Cover Letter

My name is Oded Cohen and I would be honored to apply for the tenure track position in Mediterranean history. I am currently 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 approved by the senate of Tel Aviv University in 2017, Entitled “New and Old: Cultural Spaces in the World of the Hida,” addresses the cultural and intellectual horizons of Rabbi Haim Yosef David Azulai (known as the Hida), who lived in the eighteenth century. In this study, I examined the impact that his extensive travel had on his personality, his extensive work, and his changing attitudes toward various cultural phenomena, spaces, and people. A book based on my dissertation is under contract and will be published in 2022 by Magnes Press.

In October 2017, I joined the HCMH at the University of Haifa as a postdoctoral felloew, and began to study the movement of Jews through Mediterranean countries in the early modern period, creating a database of Jews who left Israel and traveled throughout the Mediterranean region during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The first fruits of this research were presented in various forums in Israel and abroad. Additionally in 2017, I joined the LabexMed research group at the Maison méditerranéenne des sciences de l'homme, Université d'Aix-Marseille. My research there involved working in the archives of the Vaucluse department in the city of Avignon as well as other local archives, and was presented in local academic fourms

On the next year I was a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for the Study of Conversion and Inter-Religious Encounters at Ben Gurion University of the Negev (2018-2019) and subsequently received the Lady Davis Fellowship at Hebrew University (2019-2020). During this time I expanded my research on cultural practices and influances of nomadic Jews in the Mediterranean region in the early modern period. In this context I began to delve into questions dealing with the self-image of nomadic Jews following their encounters with various societies and cultural spaces. I also began to study the various editions of the text “Genealogy of the Patriarchs”. By examination of this text I try to figure how the traditions and descriptions about holy sites in the Land of Israel were transmitted and changed by Jews from various places throughout the Mediterranean region from the late Middle Ages through the seventeenth century depending on cultural and geo-political enviorment. I also am interested in the perception of this text by the seventeenth-century Christian Hebraist Johann Heinrich Huttinger and am researching this subject in collaboration with Dr. Zur Shalev. I intend to continue to study these and similar texts.

As a postdoctoral Fellow on a Valler fellowship in the Department of Jewish History at the University of Haifa and as a research fellow with the HCMH, I am addressing questions related to movement in the Mediterranean region and beyond during the early modern period. In particular, I look at issues of transmition and acceptance of rabbinic literature and its interpretation between Israel and the Western Sephardic diaspora, with an emphasis on transmition of knowledge between Israel and Italy and southern France.

In addition to my research, I have been teaching high school intermittently since 2008.Despite the differences between teaching in the high school education system and teaching at the university level, I have gained significant teaching experience. The recommendations of my superiors testify to my strong 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 research and academic teaching with my colleagues from the HCMH, who deal with geographical spaces and periods that overlap those of my current research in terms of theme and time period, such as Dr. Zur Shalev and with others such as Prof. Yossi Hayut, Dr. Cedric Cohen-Skelly,. I also aim to forge collaborations with researchers from abroad, including fellow members of the Mediterranean Studies Association.

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

Through my research, which I plan to expand upon in the coming years, I will be able to make use of the diverse skills I have acquired by reading manuscripts, especially those written in Sefaradic, Provencial and Italian handwriting, through my knowledge of Mediterranean Jewish communities, my ability to read and analyze rabbinic texts and manuscripts and also text in Spanish, Ladino and Italian, and my familiarity with the methodological principles in the area of knowledge transmission.

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

1. General courses – for example, a course on the history of the Jews in the Mediterranean region 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 of demographic changes following the expulsion during the late Middle Ages and the rise of new population and cultural centers. This will enable a discussion of the implications of the rise and fall of communities and population centers and peripheries. 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 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 toward science, Kabbalah, Halacha, Hasidism, and education.
2. Thematic courses 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

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 in manuscript and printed, that allows for in-depth study of the topic under investigation.

Sincerely,

Oded Cohen