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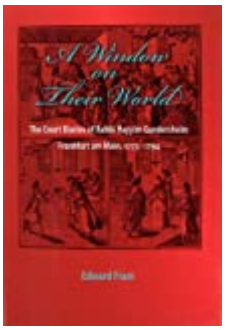

Edward Fram, ed. *A Window on Their World: The Court Diaries of Rabbi Hayyim Gundersheim Frankfurt Am Main, 1773-1794.* Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2012. 660 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87820-253-9.

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Expanding the Range and Use of Rabbinic Sources in Germany at the Edge of Modernity

In this massive and most welcome volume, Edward Fram presents a fascinating manuscript, which is a summary of various rabbinic court decisions and rulings from the private notes prepared by a long-time Frankfurt judiciary, Rabbi Hayyim Gundersheim. Gundersheim served as a *dayyan* (rabbinic judge) in Frankfurt from 1767 (in his late twenties) until his death in 1795. Comprised of 210 loose hand-written paper folios, the manuscript is written in multiple hands in rabbinic Hebrew, along with some Yiddish and German transliterated into Hebrew. It is not the official record kept by the Frankfurt rabbinic court (*bet din*).

Throughout the extensive and helpful introduction Fram traces the history of the manuscript and he very usefully discusses the nature and limitations of the source. He also reconstructs a biographical sketch of Gundersheim that takes advantage of a broad range of source materials. Of particular interest is Framâs discussion of other aspects of Gundersheimâs teaching, preaching, and activities beyond the court. Fram also presents a thorough and valuable overview of judiciary structures, functionaries, and processes of the Frankfurt court, which reveals communal structures and tensions. As Fram notes, the records of litigation tell us a great deal about legal cases as well as the litigants who brought them to or were summoned before the court. It allows us to see Jews from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and it offers important information about women, who might be involved in various legal matters, such as âestate claims, commercial and real estate transactions, contract disputes and requests for payments of their marriage contractsâ (pp. 34-35). Married women had to litigate with their husbands or their husbandsâ written consent (except in divorce proceedings), though single women (independent or widowed) could approach the court on their own.

In the introduction, Fram reviews the central types of disputes brought before the court, providing both examples and rich context–and he underscores its role in interpreting, if not implementing, communal regulations. Some 40 percent of the cases recorded in Gundersheimâs diary related to real estate, particularly the sale or divi-

sion of houses and synagogue seats. Fram cautions that it is difficult and potentially problematic to extrapolate from Gundersheimâs diary to the broader activities of the court. As others have cautioned when it comes to rabbinic rulings, Fram discusses at length and in exemplary fashion the possibilities and limitations of using such material as a historical source, with particular attention to comparing and contrasting court documents and rabbinic responsa. He also notes that the use of non-Jewish courts by Jews could be both frequent and complex and that while it needs to be considered it should not be overestimated. Fram rightfully discusses the actual practical authority of the court at great length, noting that in some cases individuals and the community failed to adhere to the obligations imposed by the court. Given the size and centrality of the Frankfurt community, the *bet din* addressed cases from other communities and individuals from outside the community, making the manuscript important for a larger Jewish history beyond the city.

While the introduction is an excellent study of the source and the legal structures and processes of the court, it provides much less detail about the community and the social, economic, and cultural complexity of a major early modern Jewish center. Beyond the formalities of the legal discussions, Fram unfortunately misses the opportunity to exploit fully the potentially broader implications of the rich material he so admirably presents. Fram engages the most recent, and frankly somewhat limited, scholarship on the Frankfurt community. Still, even without turning the volume in to an essay on late eighteenth-century Frankfurt, a broader context would inform the reading and interpretation of the texts to follow and, in concert with other community sources, it would likely have led to some important observations.

The bulk of the volume (pp. 91-535) is comprised of the documents. Each case is presented in its Hebrew original with a brief summary in English and helpful explanatory reference notes. Fram provides orientation to the broad categories of cases in the introduction and it is impossible in the limitations of a review to point out the full scope of cases and issues addressed in these documents. It will, therefore, have to suffice to review a few common themes.

The sale of synagogue seats is addressed with great regularity throughout the diary. Intriguing is the sharing of seats, divided by use at specific times among different people. In the context of church seating in early modern Germany as well as discussions of public religious practice, these documents raise many important issues that are quite exciting to consider. Equally fascinating are the many documents that address legal suits related to property and joint business ventures. Multiple ownership of houses (including rotation in living locations among co-owners, based on various lotteries and agreements) forces us to consider the nature of communal social structure and day-to-day life in the Jewish quarter.

Disputes abound in the manuscript, raising important questions about the social and cultural concerns and tensions within the community. There are numerous examples of disputes between individuals and matchmakers and between matchmakers themselves; conflicts over dowries and marriage contracts; disagreements regarding inheritances, as well as charitable giving and trusts, guardianship, agency and administration of estates, and distribution of assets; disputes between creditors and debtors; suits over the payment of wages; and domestic disputes. Perhaps more surprising and intriguing are the cases that deal with dues for fraternities or admission to or exclusion from various communal societies.

Immovable property is discussed regularly in the documents–the sale, rental, and ownership of land and houses, as well as the details of construction and renovation. Recorded as well are the executions of compromise agreements and rulings on various damages, as well as several loan agreements.

Community issues appear repeatedly throughout the texts. The nature and scope of written agreements and diaries and the production of other communal bureaucratic tools afford insights into communal legislation and enforcement as well as the nature of household goods and personal items. The authority of the community is also raised in discussions related to communal customs (for example, a case related to ritual immersion of women after childbirth–no. 191) and formal communal responses to non-Jewish authorities regarding certain Jewish customs and practices (such as inheritance). Other aspects of Jewish communal life appear in the notes regularly, including support of needy brides; approval of community measures related to tax assessment; and debates over the construction of a new public building to serve as a hostel and hospice for the poor and elderly (no. 252).

The volume includes eight fascinating appendices that offer comparative materials from the Frankfurt *pinkas* and other rabbinic collections of the period, all in Hebrew (with no context or discussion in English) and dealing with a range of issues raised in various parts of the diary. Among the most intriguing material is that re-

lated to a local *hazzan* (appendix 3) rumored to have performed inappropriate acts (unspecified) and discussions about communal authority to limit unauthorized prayer quorums (appendix 5). The appendices include a brief Jewish ordinance (in German; appendix 6). The volume also includes a number of outstanding and helpful materials, such as a list of abbreviations, an overview of coins and measurements, a glossary of non-Hebrew words, a short bibliography, and indexes of place names; houses, lots, and streets in the *Judengasse*; personal names; and subjects of cases. In all, Fram has prepared an outstanding scholarly volume that will add a great deal of depth to the study of early modern Jewish communities. Given the scope of the introduction and the presentation of the sources fully in the original only, the use of the volume will be limited but still of great benefit, primarily to scholars working in early modern Jewish history and Jewish law.

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