

# Rabbis, Philosophers, and Reformers: The Jewish Community of Prague in the Intellectual Landscape of Late Medieval Bohemia

Milan Žonca

Almost nine decades ago, Ruth Kestenbergl (Gladstein) suggested that the Hussite reform movement, which emerged in Bohemia at the turn of the fifteenth century, drew inspiration from the local Jewish community’s thriving religious life.<sup>1</sup> The possibility of intellectual and religious contacts between the Jews and the Hussites has been since examined by several scholars, most notably Frank Talmage, Israel Yuval, and Tamás Visi.<sup>2</sup> This proposed lecture will revisit this question and, simultaneously, broaden its scope. Utilizing newly available manuscript evidence, the lecture will examine the intellectual profile of the late medieval Jewish community of Prague in the context of its interactions with contemporary religious discourses – Jewish and Christian alike. By analyzing the works and attitudes of three prominent scholars active in Prague in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, it will trace motifs and interests that shaped Jewish intellectual life of the city in this period.

The three scholars in question – Yom Tov Lipman Mühlhausen, Menahem Shalem, and Avigdor Kara – served together at the rabbinic court of Prague in the second decade of the fifteenth century, when memories of the violent attack on the community during Easter 1389 were still vivid. All three combined a fresh interest in the study of Maimonidean philosophy with polemics aimed at internal as well as external opponents. Yom Tov Lipman Mühlhausen’s widely disseminated anti-Christian polemic *Sefer Nizahon*, possibly written during his stay in Prague, offered a rationalistic reinterpretation of traditional religious practice in response not only to the challenges of Christian exegesis, but also of heterodox Jewish interpretations

<sup>1</sup>Ruth Kestenbergl, ‘Hussitentum und Judentum’, *Jahrbuch der Gesellschaft für Geschichte der Juden in der Tschechoslowakischen Republik* 8 (1936): 1–25.

<sup>2</sup>Frank Talmage, ‘Angels, Anthems, and Anathemas: Aspects of Popular Religion in Fourteenth-Century Bohemian Judaism’, *Jewish History* 6, no. 1/2 (1992): 13–20; Israel Jacob Yuval, ‘Juden, Hussiten und Deutsche. Nach einer hebräischen Chronik’, in *Juden in Christlichen Umwelt während des späten Mittelalters*, ed. Alfred Haverkamp and Franz-Josef Ziwe (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1992), 59–102; Tamás Visi, ‘The Emergence of Philosophy in Ashkenazic Contexts: The Case of Czech Lands in the Early Fifteenth Century’, *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts* 8 (2009): 213–43.

of the Bible and of the rabbinic literature. His reform impulses resonated with those of Avigdor Kara and Menaḥem Shalem who, each in his own way, employed philosophy and Kabbalah to reinvigorate Jewish religiosity while simultaneously demarcating boundaries within the community and against external forces.

The lecture will demonstrate how these attempts evolved in dialogue (both acknowledged and unacknowledged) with the concerns and emphases of pre-Hussite church reformers such as Jan Milíč of Kroměříž or Matěj of Janov. Rather than tracing direct influences, the lecture will present Jewish and Christian religious discourses at the time of the emergence of Hussitism as rooted in a shared cultural milieu where concerns about orthodoxy and devotion could be picked up and reinterpreted across religious boundaries.