

“Her Labor is Her Own”: Ottoman Jewish Women’s Work in the Modern Era

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Abstract

This talk will offer some preliminary reflections on Ottoman Jewish women’s labor and professional histories in the modern era, asking: what drove late Ottoman Jewish women to seek employment, when they did so at all? In which contexts was their work a matter of choice, driven by a broader sense of mission, professional or intellectual interests? For many women, who had a say not only in whether they would work but also what kind of work they would pursue, becoming professionals meant a newfound independence from their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. That this was easiest for those whose families had achieved financial stability should come as no surprise. Yet throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were joined by women of more limited means, who pursued new forms of work with a sense of calling, not simply to earn their way but rather despite the many costs that doing so entailed. Training our focus on the traces such women left behind begins to unsettle some of our most prevalent assumptions about Ottoman Jewish women’s autonomy—or lack thereof—in the modern era.

Bio

Julia Phillips Cohen is an Associate Professor in the Department of History and the Program in Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt University. She is the author of two books: *Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Modern Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), and—together with Sarah Abrevaya Stein—*Sephardi Lives: A Documentary History, 1700-1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014). (A Turkish translation of her monograph *Becoming Ottomans* appeared as *Osmanlılaşmak: Modern Çağda Sefarad Yahudileri ve İmparatorluk Yurttaşlığı* (Istanbul: Alfa Yayınları, 2017)). Cohen has published articles in a range of venues, including the *American Historical Review*, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, *Jewish Social Studies*, *Jewish Quarterly Review*, and *AJS Perspectives*. A new essay, entitled “A Model Millet? Ottoman Jewish Citizenship at the End of Empire,” is newly out in the edited volume *Jews, Liberalism, Antisemitism: A Global History*, edited by Abigail Green and Simon Levis Sullam (London: Palgrave, 2020). Her new projects include a study of Sephardi Jews’ relationship to Spain and their Spanish past in the centuries following the expulsion and a modern history of Ottoman Jewish women’s work.