patricia Bizzell, "שיבוץ (*Shibbutz*) as a Conciliatory Rhetorical Style in Nachmanides' 'Letter to the French Rabbis'" in *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 17:2 (2014), 114.

[28] Nachmanides, כתבי רבינו משה בן נחמן: יוצאים לאור על־פי כתבי יד ודפוסים ראשונים עם מראי מקומות, הערות ומבואות [The Writings of Our Rabbi Moses son of Nachman: The Bringing to Light According to the Manuscripts and the First Printings with Views of Places and Notes] (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kuk, 1963), שלט. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this paper are my own.

[29] About thirty years later, Nachmanides would defend the Talmud against accusations of blasphemy by Christian authorities in the kingdom of Aragon.

[30] Nachmanides, שמא.

the terms of the debate for the future."[31] The outcome reflects Nachmanides' prioritization of revitalizing collective Jewish unity in the face of crisis. In this context, understanding the livelihoods of fellow Jews in other parts of the world was essential for the Jewish people to remain a single group. The travel accounts of Benjamin of Tudela and Petachia of Regensburg illustrate how conveying information, both in the form of population statistics and leaders, as well as oral stories that emphasize cultural values and highlight the holiness of special places, was productive in fostering a sense of Jewish unity among the travelers themselves, their readers, and the communities they visited.

III Benjamin of Tudela on Global Jewish Identity

In 1173, Benjamin of Tudela returned to his home in Tudela, present-day Spain, from a journey that took him through parts of Europe, Africa, and the Near East. Estimates for the start date of his travels include 1159/60 and 1166, so the undertaking certainly lasted several years and consumed extensive resources.[32] How Benjamin managed to accomplish such a journey is not discussed in the itinerary itself, but it is evident that he relied on Jewish networks and assistance from local communities as he progressed from location to location.[33] Therefore, Jews around the world were able to learn from his past experiences not just in Iberia but also in the places he visited, and Benjamin likewise gained insight into the diversity of practices, political structures, and relations between Jews and gentiles in the locations he documented. Benjamin's journey is evidence that travel provided a means by which Jews could express a common identity with their co-religionists, showing a specific interest in the history and culture of Jewish people and rendering other information of secondary importance. Thus, despite skepticism over the reality that Benjamin's itinerary presented, the existence of the source itself illuminates Benjamin's motivation to highlight the collective experience of a truly global medieval diaspora. I explore the meaning behind these claims and its reflection of an emerging sense of a unified Jewish identity which the twelfth century's increased opportunities for travel fostered.[34]

Scholars typically employ Benjamin of Tudela's *Masa'ot* (Travels) to provide a source of fleeting insight from the twelfth century on a location of interest or to delve into specific passages that Benjamin wrote and attempt to discern why he portrayed a location or community in a certain way.[35] I shift to a more holistic approach to the *Masa'ot*, identifying patterns that mark Benjamin's attitude toward the Jewish diaspora and reading how Benjamin understood the boundaries of the Jewish community as well as its internal divisions. Benjamin's attitude toward Jewish history, propensity to define groups as either Jews or non-Jews, and his characterizations of learning institutions across the diaspora reflect a personal awareness of a single Jewish community that extended from his home in Spain all the way to India.

In the eminent work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2006), Benedict Anderson identifies the census, the map, and the museum as crucial instruments in the construction of national identity.[36] He writes that these institutions "profoundly

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[31]Bizzell, 127-128.

[32]Jacobs, 29.

[33]Michael Signer, introduction to *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Travels in the Middle Ages* (Cold Spring, NY: NightinGale Resources, 2005), 13.

[34]Nuria Morère, "Antiquity in Benjamin of Tudela's Travel Narrative: Interpretation and Meaning Within the Context of the History of Travel." *Journal of Tourism History* 9:1 (2017), 29.

[35]Fauvelle-Aymar, 383; Abraham Melamed, "The Image of India in Medieval Jewish Culture: Between Adoration and Rejection" in *Jewish History* 20:3/4 (2006), 311; Robert Hess, "The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: a Twelfth-Century Description of North-East Africa." *Journal of African history* 6:1 (1965), 15.

[36]Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 163.

shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion—the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry."[37] Benjamin's lifetime preceded the concept of the nation-state by several hundred years, and no Jewish community of his time was in a position to colonize another group of people as the nineteenth-century European powers did. Nevertheless, these three institutions of census, map, and museum in twelfth-century form are not only present in Benjamin's itinerary, but they are indispensable to his mission; the *Masa'ot* would be incomplete without them. As such, a substantial portion of the work as a whole is simply counting the number of Jewish households in each town he visits and stating how far away by land or sea the next location is. Although Benjamin did not visit any museums, he devotes significant attention to material objects and buildings that connect to the Jewish past and antiquity.[38] It is not coincidental that Benjamin's recounting of population figures, his verbalization of distances between physical locations of Jewish communities, and his deep interest in material artifacts from Temple-period Judaism are reflective of the institutions that Anderson highlights, because Benjamin was likewise invested in the construction of a group identity rooted in common heritage and collective memory.

First and foremost, Benjamin's perspective on Jewish history works to establish a common identity among all people he considered to be Jews rooted in the Land of Israel during the Temple period. Benjamin's attention to historical memory is best on display in his description of Rome, where local Jews take him to see columns that they believe were transported to Rome from the destroyed temple in Jerusalem. Benjamin writes of two columns engraved with the words "Solomon, son of David."[39] Benjamin explains that the local Roman Jews told him that the columns sweat a moisture similar to water each year on the ninth of the month of Av, the traditional date that commemorates the destruction of both the First and Second Temples in the Jewish calendar.[40] While the accuracy of this narrative cannot be verified, the story demonstrates an awareness of the connection between the physical space of Rome and the historical Judea that predated the Roman expulsion. Examining the legacy of the Roman conquest of Judea and destruction of the Temple in the medieval period, Marie Thérèse Champagne identifies a "persistent association between the Temple Treasures and Rome, and the Temple Treasures and the Lateran Basilica in the twelfth century," and she articulates that Jews and Christians alike believed that the confiscated remains of the Temple were held in Rome.[41] Marc Epstein adds in his analysis of medieval Jewish artistic works that "the Temple and its symbols [i.e. the menorah] have remained powerfully evocative" in Jewish cultural memory throughout medieval, early modern, modern, and postmodern Jewish history.[42] The mutual understanding of the significance of columns from the Temple shows a shared appreciation for objects that reflect the glorified period of the Temple among Jews of different diasporic regions.

Benjamin's frequent invocation of the nostalgic expression *b'yamei kedem*, in days of old, in his account of Jerusalem further represents a desire to glorify the Jewish past of the Temple period. While the Jewish people were dispersed throughout the world a millenium prior to Benjamin's journey, he still recognized a common heritage in the old days of ancient Judea. Just outside the

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[37] Anderson, 163-164.

[38] Morère, 33.

[39] Benjamin of Tudela, The Travels of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, ed. Adolf Asher, Facsimile of 1840-41 edition (New York: Hakesheth, [1927?]), ׳. Translation is my own.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Marie Thérèse Champagne, "Treasures of the Temple and Claims to Authority in Twelfth-Century Rome" in *Aspects of Power and Authority in the Middle Ages* ed. Brenda Bolton and Christine Meek (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 108-109.

[42] Marc Epstein, "Mapping the Territory: 'Arb'ah Kanfot Ha'arez' – the Four Corners of the Medieval Jewish World" in *Skies of Parchment, Seas of Ink: Jewish Illuminated Manuscripts* ed. Marc Epstein (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 53.

Old City, Benjamin identifies a "large building from the days of our ancestors," reinforcing the notion that both he and his readers had a genealogical relationship with the land of Israel that tied together Jews from every part of the medieval world across the major diasporic divisions of Sepharad, Ashkenaz (northern France, Germany, and slavic territories), and the Islamic Near East and North Africa.[43]

Like the building from the days of Benjamin's ancestors, the Western Wall symbolized the continuing attachment of Jews to Jerusalem and the Temple. Benjamin highlights the diversity of Jewish pilgrims at the Western Wall, known in Hebrew as *haKotel haMa'aravi*. He explains "the Western Wall [*haKotel haMa'aravi*] is one of the walls [*kotelim*] of the Holy of Holies, and they call it the Gate of Mercy and all of the Jews [*kol haYehudim*] come there to pray in front of the *Kotel*."[44] He omits the word *haMa'aravi* at the end of the sentence because the Western Wall is the only wall to which one refers with the term *Kotel*, even though the word literally means "wall." Benjamin simply assumed that his Jewish audience knew this, and did not feel compelled to explain the meaning of a term that may have been unfamiliar to those outside the community. The statement also articulates that the Western Wall is the physical center of Jewish life for Jews not just in Jerusalem or the Land of Israel but throughout the entire diaspora with the phrase *kol haYehudim*. As such, Benjamin shows his audience that all of the world's Jews maintain a special connection to the Western Wall that does not apply in greater measure to any particular segment of the diaspora.

Benjamin was keenly aware of the different diaspora traditions, defined by geographic region, that together formed the Jewish world he sought to represent as a single community. In Lunel, southern France, Benjamin makes a point of specifying "Rabbi Judah the doctor, the son of Tibbon the Sephardi."[45] Benjamin's identification of Judah as Sephardic demonstrates that members of the Jewish community were conscious of classifications in identity and Benjamin considered it important enough to include as one of Judah's identifying features. Similarly, in Constantinople, Benjamin identified the king's doctor as Shlomo haMitzri, or Solomon the Egyptian.[46] Again, Benjamin used geography embedded in people's names to identify when a member of a local Jewish community stood apart because of his family origin. Benjamin does not describe discrimination against Judah or Shlomo from other Jews, and Shlomo even had special privileges that other Jews were denied, such as riding a horse, as a result of his profession. By Benjamin's time, the different categories of Jews (Sephardi, Ashkenazi, and Eastern) were a major part of a particular Jew's individual identity, but Benjamin's narrative looks to overcome such differences by showing how accepted, and even honored and respected, Judah and Shlomo were in communities where their families did not originate.

In Greece, Benjamin first encountered a group of people who occupied a liminal space in whether or not they should be considered Jews: the Wallachians. After describing their violent attacks on the Greeks, Benjamin wrote "they are not strong in the Christian religion and they have Jewish names between them and some said that they were Jews and they called the Jews 'our brothers' and when they find Jews they rob them but do not kill them as they kill Greeks and they do not have any faith."[47] Marcus Adler, who produced the most commonly-used translation of Benjamin's itinerary, translates the end of this sentence, *v'ein lahem shum dat*, as "they are altogether lawless."[48] I translate *dat* as faith because Benjamin's word choice intentionally excludes the Wallachians from

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[43] Benjamin of Tudela, ‏לֹ‎.

[44] Benjamin of Tudela, ‏לֹ‎.

[45] Benjamin of Tudela, ‏דֹ‎.

[46] Benjamin of Tudela, ‏כד‎.

[47] Benjamin of Tudela, ‏יט‎.

[48] Benjamin of Tudela, *The Travels of Benjamin of Tudela*, trans. and ed. Marcus Adler (Cold Spring: Nightingale, 2005), 68.

Benjamin's idea of who the Jews were. His refusal to acknowledge or conceive of the Wallachians as Jews informs our understanding of Benjamin's criteria for the makeup and structure of a Jewish community. Furthermore, the absence of rabbis and scholars in Wallachia prove that in Benjamin's mind, they did not practice Judaism. As he moved east and encountered Karaites, Epikursin, and Samaritans, Benjamin treads even more carefully in delineating boundaries around the unified Jewish community, and thereby placing the other groups beyond its reach.

Constantinople offers a case study of how Benjamin wrote about Jewish segregation from the rest of the population, a phenomenon that was not enforced in western Europe until the fourteenth century.[49] Benjamin writes that "there are no Jews in the city because they were moved behind an arm of the water," which Anna Dulska identifies as the Galata area in her study of interfaith coexistence in the twelfth-century.[50] While Adolf Asher's 1840 Hebrew edition of Benjamin's itinerary was based on the 1556 Ferrara, Italy, publication, Adler's 1907 translation was based on a different Hebrew text, a fourteenth-century Ashkenazi manuscript now located in the British Library (henceforth MS London), resulting in a variance between versions of the itinerary.[51] Asher's Hebrew edition states that there are 2,000 Rabbanite Jews and 500 Karaites on the other side; Adler's translation notes a fence that separated the Rabbanites and the Karaites.[52] Benjamin includes Karaites, Jews who did not accept Talmudic authority, in his imagination of the Jewish community, but makes sure to distinguish them from the Rabbanites with whom he evidently associated and communicated during his time in Constantinople.

Furthermore, according to Adler's translation based on MS London, Benjamin placed Rabbanite Jews and Karaites together in opposition to a separate group he calls the Epikursin in Cyprus. According to Adler's translation, Benjamin says that "it is four days' voyage from here [Rhodes] to Cyprus, where there are Rabbanite Jews and Karaites; there are also some heretical Jews called Epikursin, whom the Israelites have excommunicated in all places."[53] Asher's Hebrew edition, the work primarily cited throughout this paper, refers only to "another community" without specifying the Karaites by name.[54] Since it is not clear which version of the text is more accurate to Benjamin's words, there are two possibilities for interpretation. If Benjamin did identify the Karaites by name, who are omitted in the Ferrara and Asher versions, he clearly considered them to be in closer proximity to his own practice of Judaism than the Epikursin whom he claims profaned the sabbath.[55] Even though the Karaites rejected the Talmud, Benjamin was never overtly hostile to them and their connection to Judaism in the same way that he reacted to Wallachians, Epikursin, and Samaritans. Even if Benjamin did not identify the Karaites by name as the Asher version indicates, it is still clear that he placed a distinct community closer to Rabbanite Jews than the Epikursin, a community that may well have been the Karaites since he mentioned that Karaites and Jews lived near one another in Constantinople, his most recent major stop prior to Cyprus. The evidence suggests that Benjamin believed Karaites to be ancestrally descended from the same Israelite population as Rabbanite Jews, and he recognized a common history with them that also included a shared emphasis on the centrality of the Temple in Jerusalem.

As he traveled through the Land of Israel, Benjamin mentions Samaritan communities in Caesarea and Nablus (Shechem). When he first introduces them, in Caesarea, Benjamin estimates

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[49]Shlomo Simonsohn, *The Jews and the Apostolic See* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1991), 141.

[50]Benjamin of Tudela, כג; Anna Katarzyna Dulska, "Abrahamic Coexistence in the Twelfth-Century Middle East? Jews Among Christians and Muslims in a Travel Account by a Navarrese Jew, Benjamin of Tudela," *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 38:3 (2017), 261.

[51]Jacobs, 31-32.

[52]Benjamin of Tudela, ed. Asher, כג; Benjamin of Tudela, trans. Adler, 72.

[53]Benjamin of Tudela, trans. Adler, 75.

[54]Benjamin of Tudela, כה.

[55]Benjamin of Tudela, כה.

that in addition to ten Jews, there are "200 Cuthim, who are the Samarian Jews that are called Samaritans."[56] The Samaritans identified Mount Gezirim as their spiritual center and were thought to be descended from a group that the Assyrians exiled to Samaria in the eighth century BCE, not the Israelite ancestors of the Jews.[57] Later, as he described Nablus and its surrounding region, Benjamin wrote that "it is two parasangs to Nablus, which is Shechem on Mount Ephraim, and there are no Jews there, and in the valley between Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal reside 100 Samaritan Cuthim."[58] The ambiguity over whether Samaritans should be considered Jews persists until Benjamin claims that, through the omission of three letters in the Hebrew alphabet to which Benjamin ascribes meaning, it is clear that the Samaritans are not of the seed of Israel, or of Israelite descent. The letters in question are ח, ה, and ע, which are each found in one of the names of Judaism's patriarchs and represent a lack of dignity, kindliness, and humility among the Samaritans. Benjamin associates these characteristics with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob respectively, 'proving' that the Karaites are not descended from the Jewish patriarchs.[59] Jacobs points out that "the Samaritan alphabet does include all three letters," but Benjamin seems convinced of his position.[60]

In Benjamin's perception, which reflects his own cultural upbringing and that of his readers, having Israelite heritage is a fundamental part of what it means to be Jewish. Even though the Samaritans practice similar customs to the Jews, he ultimately does not associate with them as Jews, ostensibly over a perceived separate genealogy. In Damascus, Benjamin counted 200 Karaites and 400 Cuthim (Samaritans), and wrote that the groups lived in peace but did not intermarry.[61] By proclaiming that the groups did not intermarry, Benjamin emphasized the hereditary component of identity, connecting a willingness to produce offspring with the religious framework to which an individual and his or her parents subscribed. In other words, Benjamin observed how religious differences led to the creation of distinct groups of people due to the fact that marriage only occurred between people within the same group, at least in the context of Karaite and Samaritan communities. Benjamin does not discuss intermarriage between Karaites and Rabbanite Jews, and indeed, in her study of Karaites as both a real and imagined community across different periods of Jewish history, Marina Rustow notes frequent intermarriages between these two groups in the eleventh-century Near East.[62]

The Wallachians, Karaites, Epikursin, and Samaritans form part of an emerging pattern of Benjamin classifying groups on the fringes of Jewish society as either Jews or non-Jews. Rustow explains that

> rabbinic leaders of the eleventh and twelfth centuries were hardly as jumpy about the taint of non-rabbinic heresy as Natronay [*ga'on* (leader) of the rabbinic academy of Sura on the Euphrates from 857-65] had been in the ninth, or as zealous in its extirpation as were their counterparts in the west. Even if the doctrinal and behavioural boundaries between the groups were sharp, they were frequently crossed.[63]

This sentiment likely influenced Benjamin's accepting outlook on the Karaites in relation to the others. However, his inclusion of each of these groups and their proximity to Judaism reflects that they occupied a space in the Jewish imagination and that their existence needed reckoning

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[56] Benjamin of Tudela, לב.

[57] Jacobs, 182.

[58] Benjamin of Tudela, לב.

[59] Benjamin of Tudela, לג.

[60] Jacobs, 183.

[61] Benjamin of Tudela, מח.

[62] Marina Rustow, "Karaites Real and Imagined: Three Cases of Jewish Heresy" in *Past and Present* 197:1 (2007), 42.

[63] Rustow, 43.

as Benjamin formulated his outlook on how to establish a unified diaspora. He assumed that his Rabbanite readers share his ideas about the composition of their community, never acknowledging perspectives that differ from his own. Meanwhile, Benjamin's attention to these groups illustrates how medieval Jewish travelers participated in the same tradition of determining their own group, and therefore presenting a unified front, in opposition to outsiders as their Christian counterparts did. However, the practice manifested itself differently, such that people of any geographical region could be deemed insiders as long as they convincingly claimed descent from the Israelites of biblical times and accepted Talmudic authority.

Even though Benjamin associated Karaites with Jews in several instances, he always distinguished them verbally such that they are never simply "Jews," a term that could be applied to Rabbanite Jews of Sephardic, Ashkenazi, Eastern, and even Ethiopian and Indian descent.[64] Across the continents, Benjamin is clear that the presence and study of Talmud, the central text of rabbinic Judaism, was a critical and irreplaceable component of Jewish communal identity. As long as Benjamin mentions the community's scholars, who all possess the title of "rabbi," there is no question as to whether that community is composed of fully-functioning Jews with whom Benjamin immediately assumes an unstated association. Examples of this trend occur throughout the itinerary and demonstrate his own perception of the adhesive that binds together all Jewish communities. In Lunel, France, Benjamin states that Rabbi Asher "is very wise in Talmud."[65] Likewise, Thebes in modern-day Greece features rabbis wise in Mishnah and Talmud led by Rabbi Aaron Kuti, whose expertise is only surpassed in the land of Greece by the scholars of Constantinople.[66] Benjamin expresses sheer admiration and the utmost respect for the academies in Baghdad, which he presents as the epicenter of Talmudic learning and home to the best and brightest scholars. In their study of oral tradition in the Jewish academies of Mesopotamia, Daphna Ephrat and Yaakov Elman argue that the yeshivot (academies), which functioned under the leadership of the *ga'on*, claimed "to be the heirs of the very creators of the Babylonian Talmud," justifying their emphasis on orality in their teaching method.[67] Moving east, Benjamin refers to Rabbi Sar Shalom in Isfahan as the lead rabbi of Persia, Rabbi Obadiah the Nasi in Samarkand, and even states that the Jews in India "are good Jews, perform *mitzvot* [commandments], and between them there is the Torah of Moses and Prophets and a small amount of Talmud and Halakhah [jurisprudence]."[68] The mere existence of Talmud in each of these communities is sufficient for Benjamin to associate with the group as a product of the shared history, genealogy, and customs that the presence of the Talmud represents.[69]

Having discussed the status of groups through the criteria of perceived heritage and acceptance of the Talmud, Benjamin's portrayal of the lost tribes of Israel presents new evidence that pressures his preconceived Jewish imagination. As he journeys from Tilmas to Kheibar in present-day Saudi Arabia, Benjamin asserts "they say that the people of the tribes of Reuben and Gad and half of the tribe of Manasseh that were captured by the Assyrian king Shalmaneser walked there and built these large cities in this fashion and fight with all the kingdoms and there is not one man

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[64]Fauvelle-Aymar argues that the Jewish community in Ethiopia that Benjamin describes did not, in fact, exist historically, but their unquestioned presence in Benjamin's narrative shows that there was no mental obstacle to the idea of Jews living in sub-Saharan Africa (Fauvelle-Aymar, 404).

[65]Benjamin of Tudela, ד.

[66]Benjamin of Tudela, יט.

[67]Daphna Ephrat and Yaakov Elman, "Orality and the Institutionalization of Tradition: The Growth of the Geonic Yeshiva and the Islamic Madrasa" in *Transmitting Jewish Traditions: Orality, Textuality, and Cultural Diffusion* ed. Yaakov Elman and Israel Gershoni (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 129.

[68]Benjamin of Tudela, פב.
Benjamin of Tudela, צב.

[69]Ephrat and Elman, 114.

who can enter to them, which requires eighteen days of walking through the uninhabited desert."[70] Featured in the ninth-century *Travels of Eldad the Danite*, the lost tribes of Israel figure prominently into medieval Jewish travel literature as bastions of imaginary self-governing Jewish communities beyond the reach of Christian domination.[71] Similarly, Benjamin characterizes them as builders of great cities and formidable warriors who share distant ancestry with the collective Jewish people for whom he wrote.

While Eldad describes the land beyond the River Sambation, the home of the lost tribes, as an idealized Jewish society, Benjamin places the lost tribes in the interior of the Arabian peninsula but surrounded by eighteen days worth of desert travel that is impossible to penetrate. This barrier motif common in travel literature, including the Christian account of Prester John, means that the lost tribes are out of communication with other Jewish communities in the region and the world.[72] It is noteworthy that Benjamin never refers to them as Jews or estimates a population figure. He identifies the tribes as having been led to captivity by the Assyrian king Shalmaneser (r. 726-722 BCE), validating their ancestral link to the rest of the Jewish diaspora.[73] The absence of a population estimate shows that Benjamin quite literally did not count them as Jews even though he counted Jews in places where he heard about the Jews from other sources.[74] In other words, a population estimate by Benjamin, even a vague one such as "several thousand," includes a particular group of Jews in the ultimate picture of how many Jews live throughout the world. The lack of any population estimate for the lost tribes excludes them from this notion of a count, even though he clearly admires the lost tribes' reputation and symbolism for Israelite autonomous capability. This passage applies historical memory alongside local oral tradition to explain that the lost tribes are relevant to his understanding of the Jewish world, even if he did not consider the people themselves to be Jewish.

Benjamin's journey climaxed in Baghdad, and his observations indicate that Jews around the globe looked to the Mesopotamian metropolis as the epicenter of Jewish civilization in the medieval world. Jacobs confirms that Benjamin devoted his attention to Baghdad in a manner unlike that of any other city, indicating an exceptional status for Baghdad in the medieval Jewish imagination that Benjamin certainly propagated.[75] Benjamin begins with a highly positive portrayal of the Abbasid caliph and some of the rituals he performed. In discussing the Jewish community, Benjamin demonstrates great respect for the yeshivot and their sages, some of whom trace their lineage back to biblical figures like Moses. Benjamin claims that Rabbi Elezar and his brothers were descended from the prophet Samuel and knew how to play music in the same way as it was performed during the period when the Temple stood, continuing to refer to the glorified, shared history that the Temple period represented.[76] Benjamin also describes the Exilarch, the hereditary position of the leader of the Jewish community who commanded great respect from Jews and non-Jews under the Abbasid Caliphate. The Hebrew title Benjamin applies to the Exilarch, *Rosh haGolah*, is related to the word *galut*, which means exile and oppression. Thus, the experience of exile from the Land of Israel remains front and center in the title of the leader of a prosperous Jewish society whose authority is only surpassed by the Abbasid Caliph. Jacobs maintains that Benjamin used

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[70]Benjamin of Tudela, ‏עב‎.

[71]Micha Perry, "The Imaginary War Between Prester John and Eldad the Danite and its Real Implications," *Viator* 41:1 (2010), 11.

[72]Perry, 8.

[73]Benjamin of Tudela, ‏עב‎. Although the Bible and Benjamin attribute the exile to Shalmaneser V, Assyrian sources express that the deportation of the Israelites took place after Shalmaneser's death, between the spring of 720 and 719 BCE, under his successor Sargon II (r. 721-705 BCE). For further information about the Assyrian sources, see Pamela Barmash, "At the Nexus of History and Memory: The Ten Lost Tribes." *AJS Review* 29:2 (2005): 214-215.

[74]Botticini and Eckstein, 159.

[75]Jacobs, 131.

[76]Benjamin of Tudela, ‏ס‎.

the Exilarch to portray Baghdad as "the Jewish world's power center, in this respect rivaling Jerusalem, its spiritual center," informing his Sephardic audience that their own Jewish culture paled in comparison to what Benjamin witnessed in Baghdad.[77] Jacobs is skeptical of Benjamin's portrayal of a carriage procession for the Exilarch and a punishment of 100 lashes for Muslims who did not rise to greet the Exilarch, but his narrative tells his audience that Jewish authority was highly respected in the Abbasid Caliphate.[78]

Jacobs explains that, by the time of Benjamin's journey, "both the Abbasid caliphate and Babylonian exilarchate—reduced to largely ceremonial status—were mere shadows of their glorious past."[79] By exaggerating the power vested in the position of the Exilarch, Benjamin seeks to establish the Jewish community as a politically organized entity on the same level as Latin Christians who followed the pope in Rome, Muslims who followed the Abbasid caliph, and Orthodox Christians whose spiritual leader he identified previously in Constantinople as the "pope of the Greeks."[80] Since European Jewish communities had only local leaders and no unifying figure, Benjamin glamorized the role of the Exilarch as a potential solution to rectify the Jewish community's lack of centralized authority. In addition, the exilarch position helped define the roles of the numerous local leaders whom Benjamin names by placing them in a structure with a universal leader. Without such structured definition, small Jewish communities were vulnerable to schisms caused by events like the Maimonidean controversy or simply a lack of contact with other communities, as was the case with the lost tribes. A single Exilarch, a position that still existed during Benjamin's lifetime, reflects Benjamin's agenda in structuring Jewish authority in a parallel way to Islam, under the leadership of the Abbasid Caliph, and the branches of Christianity under the pope in Rome and the "pope of the Greeks," also known as the patriarch, in Constantinople.[81] Benjamin seems to imply that Jews outside the Near East could benefit from such a global structure of authority by embracing the institution of the exilarch as their spiritual leader.

Toward the end of his narrative, and a section overlooked by nearly every study of his travels, Benjamin provides a Sephardic perspective on the Ashkenazi communities of medieval Germany, including a mention of Regensburg, the hometown of Benjamin's contemporary traveler Petachia. Benjamin's writing on the Jewish communities of Germany is deeply insightful into how he imagines Jewish unity and the extent to which Jews leveraged networks to facilitate physical mobility, which led to a strengthened notion of peoplehood. Generalizing to all of the German towns he mentioned previously, Benjamin states that the towns "have in them wise scholars and communities who love their brothers and wish peace for all people, near and far, and when a traveler comes to them, they celebrate and make him a banquet, and will say 'celebrate, our brother, because the redemption of God comes in the blink of an eye.'"[82] The religious nature of the statement implies that the Jewish communities were specifically welcoming to Jewish travelers and used Jewish identity as a cause for celebration when Jewish travelers arrived in their towns. Benjamin expresses how travel linked Jews across different parts of the Mediterranean as well as the Indian Ocean and the interior parts of Europe and the Near East, establishing a globalized sense of Jewish identity at a time when the Jewish diaspora extended across natural and political boundaries that otherwise divided populations from one another.

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[77] Martin Jacobs, "A Day's Journey: Spatial Perceptions and Geographic Imagination in Benjamin of Tudela's Book of Travels," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 109:2 (2019), 222.

[78] Jacobs, Reorienting the East, 133.

[79] Jacobs, Reorienting the East 132.

[80] Benjamin of Tudela, כ.

[81] Benjamin of Tudela, כ.

[82] Benjamin of Tudela, ק.

IV Petachia of Regensburg and Oral Tradition

Petachia was born in Regensburg, present-day Germany, to a family of prominent rabbis.[83] In the medieval period, Regensburg was known as a "Jewish Athens" because of its reputation for intellectual excellence, and it attracted famous scholars of medieval Ashkenaz like Judah *he-Hasid* (the righteous).[84] Petachia set out from Prague between 1170 and 1180, evidenced by his references to political authorities such as the Crusaders. His work lacks order and specificity in many instances, and its limitations as a source are vast. The vagueness throughout is probably a critical reason that his work has not been attractive to scholars examining Jewish identity in the Middle Ages. I maintain, however, that the source's compilation of oral traditions is a powerful example of Petachia's desire to learn more about Jews outside his home community and transfer his cultural knowledge about such people, with whom he associates, to other Ashkenazim. The physical and spiritual characteristics he ascribes to graves and biblical sites further contributes to his representation of the Near East as a central space to Jewish identity. Beyond being a contemporary of Benjamin of Tudela, the content that Petachia provides complements Benjamin's work. Most significantly, Petachia's focus and recounting of the oral traditions that accompanied the sites he visited relayed important cultural material from Jews in one part of the world to Jews in another. Moreover, the fact that the yeshivot of the Mesopotamian region relied much more heavily on orality in their education system and that Petachia and Benjamin were the first individuals to write down these stories directly correspond to a strengthening of Jewish unity through travel writing during the twelfth century.[85]

Examining Petachia of Regensburg's travels alongside those of Benjamin of Tudela demonstrates how similar ideas of Jewish unity persisted in both Sephardic and Ashkenazi travel narratives. Without considering specific content in the narratives, the simple fact that these itineraries exist and focus so explicitly on Jews, Jewish histories, and Jewish intellectual achievement reflects a common understanding of the elements that comprised shared Jewish identity in the Middle Ages. Here, I demonstrate the relevance of Petachia and Benjamin not only to Jewish history, but to the diasporic medieval Jewish identity that serves as a microcosm for Philips' and Heng's vision of global Middle Ages scholarship.

Petachia's work provides a glimpse into the prominence of the work itself at the time of its actual composition. In a study comparing Petachia's travels to a midrash of Jonah, Osnat Sharon explains that Petachia referenced Rabbi Judah *he-Hasid* as an individual involved in the writing or editing of his work.[86] According to medieval Ashkenazi text expert Ivan Marcus, the thirteenth-century *Sefer Hasidism* was written anonymously but is widely attributed to the same Judah *he-hasid* that contributed to Petachia's composition.[87] Moreover, Marcus claims that *Sefer Hasidism* was widely read and dedicates an entire chapter to unpacking Judah's life and its influence on *Sefer Hasidism*'s contents. The fact that Judah *he-hasid* was so well known in medieval Ashkenaz indicates that his partnership with Petachia would have made his work widely available among scholarly and literate communities in Ashkenaz. Sharon's suggestion, that Petachia "was the son of a well-connected family of rabbis," means that the stories Petachia recounted reached a substantial audience and

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[83]Benisch, iv; Sharon, 42.

[84]Ivan Marcus, *Sefer Hasidism and the Ashkenazic Book in Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 45.

[85]Ephrat and Elman, 114.

[86]Osnat Sharon, ״הפיל, הלווייתן ונינוה העיר הגדולה: סיבוב ר פתחיה מרגנסבורג ומדרש יונה והדפסתם יחדיו״ [The Elephant, the Leviathan, and the Great City of Nineveh: The Loop of Rabbi Petachia of Regensburg and Midrash Jonah and their Printing Together] in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* (2016), 42.

[87]Marcus, 1.

informed them of oral traditions that convey his understanding of Jewish life in the Near East.[88] The transmission of such knowledge greatly benefited Jewish understanding of the cultural diversity that existed within the Jewish world.

Petachia's journey began in Prague, and he continued through Poland and Russia to Kedar, where he encountered the first group of people he deemed worthy of detailing. His first instinct is to classify them as non-Jews, stating "and in the land of Kedar there are no Jews," although they clearly represent some form of an unnamed non-Rabbanite peripherally Jewish group.[89] Justifying his reasoning behind their lack of Jewishness, he explains that "they said that they had not heard from the world what the Talmud is."[90] Early on, Petachia identified knowledge of the Talmud as a proxy for defining Jewish identity in the medieval world. The Talmud made Jewish life possible in the medieval period, and travelers clearly used its presence or lack thereof as a marker of Jewish community. While one might claim that Petachia is saying that the people in Kedar could be Jews if they learned from the sages and studied the Talmud, he also implied that they are incapable of such learning because their fathers, or ancestors, did not teach them about these works. Thus, a confluence of history and contemporary practice emerges as Petachia identifies and consolidates his imagination of the Jewish diaspora.

Petachia provides little detail on the ensuing Mesopotamian communities until he reaches Baghdad, and his Baghdad description very much complements that of Benjamin. The large Jewish community of scholarly repute with a powerful leader evidences Jacobs' argument that medieval Jewish travelers did not view the Near East as the backward and undeveloped "other" that would dominate the narrative in later eras of colonialist discourse. Botticini and Eckstein further complicate this idea when they argue that "by the twelfth century the German academies in Mainz and Worms overshadowed those in Mesopotamia."[91] By this logic, Petachia did not give his own community enough credit for its intellectual accomplishments in respect for the reputation of Mesopotamia as the heir of the rabbis of the Talmud.[92] Petachia first describes the head of the academy, Samuel HaLevi, as extremely wise in Jewish tradition, possessing more knowledge than anyone else in Babylon, Media, and Persia. Petachia offers a glimpse into a political dispute of his time, stating that Daniel, the previous exilarch, died one year prior to his visit and the two options for his successor, David and Samuel, had not resolved which of them would replace Daniel.[93] He then mentions Samuel's daughter, an expert in scripture and Talmud who teaches her students, who cannot see her, through a window while she is enclosed in a building.[94] Petachia does not show surprise at a woman being capable of teaching scripture, but rather recounts her activity with a very neutral tone.[95]

Petachia offers a brief Jewish history of Ararat, stating that many Jews lived there in ancient times, invoking the same phrase, "*b'yamei kedem*," as Benjamin, but fought internally and separated, ending up in the cities of Babylon, Media and Persia.[96] While his tone seems matter-of-fact due to the simplistic language, the fact that "they killed one another" insinuates a high degree of damage that internal fractures within the Jewish community caused. Petachia notes that "in Persia, Jews face grief and sorrow, and therefore Petachia only came to one city of Persia," drawing brief

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[88] Ibid.

[89] Petachia of Regensburg, *The Travels of Rabbi Petachia of Regensburg* ed. Abraham Benisch (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2012), 6. Translation is my own.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Botticini and Eckstein, 198.

[92] Ephrat and Elman, 129.

[93] Petachia of Regensburg, 14-16.

[94] Petachia of Regensburg, 18.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid.

and unspecific attention to the suffering of Jews in Islamic territories.[97] While the information is vague, it demonstrates that Petachia is not exclusively interested in glorifying the Jewish presence in the places he visited. Relaying the fact that Jews faced hardship from non-Jews reflects an effort to convey Jewish society to his readers in a way that categorized all Jews, whether they endured suffering or enjoyed great freedoms, as members of a single group.

On the holiday of Sukkot, Petachia identifies a large gathering at the tomb of the prophet Ezekiel, located between Karbala and Najaf on the Euphrates River, as a joyous occasion that brought Jewish communities from all over the surrounding region into contact with one another.[98] The community relates several stories, which Petachia recounts, of a magical nature surrounding the grave of Ezekiel, ensuring that Petachia understands it as a place of divine significance. A common understanding of the tomb's special powers unites the region's Jewish communities, who invoke the lessons of stories like the man whose mare escaped from him to the grave as reasons to respect its presence and honor the space.[99] The grave attracted Muslim pilgrims in addition to Jews, and the differences in their offerings and prayer style marked a distinction between members of the two groups.[100] Petachia further recounts an abundance of gifts donated to the site, which contributed to its maintenance, oil supplies for the lamps, upkeep of the nearby synagogue, and support for orphans and students who lacked financial means.[101] The spirit of giving is apparent, and donating to a specifically Jewish-managed institution ensured that finances perpetuated institutions of community support.

Overwhelmingly, Petachia relies on stories, essentially local folktales, to ground his description of towns or important sites, particularly graves. These stories cannot be considered historical fact, so their significance lies in their ability to create Jewish identity through local traditions of Jewish history that distinguish between communities within a town or city. The stories offer a glimpse into how the people of Petachia's time considered their own local histories, and how those histories connected to those of surrounding Jewish communities. Because he recorded these stories and shared them with an Ashkenazi readership, Jews in Eastern Europe learned about the presence of Jews from the cultural perspective of oral tradition, an important aspect of community identity during this time period. In addition, the physical presence of the graves of biblical figures studied by Ashkenazi scholars like Judah *he-hasid* connected Petachia's readership to the Eastern Jews through their maintenance of the sites, which represented a relationship with these prophets at a tangible level that was not possible for Ashkenazi Jews. Therefore, Ashkenazi Jews could perceive Eastern Jews as protecting such sites on their behalf as they considered themselves to be co-religionists as a result of shared genealogical heritage and the study of the same texts, particularly Torah and Talmud.

Petachia introduces the grave of Ezra with the following story:

> And he [Petachia] walked for six days to the grave of our lord Ezra the scribe. And they said: in the old days [*b'yamei kedem*], the grave of Ezra the scribe was in ruins. And one shepherd came. And he saw a hill and he slept upon it. And someone came to him in a dream. Tell the Sultan I am Ezra the scribe. Take me on the hands of the Jews and put me in a certain place. And if he does not, all the children of his nation will die. And he did not do this thing. And many died. And he brought the Jews and they buried him [Ezra] together with respect. And there was marble stone and on the marble slate was engraved "I am Ezra the scribe." And they buried him in the place that the shepherd said. And they made a palace on the grave and at the eleventh hour,

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[97] Ibid.
[98] Jacobs, *Reorienting the East*, 119-120.
[99] Petachia of Regensburg, 26.
[100] Petachia of Regensburg, 28.
[101] Petachia of Regensburg, 30.

a fire rises out of his grave to heaven. The eleventh hour during the day and the twelfth hour. Also, it is seen in the first hour of night. And people walk three or four parasangs in the light of the column. And all of the Ishmaelites prostrate there. And the keys from the houses above the graves are in the hands of Jews.[102]

This story sheds light on Petachia's perception of Jews' relationship to non-Jews, and how he transmits these ideas to his fellow Ashkenazim. Petachia does not specify that the shepherd is Jewish, but the fact that he receives the vision about the Jews moving Ezra's grave indicates that he is, in fact, Jewish. Also, Petachia is unclear whether the shepherd neglected to inform the Sultan of Ezra's threat or the Sultan refused to comply, but the subsequent sentence in which the Jews are called upon to solve the crisis of deaths indicates that it was the Sultan who did not respond to the shepherd. The story also conveys a warning about the consequences of not following the will of a prophet. By citing a conversation between an Eastern Jew and a biblical prophet at his grave site, Petachia reinforces the idea that the Jews of the Near East maintain a relationship that manifests itself through the presence of holy graves in the geographical landscape of Mesopotamia.

Next, Petachia ascribes a divine quality to the fire that the grave emits when he states that it reaches all the way to heaven. This phenomenon would inspire his readers to seek more information on Ezra's grave and perhaps even make a pilgrimage of their own, generating opportunities for contact between Ashkenazi and Eastern Jews. The fire also connotes that while God is present in the prayer and study of Jews in Europe, the Jewish presence in the Near East is more exposed to physical manifestations of the divine, which empowers their robust academies of Jewish learning. Finally, he emphasizes Jewish possession of the keys to the houses around the grave and access to the money donated at the site, showing how Jews maintain autonomy over the site as a minority even when Muslims also visit it for prayer. This observation demonstrates a level of partnership between Jews and the majority culture that was less common in Europe. Petachia makes all of these observations from a distinctly Jewish perspective, highlighting the actions of the Jewish community and the dramatic impact of the grave on the local landscape and for pilgrims.

Petachia and Benjamin tell a very similar story about the grave of Daniel in the Persian city of Shushan in present-day Iran. Thus, this story likely originates from a common or popular narrative but is not found in any prior written source. According to both travelers, the population on the side of Shushan in which Daniel was buried enjoyed great prosperity and success. The people living on the other side coveted the tomb and years of war ensued. Finally, the wise elders devised a plan to suspend the grave in the middle of the river (Petachia) or move the grave from one side of the river to the other on an annual cycle (Benjamin).[103] In this instance, travel produced knowledge of local lore that represents a collective memory of how Daniel's grave came to be shared by the groups on either side of the river, whom Martin Jacobs identifies as Jews on one side and either Syrian or Nestorian Christians on the other.[104] By writing down stories like this, the travelers enabled their readers in Sepharad and Ashkenaz to understand details about their Eastern co-religionists that enhanced their feeling of belonging to the same community through the sharing of stories. While the evidence of this process is not recorded, it is easy to imagine that Benjamin and Petachia would have shared their own stories about their home communities with their Jewish hosts, permitting local legends of European Jewish character to spread among Eastern Jews.

Petachia conducts an ethnographic analysis of a synagogue in Baghdad, identifying the cultural norms that the locals practice during sessions of prayer. Petachia's focus on synagogue culture in particular demonstrates that he sought out spaces with which he was somewhat familiar but observed different customs from his prior conception of the norm. These observations convey the

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[102] Petachia of Regensburg, 36-38.

[103] Petachia of Regensburg, 38; Benjamin of Tudela, עד.

[104] Jacobs, *Reorienting the East*, 122-123.

work that travel literature performed because they enabled Jews in Europe to recognize the customs of Jews in the Near East as part of the same tradition that they practiced. For example, Petachia writes "one says alone one hundred blessings. And after they answer amen. And after that one will stand and will say the *Sheamar* blessing in a loud voice. And another will stand and will say the praises. And the congregation joins him. And his voice is heard above all of them so that they will not rush."[105] Petachia continues with the manner in which the service was conducted, noting two more specific prayers, *Yeshtabach* and *Vayosha*. Since he does not explain what the prayers mean, it is evident that he and his audience recognize them among their contemporaneous prayers, finding commonality between the way Judaism is practiced in Ashkenaz and the Near East. However, Petachia specifies difference between his own culture and that of Babylon when he states that "they are all without shoes in the synagogue, barefooted."[106] This passage constitutes a significant ethnographic detail that reflected a difference in how Jews in Europe gained insight into the customs of Jews in the Near East as Petachia observed them. The writing of this detail generated intercultural knowledge among Ashkenazi Jews about the diversity of Jewish practices, and the use of familiar terms like "synagogue" show that Petachia understood that members of the same Jewish diaspora could practice Judaism in different ways. The fact that Petachia noted these differences demonstrates an interest in how Jewish diversity manifested itself in ritual prayer, while affirming to his audience that even those who practiced Judaism in different ways were definitively members of the global Jewish community.

Petachia held a strong urge to place events of the Bible in locations that he visited. Noah's Ark, the Sea of Salt of Sodom and Gomorrah (The Dead Sea), and the graves of several prophets appear throughout the work. This feature offers a variety of physical locations that Petachia deemed to be significant to the formation of Jewish identity, rooting Jewishness in the ability to connect with sacred spaces in a particular way. The clustering of these locations in the Land of Israel and Mesopotamia place the Near East at the heart of the Jewish diaspora for all Jewish communities, essentially moving his own community to a peripheral space. Petachia encountered a range of Jewish communities from those he deemed large, powerful, and well-educated, such as Damascus, to the lone Jewish cloth dyer who lived in Jerusalem and paid a heavy tax to the king in order to be allowed to reside there.[107] His inclusion and elaboration on each of these groups indicates that he fundamentally viewed them as part of a single, diverse community. Through his recognition of customs and religious practice, and perhaps introduction from one Jewish community to the next by the people he met, Petachia's writing, like Benjamin's, worked to create a demarcation in defining the people that comprised the Jewish community and introduced elements of difference to his home audience that educated them on a certain perception of the way that Jews performed traditions in distant locations.

V   The Impact of Travel Writing on the Jewish Diaspora

Tenth-century *Ga'on* of Pumbedita (leader of the esteemed Pumbedita Talmudic Academy in present-day Iraq) Rabbi Aaron Sargado proclaimed "behold, all of the students of our yeshiva that know the versions from the mouths of the great sages, most of them have no knowledge of any book."[108] Expert on Talmudic Studies Robert Brody further argues that the oral versions of the

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[105] Petachia of Regensburg, 44.

[106] Petachia of Regensburg, 44.

[107] Petachia of Regensburg, 52; Petachia of Regensburg, 60.

[108] Rabbi Aaron Sargado, "שהרי" [Behold] in Yerahmiel [Robert] Brody, "Sifrut ha-Geonim ve-ha-Tekst ha-Talmudi" [The Literature of the Geonim and the Talmudic Text], *Mehqerei Talmud* [Talmudic Studies], vol. 1, ed. Yaakov Sussman and David Rosenthal (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990), 241. My translation of Brody's Hebrew translation (original source in Aramaic).

Talmud were always held in higher regard than written versions in the Babylonian academies, and even suggests that the Talmud never would have been written down if it were not for the need to spread it beyond the borders of the academies to the Jewish communities of Spain.[109] If the most educated members of the society, the yeshiva's students, did not know anything of a book, oral transmission was the only means of recording local folklore for future generations, and was therefore limited to contacts of the community. Botticini and Eckstein clearly demonstrate that Jews of the Muslim world possessed high degrees of literacy and standards for education, but this does not contradict the notion that orality was an important means of transmission for cultural material like folklore.[110] Even as Rustow identifies an explosion of Jewish literary production in the tenth century, her analysis applies only to the privileged texts of Torah, Talmud, and rabbinic literature, and not the local oral traditions that Petachia and Benjamin transcribed.[111] The vast distances from these communities to Sepharad and Ashkenaz meant that practical, mercantile interaction was rather limited, especially because Mesopotamia and Prague were further removed from Mediterranean trading networks. Benjamin and Petachia overcame this obstacle to cultural interaction within the diaspora through intentional travel seeking out these communities and their stories. The act of writing down oral traditions like each of their stories about Daniel's grave or Petachia's tale about Ezra's grave tangibly preserved a piece of Jewish cultural memory and transmitted it to other Jewish people in the diaspora who were previously unaware of its existence.

Travel writing as a genre revolutionized medieval European perceptions of culture, self and other, and the place of individual communities and societies in the interconnected global network. In the introduction to *The Medieval Invention of Travel*, Shayne Legassie explains that the Middle Ages fostered "a new, enduring view of travel as *literate labor*. In its guise as literate labor, travel was increasingly understood as an ennobling, taxing form of work, at once *physical and intellectual*, practicable in just about any place in the world, with intimate ties to the art of literacy."[112] In essence, travel writing is uniquely capable of capturing the perspective of a literate and educated individual who gained exposure to a variety of communities, enduring great physical difficulties in order to do so. Jewish travelers' notable emphasis on active Jewish communities and holy sites demonstrates a commonality in values between Benjamin and Petachia as individuals representing each of their cultures' outlook toward Jews in the Near East. Meanwhile, the content of their descriptions evidence interactions and exchange of local oral histories that brought communities closer together even through a single representative.

While Marco Polo "created Asia for the European mind," Benjamin of Tudela and Petachia of Regensburg contributed significantly to Sephardic and Ashkenazi perceptions of Jews in the Near East, and in Benjamin's case, other parts of Europe, Africa, and India.[113] Most importantly, their overarching depictions present Jews living in distant lands as closer in cultural understanding to themselves than the non-Jews who inhabited their own hometowns in Sepharad and Ashkenaz. While information is limited on their medieval circulation, each work was formally published in the early modern period. Eliezer ben Gershon printed the first edition, or *editio princeps*, of Benjamin's travels at Constantinople in 1543.[114] This location is significant because, by the sixteenth century,

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[109] Yerahmiel [Robert] Brody, "Sifrut ha-Geonim ve-ha-Tekst ha-Talmudi" [The Literature of the Geonim and the Talmudic Text], *Mehqerei Talmud* [Talmudic Studies], vol. 1, ed. Yaakov Sussman and David Rosenthal (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990), 242-243.

[110] Botticini and Eckstein, 142.

[111] Marina Rustow, *Heresy and the Politics of Community: The Jews of the Fatimid Caliphate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 39.

[112] Shayne Legassie, *The Medieval Invention of Travel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), viii.

[113] John Masefield, introduction to *The Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian, by Marco Polo* (London: J.M. Dent, 1908), xi.

[114] Marcus Nathan Adler, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Critical Text, Translation and Commentary* (New York: Phillip Feldheim, Inc., 1907).

the Jews had already been expelled from Spain and many of their descendants lived in Istanbul and other parts of the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, Benjamin's account maintained a place in his culture's literary body even as Benjamin's descendants fled from the land of Sepharad that Benjamin considered his home. The preservation of the text up until its printing in 1543 demonstrates that it contained cultural significance to Sephardic Jewry that surpassed Benjamin's own lifetime.

Meanwhile, Petachia's *Sivuv* was printed in Prague in 1595.[115] Eastern Europe continued to be home to the Ashkenazi community with which Petachia identified through the medieval and early modern periods, illustrating a similar continuity of the work's value within the culture that produced it. When the early modern invention of the printing press made their publication possible, printers took the opportunity to make these works more accessible to Jews specifically, as the first versions of each account were printed in Hebrew. While much of the information in both compositions was no longer applicable to the political climate in which they were printed, each work clearly stimulated cultural thought on the Jewish diaspora in the Middle Ages. By publishing and reading Benjamin and Petachia, Jews formed and maintained connections to groups of Jews they would never meet in person, strengthening Jewish unity in the diaspora. In the twelfth century, these texts were likely not read by a significant portion of the Jewish population due to their limited accessibility before modern times. However, they do demonstrate that the authors and their immediate audiences considered the nature and extent of Jewish diaspora and reimagined the very essence of Jewish peoplehood through physical journeys.

Botticini and Eckstein point to the educational requirements developed by the rabbis of the Talmud as the reason for medieval Jews' high level of literacy and over-representation in skilled urban occupations as opposed to agriculture.[116] They argue that Jews developed a "uniform code of law (the Talmud) and a set of institutions (rabbinic courts, the responsa) that fostered contract-enforcement, networking, and arbitrage across distant locations," which resulted in Jews having an advantage over other groups in a variety of careers.[117] Furthermore, they identify a process whereby Jews who became skilled laborers in urban settings were then more inclined to invest in their children's education and literacy, creating future generations of Jews who had studied the same texts across the diaspora.[118] Benjamin and Petachia themselves, both rabbis from urban communities, were a product of this process who sought to reconceptualize their own place within the broader Jewish world through the mechanism of travel. Moreover, the literary advantages of Jews that Botticini and Eckstein identify allowed the itineraries of Benjamin and Petachia to reach a wider audience, proportionally, than they could have in communities with less emphasis on literacy and education, adding to travel literature's importance in the construction of medieval Jewish identity.

VI   Conclusion

According to Elka Weber, "travel writing becomes an extended form of self-definition," whereby the writer distinguishes himself from others who practice different cultural norms from the author and the reader.[119] This paper has been an exploration of self-definition, using two case studies that bridge important gaps in medieval scholarship. Even in the global Middle Ages, no single group paralleled the representation of Jews across Europe, Africa, the Near East, and Central and South Asia. A global political phenomenon, the Crusades, established the conditions necessary for

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[115]Sharon, 37.
[116]Botticini and Eckstein, 2.
[117]Botticini and Eckstein, 5.
[118]Botticini and Eckstein, 142.
[119]Weber, 36.

Benjamin and Petachia to set out for the east and record the information and oral stories that they encountered along each of their routes. Further research might explore the details of how the Crusades facilitated trans-Mediterranean mobility. Another project would investigate whether the increased interaction between Latin Christians and Eastern Jews, Muslims, and Eastern Christians as a result of the Crusades affected the status of Jews in Europe with respect to their communities.

The itineraries of Benjamin and Petachia complement one another in their formats and in the information they provide. Benjamin's *Masa'ot* is organized by geography, tends to extract the same types of information from the places he visited, and emphasizes the ties between Jewish communities and their connection to the Land of Israel. Meanwhile, Petachia's *Sivuv* jumps between locations, frequently returning to places already mentioned, and even states explicitly that the names of cities he visited and their distances from one another are not worth writing down. However, his detailed accounts of the oral traditions surrounding the graves of prophets and holy figures in Mesopotamia were invaluable to the transmission of Jewish culture from one region of the globe to another. Both accounts reflect their authors' perception of unity among Jews, especially Rabbanite Jews, rendering two Jews from the most distant regions of the world closer in culture, values, and education to one another than they were to their Christian, Muslim, sun-worshipping, or otherwise idolatrous neighbors to whom they lived in close proximity.

From these accounts, one learns that the condition of Jews varied greatly across different regions, and even within the same region. Both authors are repulsed by the oppression of Jews in Greece and enthralled by the prosperity of Jewish communities in Near Eastern urban centers like Damascus and Baghdad. Within the Near East, each author notes disparities in wealth, religious practice, education level, and state of relations with the local non-Jewish population, as well as divergences between Jewish society in metropolises and small towns. However, despite these differences shaped by external factors, common themes of Bible and Talmud Study, commemoration of the Jewish exile from the Land of Israel, and prayer at holy sites of shared prophets in a manner distinctly identifiable as Jewish emerged as common features of Jewish communities across the diaspora. The desire to establish a historical narrative through common ancestry that bound the entire diaspora together further solidified the sense of unity that Benjamin and Petachia set out to promote. By relating cultural traditions and, even more importantly, oral stories from Near Eastern Jews to their Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities, the travel writing of Benjamin of Tudela and Petachia of Regensburg contributed to strengthened Jewish unity in the medieval world.

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