

# Introduction

The tangle of relationships between religious commitments and the study of nature in early modern Europe has occupied several generations of historians of science. Their attentions have focused, understandably enough, on Protestants and Catholics. Jews of the same epoch had a limited role in both the production and consumption of natural philosophical knowledge (in contrast to Jews of the medieval period, as discussed in *Science in Context*, vol. 10, no. 3). Still, the study of nature remained a subject of reflection among many Jewish intellectuals and religious leaders throughout this period. Such Jews sought to clarify how new developments in natural philosophy might influence how they lived and what they believed, and how these developments might best be absorbed or ignored.

This volume focuses primarily (though not exclusively) on the question of why certain Jews did or did not take an active interest in nature in different times and places, and how these motives may have affected how they explained nature. The volume opens with Hava Tirosh-Samuels' description of philosophical interest in nature demonstrated by sixteenth-century Italian Jewish scholars. Their approach, she argues, fostered the persuasion that the proper study of nature is an essentially hermeneutical and linguistic endeavor. The next four papers all consider how much interest in natural philosophy was evinced by the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe in the period spanning the lives of Copernicus and Kepler. David Fishman, in what was perhaps the first paper to address this subject (written a decade and a half ago, widely read *samisdat*-style, but never published until now), describes a small but influential school of Polish rabbis who learned and taught contemporary astronomy. Elchanan Reiner, Joseph Davis, and Noah Efron each consider the unique milieu of Prague during the reign of Rudolf II, arriving at conflicting conclusions. Reiner explains why Jews were not genuinely interested in the natural philosophy of their day, while Efron explains why they were. Davis suggests a middle position, describing limited but significant ways in which contemporary natural philosophic knowledge was conferred interest, by its incorporation into debates about Jewish ritual law. The volume ends with essays by Matt Goldish and David B. Ruderman about diverging reactions of Jews in eighteenth-century England to Newtonianism. Goldish describes the career of Jacob de Castro Sarmiento, whose increasing commitment to Newtonianism coincided with the waning of his attachment to Judaism. Ruderman chronicles the work of Jacob Hart, who embraced much of Newton's philosophy while criticizing it on the grounds that it diminished the active involvement of God in the universe.

Taken together, these papers begin to illustrate the great variety of responses of early modern Jews to developments in natural philosophy. These responses shed

new light, from a vantage often overlooked by historians of science, on the complicated relationships between religious commitments and changing attitudes towards nature during a pivotal epoch in the history of European natural philosophy.

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## List of terms

<b>Aggada:</b>	Rabbinic legends and parables
<b>Galāhim:</b>	Christian priests (literally: “tonsured”)
<b>Derash:</b>	Homily
<b>Hilkhot Qiddush ha-Ḥodesh:</b>	Laws of the sanctification of the New Moon (one of the sections of Maimonides’ law code <i>Mishneh Torah</i> )
<b>Halakha:</b>	Jewish law
<b>Yeshiva:</b>	Traditional rabbinical academy or seminary
<b>Kashrut:</b>	Rules pertaining to the permissibility of food to observant Jews
<b>Kasher:</b>	Food which meets the standards of kashrut
<b>Maḥloqet:</b>	A difference of opinion between authorities
<b>Pilpul:</b>	Intricate analysis, often hair-splitting or casuistry
<b>Parshat ha-shavu’a:</b>	Weekly pericope, the section of the Torah read publicly in the synagogue on the Sabbath
<b>Peshat:</b>	Plain meaning of a text
<b>Qara’im:</b>	Karaites
<b>Shtadlanim:</b>	Individuals who lobbied for Jewish interests among the political authorities
<b>Tefilin:</b>	Phylacteries

**Editors’ Note:** As the reader may note, we have not unified the transliteration of Hebrew between the different papers.