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## “Eternal Love I Conceive for You”

### Traveling Jewish Men and Covenantal Bromances

by Eyal Levinson

**Zusammenfassung:** *In diesem Artikel werden mittelalterlich-jüdische „Bromances“ diskutiert, die jüdische Männer vor dem Aufbruch auf eine längere Reise vertraglich vereinbarten. Einige jüdische Männer des Mittelalters hielten solche nicht-sexuellen homosozialen Verbindungen für notwendig, um rabbinische Männlichkeitsideale zu stärken. Zwei spätmittelalterliche hebräische Quellen, eine des 14. Jahrhunderts aus Spanien und eine aus dem Deutschland des 15. Jahrhunderts, offenbaren, dass es unter jüdischen Männern im mittelalterlichen Europa üblich war, vor längeren Reisen solche Vereinbarungen zu schließen. Obgleich die beide Quellen die einzigen Beispiele für Vereinbarungen über „Bromances“ sind, die der Autor bislang finden konnte, scheint die sorgsame Lektüre und die Kontextualisierung mit anderen zeitgenössischen Quellen den Schluss zuzulassen, dass diese Art männlicher Verbindungen eine anerkannte soziale Praxis in jüdischen Gemeinden des mittelalterlichen Europa war. Was war der Inhalt dieser Beziehungen? Welche Rituale wurden durchgeführt, um diese Vereinbarungen zu besiegeln? Und wie halfen diese vertraglichen „Bromances“ dabei, die Grenzen normativer Männlichkeit zu verstärken? Diese Fragen sollen im vorliegenden Beitrag diskutiert werden.*

**Abstract:** *This paper discusses medieval Jewish covenantal bromances, formed by Jewish men prior to embarking on an extended journey. For some medieval Jewish men, long distance traveling necessitated forming non-sexual homosocial bonding, which reinforced rabbinic masculinity. Two late medieval Hebrew sources, one from 14<sup>th</sup> century Spain and the other from 15<sup>th</sup> century Germany, reveal that entering a covenant before a long-distance journey was a known practice among medieval European Jewish men. Although these are the only two examples of covenantal bromances I found thus far, reading them carefully and contextualizing them with other contemporary sources, we may conclude that this type of male bonding was a recognized social institution in medieval European Jewish communities. What was the content of these relationships? Which rituals were employed to seal these pacts? And how did these covenantal bromances reinforce the boundaries of normative masculinity? These are the questions I discuss in this paper.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> The paper was presented at the Leeds International Medieval Congress, 2018. This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 681507. I wish to express my gratitude for Andreas Lehnertz, and the editors of this blog, Björn Gebert and Lena Van Beek for their useful comments.

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At some point during the last quarter of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, rabbi Petachiah of Regensburg left his home in Prague and went on a very long journey. He first went to Poland and from there continued eastwards toward the Ukraine, which he called Kedar, then to the Crimean Peninsula and Babylonia on his way to the Holy Land. In his travelogue, Petachiah mentions a custom he encountered in the land of Kedar. Before a Kedarian man traveled, he sought another man to accompany him, and the two entered into a covenant:

“This is the manner in which the sons of Kedar pledge their faith to each other. One man thrusts a needle into his finger and invites the intended companion of his journey to swallow the blood of the wounded finger. He and that other person become, as it were, the same blood and flesh.”<sup>2</sup>

Entering into a covenant prior to long distant journeys was also a known phenomenon among medieval European Jewish men. But they had different ways to seal their covenants. These homosocial friendships were (as far as the sources attest) non-sexual relationships based on mutual trust and some sort of emotional bonding and they were sometimes sealed with oaths.<sup>3</sup> I refer to these friendships as covenantal bromances. Bromance is a valuable analytical category for historical research and has only recently become part of historiographical discourse.<sup>4</sup> The online Merriam-Webster dictionary defines bromance as, “a close nonsexual friendship between men”.<sup>5</sup> Dictionary.com clarifies this definition further, emphasizing the couple-like facet of this friendship: “a relationship or friendship between two men that is extremely close but

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<sup>2</sup> The source can be found in the following manuscripts: Leipzig, University Library, Ms. B.H. qu. 38, fol. 1r–5v. The translation of the text appears in Elkan Nathan Adler, *Jewish Travellers in the Middle Ages*. 19 firsthand Accounts, New York 2011, p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> On medieval friendships, see Brian Patrick McGuire, *Friendship and Community. The Monastic Experience 350–1250*, Michigan/Kalamazoo 1988; Mathew Stephen Kuefler, *Male Friendship and Suspicion of Sodomy in Twelfth-Century France*, in: *Gender and Differences in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Sharon Framer and Carol Braun Pasternack, Minneapolis/London 2003, pp. 145–181; Constant Mews and Neville Chiavaroli, *The Latin West*, in: *Friendship: A History*, ed. by Barbara Cain, London 2009, pp. 73–110. On bromance see: Suzanne Kemmer, art. “Bromance”, in: *The Rice University Neologisms Database*, last modified 4. December 2008, <https://neologisms.rice.edu/index.php?a=term&d=1&t=6561>.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras was the first historian who used the term ‘bromance’ as an analytical category within historical research in her discussion of the late medieval interpretation of the love story between David and Jonathan. She has spoken on several occasions about this topic in recent years.

<sup>5</sup> See art. “Bromance”, in: *The Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster Inc., <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bromance>.

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does not involve sex.”<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Chen points at three key elements in this type of a relationship: it is restricted to men only, lacks a sexual aspect, and is a legitimate cultural space that enables the existence of intimacy between two men.<sup>7</sup> As we will see, the covenantal bromances discussed in this article manifest these three aspects. Such bromances can be found in Hebrew sources from the late Middle Ages, one from Spain and two from Germany. Another source, originally from late 13<sup>th</sup> century Spain and popular in Germany and Italy during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, alludes to it as well. They all pertain to friendships formed by two men prior to a long distant journey. However, the paucity of sources relating to bromances does not allow us to draw a comprehensive picture of this social phenomenon.

In order to better understand the covenantal bromances, I first portray some characteristics of Jewish traveling in the Middle Ages. This is ensued by presenting the covenantal bromances and concluded by some suggestions to why Jewish men entered into these homosocial bonding.

### **Traveling Jews in the Middle Ages**

Medieval Jewish men and women traveled for a variety of reasons, such as economic purposes, to visit their families, to attend weddings of family members and friends, and to get married.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Dictionary.com <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/bromance>. In the last decade, this term has received considerable attention in North-American popular culture, reality shows, magazines, and blogs such as COME-DIVA, which presented to its followers "the five top bromances of all times". Wednesday, June 01, 2011, currently only accessible via Internet Archive: <https://web.archive.org/web/20120304141958/http://www.come-diva.com/top-5-bromances-of-all-time>.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth J. Chen, *Caught in a Bad Bromance*, in: *Texas Journal of Women and Law* 21 (2012), pp. 241–266, p. 246. See also Richard Severe, *Bromance in the Middle Ages. The impact of sodomy on the development of male-male friendships in medieval literature*, PhD Diss., Purdue University Ann Arbor (2010), unpublished.

<sup>8</sup> See Judith Baskin, *Mobility and Marriage in Two Medieval Jewish Societies*, *Jewish History* 22 (2008), pp. 223–243.

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**Image 1:** *Jacob traveling to Laban.*  
*London, British Library, Add. 14762, fol.*  
*11v.* Licence: none (Public Domain).

In image 1 we see a depiction of the biblical Jacob on his way to Laban to unite with his future spouses (Leah, Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah). Jacob is dressed in 15<sup>th</sup> century traveling cloths, holding a spear, wearing a felt hat with a feather stuck in it and a traveling bag hung to his side. In medieval Hebrew sources, we can find stories about young men who traveled to study with known rabbis, and about some men who traveled, like Petachiah, to the Holy Land. The following illustration from the *Yehudah Haggadah* (created in Germany between 1470–1480; image 2)<sup>9</sup> shows the biblical story of the people of Israel departing Egypt.

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<sup>9</sup> About this illustrated manuscript see Katrin Kogman-Appel, *Die zweite Nürnberger und die Jehuda Haggada. Jüdische Illustratoren zwischen Tradition und Fortschritt*, Frankfurt am Main 1999.

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**Image 2:** *Exodus from Egypt. Jerusalem, Israel Museum., The Yahuda Haggadah. Franconia, Southern Germany. Unidentified scribe. 1470-80. Handwritten on parchment; brown ink and gold and silver leaf; square Ashkenazic script. H: 23.1; W: 16.5 cm. The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Gift of Rachel Ethel Yahuda, New Haven, Connecticut. Accession number: B55.01.0109, Call number 180/50, fol. 19. Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem by Ardon Bar-Hama, Licence CC BY-NC 4.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.*

The image delineates a group of medieval travelers, dressed in medieval garb, including, what seems to be, a whole family strolling behind the riders, a father carrying a baby on his back, a mother holding a baby in a crib and a child in between them. We can also see a young couple riding on a horse.

Similar to this illustration, the written sources also corroborate that during the Middle Ages many Jewish women and children traveled. However, traveling was undertaken mostly by Jewish men. Married men spending extended periods of time away from their wives and families necessitated the communities to issue ordinances against it. These ordinances, originating in the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century in Northern France, and reaffirmed by the Jewish communities in Germany during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, read as follows:

“No one may remain away from his wife against her will unless the Court of Seven Elders before whom the matter is taken permit the continuance of his stay. The Court may give the husband permission to remain absent according to the circumstances, for

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example if he must collect his debts or if he is engaged in study or learning to write or he is engaged in business.”<sup>10</sup>

The opening clause of the same ordinances forbade husbands to be away from home for more than eighteen months unless their wives granted them permission,<sup>11</sup> and the ordinances conclude by threatening men who disobeyed these rules with the severe punishment of excommunication.<sup>12</sup>

Traveling was a dangerous adventure and necessitated physical and spiritual preparation. The Traveler’s Prayer, which medieval rabbis inherited from late Antique Talmudic literature, was one preparatory necessity for the journey, as it is still nowadays the practice among Orthodox Jews. An example from a well-preserved and beautifully written Hebrew manuscript dates to the 13<sup>th</sup> century (image 3).

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<sup>10</sup> Louis Finkelstein, *Jewish Self Government in the Middle Ages*, New York 1924, p. 169.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

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**Image 3:** *The Traveler's Prayer*. London, British Library, Add. 27200, fol. 9v. Licence: none (Public Domain).

Translation:

“May it be Your will, our God and God of our fathers, to walk me in peace and support and nurse me in peace and save me from the hands of any enemy or ambush along the way [...] And may I return to my home in peace.”<sup>13</sup>

**“I Trust Your Company and Rejoice in Your Love”<sup>14</sup>**

For some medieval Jewish men preparing for the road also meant establishing covenantal bromances. These relationships, as we will see, were not aimed at challenging rabbinic norms. On the contrary, they sometimes assisted in reinforcing traditional lore and rabbinic morality, while on the road, where social conventions were often suspended and where it was halakhically (i.e., according to Jewish law) challenging to observe the commandments. Rabbi Judah the Pious (d.

<sup>13</sup> Translated by Eyal Levinson.

<sup>14</sup> Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod.hebr. 107, fol. 42r, translated by Eyal Levinson.

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1217) was well aware of this problem and thus instructed that: “Everyone who can earn his living near his home should not travel to a distant land, because most of those who travel do not observe the sabbath properly.”<sup>15</sup> Bearing in mind how dangerous it was to travel, and how difficult it was to stick to rabbinic norms while on the road, let us now turn to the covenantal bromances.

“Meshal ha-Qadmoni”, meaning: “Fables of the Distant Past”, is a collection of tales written around 1281 by the Jewish Spanish scholar, Isaac ben Solomon ibn Sahula (born 1244). The book gained popularity in Germany and Italy during the late Middle Ages. Unfortunately, none of the original manuscripts survived, but luckily there are five illuminated manuscripts from Germany and Italy, all made in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>16</sup> One of the fables, accompanied with the following drawing (image 4), discusses a traveler who meets another man on the road, and the two become friends and continue the journey together.



**Image 4:** *Two travelers meet on their journey.*  
Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod.hebr. 107, fol. 42r.  
URN: [urn:nbn:de:bsb:12-bsb00034081-7](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bsb:12-bsb00034081-7), link to image:  
[http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/bsb00034081/image\\_87](http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/bsb00034081/image_87). License: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek.

<sup>15</sup> Judah b. Samuel he-Hasid, *Sefer hasidim* (SHP), ed. by Jehuda Wistinetzki, Frankfurt am Main 1924, no. 592.

<sup>16</sup> For a description of the Munich manuscript and the locations of the other four 15<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts see the website of the Center for Jewish Art <http://cja.huji.ac.il/mhs/browser.php?mode=set&id=21806>. For more literature on “Meshal ha-Qadmoni” and a discussion of the illustrations see Sara Offenber, On a Pious Man, Adulterous Wife, and the Pleasure of Preaching to Others in Yitshaq Ibn Sahula’s Meshal ha-Qadmoni, *Hispania Judaica* 12 (2016), pp. 103–125.

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Thereafter, the traveler proclaims: "I trust your company and rejoice in your love."<sup>17</sup> They walk along together and become emotionally attached to one another. Although love and trust became part of this bromance, there was no mention of the two friends entering into a covenant or even having some sort of an agreement between them. Our next source, however, presents a bromance where the two friends made an agreement and swore to travel together.

### **"I had Strong Desire to Travel with Him and No Peace Until We Made an Agreement"**<sup>18</sup>

"The Book of Abramelin" is a late 14<sup>th</sup> or early 15<sup>th</sup> century book of Jewish magic written in Germany by Abraham of Worms to his son. In the book we learn of the bromance Abraham had with Samuel of Bohemia. In 1387, before Abraham and Samuel started their journey, they made an agreement and swore to travel together. The two friends then left Germany and traveled to Constantinople on their way to the Holy Land. This is Abraham's description of how he befriended Samuel:

"Then I met Samuel from Bohemia, a young man of our religion. His demeanor and behavior showed me that he traveled on the path of Adonai [God]. I befriended him and he confided in me that he intended to travel to Constantinople to meet his father's brother, and from there travel on the road to the blessed land where our fathers lived. I had strong desire to travel with him and no peace until we made an agreement, promised and swore to travel on together."<sup>19</sup>

Abraham left his hometown, Worms, and traveled to nearby Mainz to study with a known rabbi. There he met Samuel and they became good friends. When Abraham realized that his new friend was about to travel to the Holy Land, he expressed his wish to join him and eventually Samuel assented to Abraham's plea. However, before they embarked on their journey they formed a bromance sealed with an oath. Abraham knew that, like him, Samuel walked the path of God, meaning adhering to rabbinic norms and teachings. This bromance ended when Samuel died while they stayed in Constantinople and Abraham continued to travel by himself. We do

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<sup>17</sup> Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod.hebr. 107, fol. 42r, translated by Eyal Levinson.

<sup>18</sup> *The Book of Abramelin. A new translation*, ed. by George Dehn and trans. by Steven Guth, Florida 2006, pp. 11–12.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

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not know what they promised to one another, how they managed their finances or how they swore to maintain the covenant. Our third source, however, sheds light on these issues.

#### **“For These Reasons We Received the Vow and Made this Oath”<sup>20</sup>**

This is a story about Jacob ben Hananel and Hizkiyah, two Spanish rabbis who in 1317 signed a contract and swore to God to emigrate together to Jerusalem. Their story appears in a halakhic question Jacob sent, in 1321, to Asher ben Jehiel (d. 1327), the leading rabbinic authority in Toledo at that time. The document does not mention what type of a relationship the two men had prior to signing the contract. But it does say that they agreed to enter into a trustworthy friendship and to form an economic partnership for the duration of seven years. This was not a regular medieval business contract, but an oath, which incorporated economical, religious and social aspects. This oath was supplemented by a vow to God. Their agreement begins with the following words:

“In honor of the God of Israel [...] and in honor of his entire Torah [...] We, the undersigned, have accepted upon us the commandments, and we have made a vow [...] to emigrate to Israel [...] and to live in Jerusalem or nearby, as we agree between us, to do the will of God and to serve Him wholeheartedly.”<sup>21</sup>

Their covenant was set within a religious Jewish context – God and the Torah. Moreover, the content of the oath shows that one of the reasons Jacob and Hizkiyah committed to this friendship was to aid one another in adhering to rabbinic masculinity norms, which valued men according to their observance of the commandments and their knowledge of rabbinic wisdom. Thus, the oath continues with the two men accepting to study Torah together, referring not only to studying the Bible but to any rabbinic lore:

“And we swore to each other upon the Torah [...] in accordance with God and many people, that we will be friends, that for seven years after we leave this place, we will not separate from each other [...] We will both set times for studying Torah together. And if, God forbid, sin prevents us from earning a living enough for the two of us, one

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<sup>20</sup> Asher b. Yehiel. *She’elot ve-Teshuvot ha-Rosh*, ed. by Isaac Shlomo Yudelov, Jerusalem 1994, p. 90.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, translated by Eyal Levinson.

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will set time to study, and his friend will be involved in worldly things, in trade and crafts.”<sup>22</sup>

They then agreed to share all their profits:

“And all the profit that the Creator will send, will be between the two of us, to support ourselves and the people of our households [...] And if, heaven forbid, one cannot supply enough to support the two households, we will both be working [...] And neither should say: I am more profitable, so I will live comfortably, but both of us will be equal in everything we earn [...] For these reasons we received the vow and made this oath.”<sup>23</sup>

The oath ends with both parties agreeing to begin the trip within two years. But four years later they were still in Spain. Neither their oath nor their vow was fulfilled.<sup>24</sup> During these four years, four of Jacob’s children died, and he was convinced that his loss was a punishment from God for not fulfilling his covenant. Jacob remained with only one son, and he was afraid to lose him. He desperately needed permission to depart immediately and without Hizkiyah. Rabbi Asher assured Jacob that his oath to Hizkiyah was indeed annulled and that he may travel without his partner and with God’s approval. Unlike what we have seen thus far, this is a legal document signed by the two friends in the presence of witnesses and in honor of God and the Torah.<sup>25</sup>

### “My Soul Desires You and Eternal Love I Conceive for You”<sup>26</sup>

The last bromance I will present can be found in an anonymous letter, written in Germany in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>27</sup> Here the author tries to persuade his friend to join him on a journey to Erfurt, where a new *yeshiva* or study house had recently opened, to study there with the great masters, or in his own words: “to drink living–water from a well that never fails.”<sup>28</sup> If they travel to Erfurt, the author promised his friend, they could also attend a wedding they were both

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> On cancelling travel oaths to the Holy Land see Ephraim Kanarfogel, *The Aliyah of “Three Hundred Rabbis” in 1211. Tosafists Attitudes Toward Settling in the Land of Israel*, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 76 (1986), pp. 191–215, here pp. 199–200.

<sup>25</sup> Asher b. Yehiel. *She’elot ve-Teshuvot ha-Rosh*, ed. by Isaac Shlomo Yudelov, Jerusalem 1994, p. 90.

<sup>26</sup> Jerusalem, *The National Library of Israel, Iggerot Shelomim*, Augsburg 1534, no. 45.

<sup>27</sup> This source is briefly discussed by Israel Yuval, see Israel Yuval, *A German-Jewish Autobiography of the Fourteenth Century*, in: *Jewish Intellectual History in the Middle Ages* (1994), pp. 79–99.

<sup>28</sup> *Iggerot Shelomim* (as in note 26), no. 44.

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invited to and especially the wedding feast, which was a favorite indulgence of Jewish youth, both men and women.<sup>29</sup> Finally, the writer suggests that they could also conduct some business in Erfurt's market. Then he adds the following words:

“[...] and now I have said I will ask you if you want to go with me for my soul desires you and eternal love I conceive for you, and your soul is dear to me and I cannot be without you. Therefore, please let me know if you will go with me and our strength will be together in one pocket and your horse will be as mine and all your expenses will be on me. But there will always be a covenant between you and me and no stranger shall intervene. Strong we will get even stronger, stand by my side and be close to me and we each will help each other as two are better than one. Therefore, prepare yourself to set out and come to me.”<sup>30</sup>

In an attempt to convince his friend to join him, the author offers to cover his friend's expenses, to take care of his friend's horse, and to seal these promises with a covenant. Essentially, what the author offers his friend is to enter into a bromance, a committed friendship, an exclusive homosocial bond, and he promises him that “no stranger shall intervene” in their relationship.

### **Bromances Between Jewish Men in the Middle Ages**

The sources examined here are of different genres: a book of fables, a book of magic, a halakhic record and a personal letter. Yet they all show that covenantal bromances were a known social practice amongst Jewish men across Europe during the late Middle Ages. These were exclusive relationships between two men based on trust and some emotional connection, they sometimes included shared finances and were sometimes sealed with oaths. And, as far as we know, they were non-sexual yet intimate friendships.

Why did Jewish men commit themselves to these bromances? It was easier and more secure to travel with a companion, as the author of the letter wrote: “Strong we will get even stronger, stand by my side and be close to me and we each will help each other as two are better than

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<sup>29</sup> On Jewish youth in northern Europe during the Middle Ages and on their attitudes towards wedding celebrations see Eyal Levinson, *Youth and Masculinities in Medieval Ashkenaz*, PhD Diss., Bar Ilan University Ramat Gan 2017 (Hebrew), to be published soon.

<sup>30</sup> *Iggerot Shelomim* (as in note 26), no. 45.

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one.”<sup>31</sup> Another possible reason is that it enabled men to carry with them a sense of cultural familiarity, shared customs and language, and a reaffirmation of self-identity during a long journey away from home. Yet another conceivable reason was that oaths were often taken to establish a bond in situations where family trust was absent, and although oaths in general could be taken by two or more people, the oaths associated with traveling were, as far as we know from the available sources, between two men committing to an inclusive bond.<sup>32</sup> Finally, these bromances allowed Jewish men to adhere more easily to rabbinic teachings and masculinity norm, which regarded men who studied rabbinic lore (a practice reserved for men alone) at the top of the male hierarchy. We have seen that Abraham of Worms and Samuel of Bohemia became friends because they both “walked the path of God”, and that the author of the letter wanted his friend to come with him to pursue advanced rabbinic studies, and that Jacob and Hizkiyah swore to study Torah together and aid one another in observing the commandments. This is perhaps the reason why we do not know of such relationships established between Christians and Jews, although we may assume that they also occurred. It is interesting to note that while personal safety was probably on their mind when seeking a partner to travel with, it is not mentioned in the documents.

All online resources have been accessed on January 8, 2019.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., translated by Eyal Levinson.

<sup>32</sup> I thank Andreas Lehnertz for this idea.