“For we Jews are merciful”: Emotions and Communal Identity

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Abstract: Assigning character traits to national groups was a key pastime in the early modern period, part of a process of consolidation of European national identities. This presentation examines the way emotional characteristics were assigned to emerging national groups. In particular, it focuses on the way in which Jewish communal sources employed language and terms of emotion to characterize Jewish communities. Internally the language often functioned to call notice to an ideal that the community was failing to live up to.

This presentation is based on excerpts from Jewish communal records, as noted for each excerpt.
EARLY MODERN WORKSHOP: Jewish History Resources


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1. Regulations of Deutschkreutz, 1816

Source: Stefan Litt, Jüdische Gemeindestatuten, 431. From Pinkas Deutschkreutz, Burgenländisches Landesarchiv Eisenstandt, AII/1, fol. 106 v.

It has been several years since the regulations (takkanot), which we heard had been issued and promulgated by the five sages of the land, have gone missing. This was the cause of many disturbances in our community, as each man did as he pleased. Whenever a question arose whose resolution depended upon the regulations, each person had a different opinion [as to what the regulations contained], even the elders of the community remembered it as in a dream, for they did not know clearly what was said in the regulations. And we, valued members of the community, sought valiantly to find the regulations for we heard they had been copied [or had moved—meaning is imprecise here] with the endorsement of our own communal secretary …so the people of our community did not rest until we received our communal regulations back and the substance of the regulations testifies that these were legislated for our community according to the status and conditions that were at that time characteristic of our community.

2. Mercy

a) Source: JTS ms 10772 p 5a

As we Jews are merciful we have no choice but to pay the expenses of the illegitimate child, for each quarter year twelve shock (Marks) and the above
b) Source: CAHJP AHW 20 p. 14 (Pinkas shamash Altona)

On the same Sunday [the day following Passover 1768] R. Chaim the *shamash* told me to tell the chief rabbi that it was thus agreed in the kahal [lay council]: Ephraim Barbira had a child in his house who was his grandchild, and the father of the child had died. The father who died had a right of residency in Hamburg; he was the son in law of Ephraim. And after the father died, Ephraim took the grandchild into his home, and out of charity (dererekh mitzvah) gave him sustenance and all he needed for no recompense, for the mother of the child, the daughter of Ephraim was unable to give anything to her son, for she was very poor; also she left to go to Amsterdam and she was not with the child. Regarding this a number of people [of the Altona community] went to the community council in Hamburg and argued that they were obliged to support the child, as the father of the child was of their community, for he is very pitiable, and we are very merciful and the Altona council cannot stand to see such a pitiful thing.

On the same day, Leyb ben Ephraim Hecksher paid the sum abovementioned through my agency to the gentile woman, expenses for the illegitimate child, Thursday 13 Shevat 5526-[1766].
הנ”ל באשר שאבינו מנוהלו הנ"ל הוא מנוהלה שלמה כהר האנוכל והפרנסות ובנין הרימונים ממונים.
ולא רכש הקהל אלפונטה להארות הרימונים בצאת.
3. Obedience and honor vs insolence and shame

a) Sources: CAHJP AHW c. 1730 Graupe 2; 46: (par. #66)

Any person who appears before the community council is obligated to obey them, to observe and to do and to uphold. Anyone who maligns the parnas (lay leader) even not during the meeting, not to mention during a meeting, they have permission to fine that person with fines and humiliations, in concert with the chief rabbi as they see fit. And if he slanders a parnas via the shamash, not to mention to his face, the kahal leaders must immediately redress the insult.

b) Source: CAHJP AHW 20 p. 31a

Today on the first day of Rosh Hashana a great faintness overcame the scholar and leader Rabbi Isaiah z”l in the synagogue and the weakness worsened until they had to carry him from the synagogue and they brought him to the home of treasurer Leyb Hecksher, where his soul departed. Due to the fact that it was a Sabbath he remained there until the second day of Rosh Hashana. Soldiers were at the funeral in order to prevent a tumult. Despite this, there was a great dispute between the Society for carrying the bier and the parnassim, because…[both parties] wanted to carry the scholar. In the course of the dispute Samuel bar Moses Bloch was extremely insolent and opened his mouth against the parnassim. Therefore on the fast of Gedalia there was a meeting of the kahal and the council fined Samuel …and relieved him of his position as treasurer (gabbai) for a quarter year. On the night after the holiday I went to seal the entire inventory of the late rabbis belongings may the Lord guard us against division and scandal from now until eternity.
4. Lovingkindness

Source: CAHJP AHW 20 p. 14

Today on the first day after the holiday the parnas of the month told me that it had been decided several months ago at the council meeting that the daughter of Leyb Walzerode who had been affianced to the young man Ezriel ben Merkel, the kahal acted out of kindness for her, that the bride will pay for the debt of her father which amounts to 50 schock/mark) 25 schock in cash and 25 the kahal will contribute to assist her as is customary for all the orphans in our community.

5. Justice

a) Source: JTS ms 10772 fol. 27a image 55.

Note that the text is available in full in EMW Vol. 10 (2013)

After this, on the next day Wed. 4 Tamuz 1766, I went to the wife of Feivish ben Aaron Levi and also to the elders [?] to warn them that a rumor has reached said lay leader R Hirsch that they want to approach the gentile courts because of the incident with R Daniel. And they should not do this, for justice is to be found in Jewish courts, and there are judges in the land and the truth will emerge, and the kahal wants to find the guilty party in this matter. And if they do not heed this warning they will get a big injunction from the kahal. They responded as one, that heaven forbid, they would not do that, and they also told me of the evil deeds of R Daniel the slaughterer, who committed a real murder, for he came in the heat of a quarrel in great anger with sword drawn in his hand and he grabbed him by the hair and the head and he wanted to slaughter him like a beast, … and if a few butchers had not arrived to save him, R Daniel would have committed murder and he [Feivish] would be gone from this world, and indeed R Feivish has fallen gravely ill and lies in bed in great danger. But the truth will out, that he did not go to gentile court of his own volition but an agent called Nisperlich came to him and asked him what happened, perhaps the matter came to attention through the ???
who is called von Balen, a burgher of the chamber, for he witnessed the entire deed of R Daniel and he said explicitly that if R Feivish would not go to the authorities he would go to the authorities to tell them the entire episode, and that is what happened. After this, the parnas of the month sent R Hayyim shamash to tell them again in the name of the entire Kahal, and to threaten them, that they should not go to the gentile courts, as above mentioned.

b) Source: CAHJP AHW 20 p. 24a

Today Sunday 17 Sivan [1770] I was sent by the parnas R Haim Birgel and by the chief rabbi to Simon Franzman to tell him that as he went to gentile court with Zalman bar Sender, he should refrain from going to gentile courts because there is justice within Jewish law (courts) and if not he will be put into coercive herem.

I was sent by the kahal to the son of Eliah the guardsman to tell him that as he went to the non Jewish court with the daughter of Eliah Elte who had been his bride and now is engaged to another, he should not go to gentile courts because “justice is
to be found among Jews” and if he does not reverse this, not only will he be put into coercive herem but the kahal will take away his employment.

d) Source: CAHJP AHW 20 p.14

Today Tuesday hol hamoed Pesach [1768] I was sent by the parnas of the month to R Meir Lelewer to tell him that as he has in his possession a copper kettle of Mr Lipman son in law of Moses Veit, and according to Lipman R Meir does not want to return the kettle, therefore the parnas of the month sent to him that he is obliged to return the kettle and if he has a dispute with Lipman, there is justice here, and each person cannot adjudicate for himself.