Ephraim Kanarfogel’s book *The Intellectual History and Rabbinic Culture of Medieval Ashkenaz* is a tribute to his deep knowledge of medieval rabbinic writings and his ability to mine these texts for invaluable historical information. The main thesis of the book is that the medieval rabbis of Ashkenaz were not just Halakhists. They studied and excelled in many branches of study, composing liturgy and interpreting it, writing and compiling biblical interpretations, and penning magical and mystical literature. Moreover, the rabbis were not ‘ivory tower academics’ — scholars who sat and discussed Talmudic passages *ad abstractum* — they were involved in their communities, whether in judicial deliberations in the courts or as propagators of popular beliefs.

In brief, the rabbis were even more important than scholars to date have led us to believe. They were not just involved with four cubits of Halakhah; they were representative of their communities. Rather than a separate elitist group, they reflect wider trends and are key to studying the medieval Jewish population at large.

Over and above this all-inclusive argument, Kanarfogel seeks to contend with a number of other questions that are central to rabbinic studies in medieval northern Europe. The first is geographical. Ashkenaz often connotes a wide geography. To what extent were the rabbis in Germany and northern France similar or dissimilar? What features did they share and how did they differ? The second is intellectual: having established the multifaceted activities of scholars, Kanarfogel asks whether the methods used in one area of study were used in others or did they differ? The third purpose is social: Kanarfogel, following Moshe Ideal in his work on Nahmanidies and other Kabbalists from Catalonia, distinguishes between the ‘first-tier’ and ‘second-tier’ of rabbis, the former identified with Talmudists and Halakhists and the latter with a range of specialties. Finally, there is a theological drive to the study: Kanarfogel is eager to understand the scholars’ beliefs. How far did they believe in a complex theology of multiple truths rather than a more one-dimensional doctrine?

Kanarfogel’s interest here stems from two underlying debates regarding Ashkenazic scholarship: the comparison between Ashkenaz and Sefarad, and the theological, philosophical and intellectual distinctions between the two diasporas as well as the relationship between medieval north European Jewish scholarship and Christian scholasticism.

A book of such complexity cannot deal with all the arguments in each chapter. Thus, while many of them are touched on in all chapters, some are dealt with more consistently and thoroughly than others throughout the book. Any reviewer with limited space cannot reflect on all the suggestions, arguments and conclusions put forward.
in over 500 pages. Therefore, I will
survey the book briefly, commenting
only on some conclusions and
arguments.

The first chapter is in my eyes one
of the most interesting in the book and
deals with two main topics, internal
organization and connections between
the Jewish scholars and their Christian
counterparts. It begins by seeking
to show that tosafists were not just
engaged in learning; they were active
in their communities, especially as
judges in rabbinic courts. Kanarfogel
proposes a different structure for the
northern French and German courts,
tracing the names and activities of
scholars. He argues that in Germany
the leading scholars were involved
in actively judging cases as the
community’s set arbitrators throughout
the entire eleventh–thirteenth century
period, whereas in France the top
scholars were less involved in active
adjudicating after the late twelfth
century. Rather, thirteenth-century
judges were chosen by litigants,
who then picked a third judge. The
northern French Jews reverted to
a set judge system only in the late
thirteenth century. Kanarfogel claims
that this was a matter of routine case
judgment, whereas marriage law was
supervised and determined by set
authorities. He then tries to account
for these differences calling on the
nature of the extant sources, the
size of the communities, the ability
to use non-Jewish courts, and other
social factors. The exposition of the
evidence is impressive and provides a
valuable resource for future scholars
studying the courts, who will be able
to reinforce or refine Kanarfogel’s
ideas, further investigating local
circumstances and norms.

The second part of the chapter,
which should have been a chapter in
its own right, seeks to compare the
signature Talmudic–Halakhic methods
and those of contemporary Christian
scholars. Kanarfogel discusses the
insularity or lack of insularity of the
Jewish community vis-à-vis their
Christian neighbours. Here, both
Halakhic–Talmudic studies and biblical
interpretation are under scrutiny.
Kanarfogel places significant emphasis
on the linguistic distinction between
both learning communities, between
Hebrew and Latin. The bottom line
is that although Jews could not have
learned scholastic methods formally
from their Christian neighbours, they
could have learned them through
conversations with Christian scholars.
Kanarfogel compares this borrowing
of method to connections between
Christian communities of learning,
such as existed between Paris and
Bologna, two centres of Christian legal
study. Overall, one is struck by a kernel
of ideas that is far from exhausted
and deserves further refinement and
attention.

The remaining chapters are built
around genres and people, an approach
that allows for a detailed understanding
of specific figures but complicates
the possibility of drawing broader
conclusions and synthesis. Kanarfogel
begins with three chapters on biblical
exegesis (chs 2–4), on piyyut (ch. 5),
a chapter revisiting Kanarfogel’s
work on magic and mysticism (ch. 6)
and a final chapter on belief and
popular thought (ch. 7) followed by a conclusion. The three chapters of the book on biblical commentary, over 250 pages, are divided chronologically. Chapter 2 presents R. Joseph Bekhor Shor of Orleans, R. Jacob of Orleans, R. Yom Tov of Joigny and some of their contemporaries. Kanarfogel presents their relationship with Rashi, the all-important exegete, as well as other exegetes, alongside their attitudes towards Christians, idolatry and methods of interpretation (peshat and drash for example). Chapter 3 moves to Germany and discusses the exegesis of Judah haHasid and the Italian tosafist Isaiah di Trani, whose commentary shares similarities with the northern French exegetes, Judah, and other contemporaries. This chapter again provides little synthesis, focusing on multiple examples, many of which are based on texts still only in manuscript. It points to a growing phenomenon of compilations of exegesis, the topic of chapter 4. Chapter 4 zeroes in on compilations that contain both unique exegesis and copied materials. It showcases R. Moses of Coucy, R. Yehiel of Paris, scholars from the yeshiva in Evreux and finally R. Eleazar b. Judah (Rokeah). Due to the sheer volume of material, among a wealth of sources, it is often hard to distinguish between smaller and larger themes, and it would have served readers well to provide more concise conclusions allowing for synthesis between the periods and a clearer understanding of the patterns that emerge from the discussion.

Chapter 5 attempts to outline developments in piyyut. Here Kanarfogel questions not only whether Tosafists wrote piyyutim but also whether, as committed Halakhists, they had a genuine interest in the poetry. He suggests, against common consensus, that more than 40 of the known scholars of this period also composed piyyutim. The chapter surveys the topic from the pre-Crusade period until the late thirteenth century, listing the rabbis chronologically and geographically. Chapter 6 discusses magic and mysticism, interest in which often accompanied ascetism, adding some new sources and details over and above Kanarfogel’s previous publications.

The seventh chapter returns to the comparison between Jewish and Christian culture. The meaning of its title, ‘Tosafist Approaches to Matters of Belief and the Implications for Popular Culture’, is not immediately evident. Kanarfogel takes on aspects of familiar discussions: how philosophical or scientifically aware were Ashkenazic intellectuals? The topic for this exploration is anthropomorphism, relating directly to the famous medieval European Maimonidean controversy as well as questioning how aggadah was understood. Kanarfogel reviews materials from many genres, again organizing the chapter by personae. Thus there is an additional section on R. Joseph Bekhor Shor, joining the section devoted to him in chapter 2; a discussion of R. Moses Taku and Solomon Simhah of Troyes; and an analysis of German Pietism. These are followed by a discussion of Tosafist Torah Commentaries, a renewed discussion of R. Isaiah of
Trani and finally a summary that touches on the matter that undergirds the entire chapter, the Maimonidean Controversy. I was left unclear as to what was ‘popular’ about the material here as it seemed related to the rabbis rather than to those less learned.

This book, as is evident from this survey, is a large one, and in many ways is too big. One is struck again and again by the wealth of information and vast erudition. References to multiple manuscripts and numerous cross references are suggested for almost every example. The footnotes are equal to if not longer than the text. Yet this richness is also, in many ways, an impediment, certainly for readers who are not among a small circle of experts. Examples are brought in associative ways that do not always allow for clear comprehension of the larger picture. The themes are not always clearly stated, and, despite my conviction that Kanarfogel is correct, and that the rabbis were not just an elite group, it was hard for me to pinpoint the wider implications of studying the rabbis. This reader, for one, would have done better with fewer examples of each phenomenon and an attempt to offer more general conclusions at the end of each chapter.

In sum, this book demonstrates Ephraim Kanarfogel’s encyclopaedic knowledge and erudition. It sums up the work of decades and presents many new sources and theories that will undoubtedly be at the heart of future studies for those interested in medieval Jewish intellectual history. In this way it is another testimony of his command of all aspects of medieval rabbinic literature, and I am confident that this book will become an essential tool not only for those studying the field of rabinics but also for historians, literary experts and philosophers as an aid to map out sources and survey evidence, whether by reading specific chapters or using the index. One can only look forward to his future work, in which, one hopes, he will continue to discuss new sources and infuse further detail into the lives of the medieval rabbis and the world they lived in.

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Much scholarly work on Christian Hebraism in early modern Europe has been monographic treatment of individual scholars, description of Hebrew study in a particular location, or surveying of Christian interest in a particular area of Jewish study. The impressive output in recent scholarship has updated outmoded notions of Christian interest, clarified