Application Letter

My name is Oded Cohen. I am a postdoctoral student in the Department of Israeli History at the University of Haifa and a research fellow at the Haifa Center for Mediterranean History (HCMH). My doctoral dissertation, supervised by Prof. Elhanan Reiner, was submitted to and approved by the senate of Tel Aviv University in 2017. Entitled “New and Old: Cultural Spaces in the World of the Hida” my thesis addresses the cultural and intellectual horizons of Rabbi Haim Yosef David Azulai (known as the Hida), who lived in the eighteenth century. He spent many years of his life traveling, as a physician and on behalf of the community in Hebron. In this study, I examine the impact that travel had on him, his extensive work, and his changing attitudes toward various cultural phenomena, spaces, and people, including non-Jews. A book I wrote based on this doctoral dissertation is under contract to be published in the coming year by Magnes Press.

In October 2017, the year I joined the HCMH at the University of Haifa as a postdoctoral student, I began to study the migration of Jews through the Mediterranean countries in the early modern period. I created a database of Jews who left Israel and traveled throughout the Mediterranean region during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I have presented the first fruits of this research in various forums at the University of Haifa, as well as at other forums in Israel and abroad. Also in 2017, I joined the LabexMed research group at the Mediterranean House of Human Studies at Aix-Marseille University in France (Maison méditerranéenne des sciences de l'homme, Université d'Aix-Marseille). During my time there, I presented my research to local scholars and worked in the archives of the Vaucluse department in the city of Avignon, as well as other local archives within and outside of Avignon. This work was an aspect of the beginning of my research on a Jew named Mordechai Tema, who left Hebron for Western Europe in the mid-eighteenth century. The first article I wrote on Tema was published in 2020 in the journal *Studia Rosenthaliana*. A second, more comprehensive article on this topic is in the final stages of preparation.

I continued my research, first as a postdoctoral student at the Center for the Study of Conversion and Inter-Religious Encounters at Ben Gurion University of the Negev (2018-2019), and then under a Lady Davis Fellowship at Hebrew University (2019-2020). Also, during these two years, I continued to address the cultural practices of nomadic Jews in the Mediterranean region in the early modern period. I began to delve into questions dealing with the self-image of nomadic Jews following their encounters with various societies and cultural spaces, via a discussion of individual Jews. I also began to study the various editions of the text “Genealogy of the Patriarchs” and how holy sites in the Land of Israel were described by Jews from various places throughout the Mediterranean region from the late Middle Ages through the seventeenth century, and in specific by the seventeenth-century Hebraist Johann Heinrich Huttinger. I am conducting research on this subject in collaboration with Dr. Tzur Shalev. In the coming years, I intend to continue to engage with these texts and other similar ones.

Some ten months ago, I joined the Department of Israeli History at the University of Haifa as a postdoctoral student (on a Weller Scholarship) and as a research fellow at the HCMH at the University of Haifa. In these frameworks, I have been addressing questions regarding migrations within the Mediterranean region and beyond during the early modern period. In particular, I look at issues of transfer and acceptance of rabbinic literature and its interpretation in Israel and in the Sephardic communities scattered throughout the Western world, with an emphasis on knowledge transfers between Israel and Italy and southern France.

I have been teaching high school intermittently since 2008, and I believe that, despite differences between teaching in the high school education system and teaching at the university level, I have gained significant teaching experience. The recommendations given by many of my superiors testify to my excellent abilities in this area.

I believe that my research and teaching experience, taken together, can contribute to my successful integration as a member of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Haifa, in the field of Mediterranean Jews in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period. Upon integration into this faculty, I would be able to offer collaborations in the fields of research and academic teaching with my colleagues from the HCMH, who deal with geographical spaces and periods that overlap those of my current field of research, such as Dr. Tzur Shalev and other researchers in this faculty who are involved in areas of research that are related to mine in terms of theme and time period, such as Prof. Yossi Hayut, Dr. Cedric Cohen-Skelly, and others. I will also aspire to forge collaborations with researchers from abroad, including fellow members of the Mediterranean Studies Association, with whom I am in contact.

Further, I intend to submit a proposal for a research grant from the National Science Foundation to conduct for a comprehensive study in which I will examine the impact of physical movement and intercultural encounters on the cultural world of rabbinic emissaries and other nomadic Jews, and the individuals and societies with whom they came in contact during their travels in the early modern era. This will be done through selection and examination of letters, manuscripts, and printed books written by these nomadic individuals, or works in which they were involved in producing sections of the texts and paratexts.

I believe that through the research that I plan to continue and expand upon in the coming years, I will be able to make use of the diverse skills I have acquired by reading handwritten manuscripts, especially those written in literary Spanish, through my acquaintance with the Mediterranean Jewish communities under investigation, my ability to read and analyze rabbinic texts and manuscripts in Ladino and Italian, and my familiarity with the methodological principles in the area of knowledge transmission. All this enables me to better understand the cultural influences of physical migration and changes in the perceptions of holy places in the Land of Israel in different time periods and regions of the Mediterranean region, thus adding layers to our understanding of the intellectual and cultural history.

In terms of teaching, I would be pleased to offer the following types of courses from these fields of specialization:

1. General courses (lectures and practicum) – for example, a lesson on chapters in the history of the Jews in the Mediterranean basin in the early modern period (15th – 18th centuries) - from the expulsion of the Jews from Spain through the Hasidic migrations to Israel. This course will progress along two axes: a geographical axis that includes demographic changes following the expulsion during the late Middle Ages and the rise of new demographic and cultural centers, as well as changes resulting from demographic changes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This enables a discussion of questions regarding center and periphery, and the meanings and implications of the rise and fall of communities and population centers. The second axis in this course will be thematic, and will include a discussion of major issues, phenomena, and processes that took place in the centuries of the early modern period, including Messianism, secularism, martyrs, and the “new Jews”, the Hebrew press, Hebraism, history of the book, organization of Jewish knowledge, and attitudes towards science, Kabbalah, Halacha, Hasidism, and education.
2. Thematic courses (seminars or practicum) for example:
3. The Wandering Jew: Travels and intercultural encounters in the Mediterranean region in early modern times
4. Self-discovery: Autobiographies and egodocuments of Jews from the Mediterranean region, and their significance
5. Jerusalem in the eighteenth century: Social and cultural aspects
6. Jewish identities in Europe and the Mediterranean region in the early modern period
7. Holy cities and Diaspora communities: Rabbinical emissaries and the Diaspora, between solidarity and friction
8. Conceptions of holy sites in the Land of Israel during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods
9. The writing and the letter: Hebrew books, from handwriting to printing

As mentioned, all the topics offered are from an area of expertise and are related to my previous research and my current and future research. In these courses, I will use a combination of teaching methods that include methodological and theoretical training as well as familiarity with historical sources, both handwritten and printed, that allow for in-depth study of the topic under investigation.

Sincerely,

Oded Cohen