

To: The American Academy for Jewish Research

From: Flora Cassen, Associate Professor of History and Associate Professor of Jewish, Islamic, and Middle Eastern Studies, Washington University in St. Louis; Ronnie Perelis, Chief Rabbi Dr. Isaac Abraham and Jelena (Rachel) Alcalay Associate Professor of Sephardic Studies, Yeshiva University

RE: AAJR Application for the Cross-Institutional Cooperative Grants, Special Initiatives Fund 2020-2021

Project Description: The arrival of Columbus' caravels to the Caribbean islands of Guanahani, Haiti and Cuba in the Fall of 1492 forever changed the course of world history. There could be no turning back for either the Europeans or the Americans. With each returning expedition, stories about the New World and its people were brought into the Old European world. The existence of a previously unknown continent challenged Europeans' worldview and raised questions about their place in a larger world and a more diverse humanity. Like their Christian brethren, European Jews and Iberian conversos had to confront and grapple with that new knowledge. Some, often Spanish and Portuguese conversos, were fortunate enough to travel the New World and see it with their own eyes. But most Jews were sitting in Europe, hearing and reading the accounts of other travelers.

Based on this, Jewish and converso authors penned their own accounts of and reflections on the New World. Abraham Farissol (1451-1525/6) included a detailed description of the Americas in his geographical work, *Iggeret Orhot Olam*. Yoseph Ha-Kohen (1496-1575) wrote entire books—*Sefer ha-India ha-Hadasha* and *Sefer Fernando Cortes*—on Columbus' discovery of the Americas and Cortés' conquest of Mexico. Farissol and Ha-Kohen were both born in Avignon and lived their lives in Italy, but news of the Americas also reached the Ashkenazi heartland. David Gans (1541-1613), a geographer and astronomer in Prague, wrote about it in his famous *Tzemach David*. The narrative of Antonio de Montezinos, a Converso merchant who describes his mysterious encounter with the lost tribe of Reueben in the Andes, forms the centerpiece of the famed Amsterdam Rabbi, Menasseh ben Israel' *Hope of Israel*. The Spanish converso, Luis de Carvajal (1567-1596), wrote a detailed diary describing his travels throughout colonial Mexico. Carvajal who used the pen name of Joseph Lumbruso (the Enlightened) described his crypto-Jewish exploits and composed an array of original theological material--prayers, Biblical meditations, analysis of the commandments, etc. in a series of manuscripts which were obtained by the Inquisition after his arrest for Judaizing in 1595. Carvajal is the only New World crypto-Jew who brazenly recorded his crypto-Judaism while still living under the Inquisition. He is also the only Jewish writer to write about the Americas while living in the New World.

This large corpus of sixteenth-century Jewish writings on the Americas constitutes a very valuable source for scholarship in History, Postcolonial Studies, Jewish Studies, Colonial Latin American Literature, Atlantic Studies, Global Studies, and Hebrew and Romance languages and literatures. However, outside of a small group of experts in Jewish Studies, it is largely

unknown. As a result, scholarship on the impact of Columbus' discovery on Jewish life and thought pales in comparison with the abundance of scholarship on the reception of the New World by Christian Europeans.

Our goal is to make these texts known and available to the wider world of scholarship. To do so, we plan to apply a translation grant from the NEH to fund a three-year project to translate the works of Yoseph Ha-Kohen and Luis Carvajal. Ha-Kohen's work has never been translated. It has been preserved in five manuscripts in the author's own hand, and partially edited by Moshe Lazar in 2002. The manuscript of Luis de Carvajal's theological and personal writings were stolen from the Mexican National Archives (AGN) in 1932 and were only rediscovered in 2016. Carvajal's spiritual autobiography has been available to scholars thanks to the transcription made by Alfonso Toro before Carvajal's manuscripts were stolen. Basing himself on Toro's transcription, Prof. Martin Cohen translated the *Vida* into English in 1966. However, today we have a unique opportunity to return to the original manuscript and produce a critical edition and English translation that takes into account all that has been discovered about the Carvajal family. In addition we plan to analyze and translate the full manuscript which includes legal, devotional and theological texts that were not previously accessible and which can illuminate vital aspects of crypto-Jewish practice and religious sensibility in the Colonial Latin American context.

This long-term collective endeavor requires careful preparation. Our intention, if we are fortunate to receive an AAJR special initiatives grant, is to organize two workshops—one at Washington University in St. Louis, the other at Yeshiva University in New York City—to discuss the analysis and translation of these texts. These workshops will not only help us formulate the best ways to bring our ambitious project to completion, but also assist us in constituting a committed group of collaborators.

Dissemination: Whereas Jewish Studies has become an established academic field, scholarly exchanges and collaboration with scholars outside of Jewish Studies remain sparse for the pre-modern era. One reason for this is lack of access to Jewish sources. One of the best known early modern Hebrew texts is Leon Modena's *Life of Judah*, which was translated by a group of scholars led by Mark Cohen from Princeton. We know many colleagues outside of Jewish Studies who use it both in their classes and in their research. These colleagues are also curious and excited about Jewish writings on the Americas. Making them available would open up the possibility of intense cross-disciplinary collaborations between scholars in Jewish Studies and in the Academy at large. For, indeed, the questions that these texts raise are urgent and important: How did Jews, an often-oppressed European minority, relate to the colonial project? How did the Sephardic experience of expulsion and exile influence these authors' reflections on the Spanish colonial project? How did Jewish authors reconcile knowledge of the New World with their biblical and rabbinic corpus? How did Jews understand the new geography and cosmography of the world?

Thus, studying Jewish writings on the Americas will also bring back the forgotten Jewish voices who intervened in the important debates of their times. For example, Joseph Ha-Kohen's books were long thought to be translations of Francisco de Gómara's (who was Cortés' secretary)

work. In reality, they are a complex combination of translation and political criticism of Gómara's work. So, when Gómara accused "Indians" of idolatry, Joseph ha-Kohen clarified that "they themselves [the Spaniards] also believe in statues and idols." And to Gómara's description of the Spaniards' violent, forced conversions of Indians, Ha-Kohen added "remember the cruelty of the Catholic Kings against the Jews." Even though Ha-Kohen never traveled to the Americas, he had a critical view of Spain's ideological project informed by his comparison of Spain's treatment of religious others in Iberia and the New World.

Applicants' Short Bios

Flora Cassen is Associate Professor of History and Associate Professor of Jewish, Islamic, and Near eastern Studies at Washington University in St. Louis. Her first book, *Marking the Jews in Renaissance Italy: Politics, Religion, and the Power of Symbols* was published by Cambridge University Press in 2017. Her second book, *Antisemitism(s): Short Analysis of a Hateful Idea* will be published by Routledge in 2021. She has also authored numerous articles on early modern Italian and Spanish Jews. Currently, she is working on a translation and analysis of Yoseph Ha-Kohen's *Book of New India* and *Book of Fernando Cortés*.

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Ronnie Perelis is the Chief Rabbi Dr. Isaac Abraham and Jelena (Rachel) Alcalay Associate Professor of Sephardic Studies at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies at Yeshiva University. His research investigates connections between Iberian and Jewish culture during the medieval and early modern periods. His book, *Narratives from the Sephardic Atlantic: Blood and Faith* (Indiana University Press) explores family and identity in the Sephardic Atlantic world. Currently he is working on a critical edition, English translation and historical study of the rediscovered manuscripts of Luis de Carvajal, a Sixteenth century Mexican Crypto-Jewish thinker. Carvajal's manuscripts were stolen from the Mexican National Archives in 1932 and only resurfaced in 2016. This project, undertaken in collaboration with Jesús de Prado Plumed and Berenise Bravo Rubio (UNAM), will offer readers the first opportunity to delve deeply into the spiritual world of a remarkable early modern religious thinker and it will provide a window into the inner dynamics of crypto-Jewish life in the Americas.

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