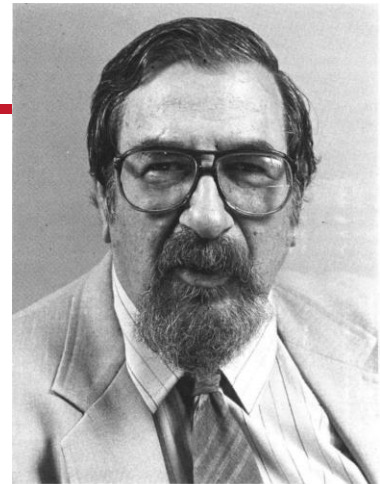


## Conference

---

# Judaism and Scepticism in the Scholarship of Richard H. Popkin

9–11 May 2022



Richard H. Popkin

Richard Popkin's scholarly interest in Judaism appears relatively late in his academic career, following what he described as an "overpowering religious experience" that took place in 1956. His contributions to Jewish history are prevalently focused on the role of Marrano thinkers in early modern scepticism and in Christian messianism and millenarianism. Therefore, recent scholarship on Jewish scepticism has rightly stressed that Popkin's multifarious oeuvre lacks any serious consideration of a specifically Jewish current within the sceptical tradition, which is independent from the converso encounter with classical philosophy and Christian theology.

However, in his correspondence and autobiographical writings, Popkin did acknowledge the importance of his Jewish identity in shaping his intellectual interests and directing his research on scepticism. In view of the forthcoming publication of Popkin's correspondence with Judah Goldin edited by Giuseppe Veltri, Jeremy Popkin, and Asher Salah, this conference aims to further our understanding of how Popkin's strong commitment to Judaism affected his perception of Jewish history and Jewish philosophy.

### Convenors

Jeremy Popkin (University of Kentucky)

Asher Salah (Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design)

Giuseppe Veltri (Universität Hamburg)

### Venue

Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies at Universität Hamburg  
Jungiusstraße 11c (entrance C/3<sup>rd</sup> floor, Room C319), 20355 Hamburg

### Zoom

Please contact MCAS for registration and further information:

[maimonides-centre@uni-hamburg.de](mailto:maimonides-centre@uni-hamburg.de)

## Programme

We kindly ask you to wear a FFP2 mask during the conference.

Monday, 9 May 2022

10:00 – 10:20	<b>Welcoming Remarks</b> <i>Giuseppe Veltri (Universität Hamburg), Asher Salah (Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design), and Jeremy Popkin (University of Kentucky)</i>
10:20 – 12:00	<b>Panel 1: The Discovery of the Marrano Experience</b> <i>Chair: Sarah Wobick-Segev (Universität Hamburg)</i>
10:20 – 11:10	<b>In the Footsteps of Richard Popkin: Paul of Burgos and the Marranos</b> <i>Guido Bartolucci (Università della Calabria)</i>
11:10 – 12:00	<b>A Split Identity: Marranos in the Work of Richard Popkin</b> <i>Thomas Kaal (Queen Mary University London)</i>
12:00 – 13:00	<b>Lunch Break (Room C315)</b>
13:00 – 14:40	<b>Panel 2: Millenarianism and Scepticism I</b> <i>Chair: Asher Salah (Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design)</i>
13:00 – 13:50	<b>“What Do We Know of Popkin?”: The Pre-Adamite Theory, Millenarianism, and Scepticism in an Age of Conspiracies</b> <i>Carlos Cañete (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid)</i>
13:50 – 14:40	<b>Reconsidering Richard H. Popkin’s Views on Marranism and Judeo-Christian Millenarianism</b> <i>Claude Stuczynski (Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan)</i>
14:40 – 15:00	<b>Coffee Break (Room C315)</b>
15:00 – 15:50	<b>Panel 3: Science and Kabbalah</b> <i>Chair: Isaac Slater (Universität Hamburg)</i>
15:00 – 15:50	<b>Amatus Lusitanus and the Making of Science in Motion</b> <i>Avner Ben-Zaken (Ono Academic College)</i>
18:00 – 19:00	<b>Dinner (Room C315)</b>
19:00 – 20:00	<b>Keynote Lecture 1</b> <b>Just the Fax, Sir: Popkin's Private Republic of Letters</b> <i>David S. Katz (Brandeis University)</i>

Tuesday, 10 May 2022

<b>09:00 – 10:40</b>	<b>Panel 3 (Continuation): Science and Kabbalah</b> <i>Chair: Isaac Slater (Universität Hamburg)</i>
09:00 – 09:50	<b>Popkin’s Historiography of the Seventeenth-Century System of Thought and Delmedigo’s Writings on Science and Kabbalah</b> <i>Joseph Levi (Shemah Institute of Jewish Studies and Culture, Florence)</i>
09:50 – 10:40	<b>Scepticism and Kabbalah in Spinoza and Other Thinkers According to Richard Popkin</b> <i>Andrew L. Gluck (Hofstra University)</i>
<b>10:40 – 11:00</b>	<b>Coffee Break (Room C315)</b>
<b>11:00 – 12:40</b>	<b>Panel 4: Popkin and Judaism</b> <i>Chair: Yoav Meyrav (Universität Hamburg)</i>
11:00 – 11:50	<b>Popkin’s Jewish Scepticism as Mirrored by His Letters</b> <i>Giuseppe Veltri (Universität Hamburg)</i>
11:50 – 12:40	<b>How Sceptical Studies Led to Jewish Studies</b> <i>Matt Goldish (Ohio State University)</i>
<b>12:40 – 13:30</b>	<b>Lunch Break (Room C315)</b>
<b>13:30 – 14:30</b>	<b>Keynote Lecture 2</b> <b>The Jewish Lives of Richard Popkin</b> <i>Jeremy Popkin (University of Kentucky)</i>
<b>14:45 – 17:00</b>	<b>Guided Tour: Jewish Cemetery Hamburg-Altona</b> <i>Michael Studemund-Halévy (Universität Hamburg)</i>

Wednesday, 11 May 2022

10:00 – 11:40	<b>Panel 5: Millenarianism and Scepticism II</b> <i>Chair: Giuseppe Veltri (Universität Hamburg)</i>
10:00 – 10:50	<b>Popkin's Newton: Bible Scholar and Christian Hebraist</b> <i>Diego Lucci (American University in Bulgaria)</i>
10:50 – 11:40	<b>Millenarian Dreams in a Catholic Guise: New Historiographical Perspectives on Popkin [online]</b> <i>Cristiana Facchini (Università di Bologna)</i>
11:40 – 12:45	<b>Lunch Break (Room C315)</b>
12:45 – 15:15	<b>Sceptical Atelier "Richard Popkin's Correspondences"</b>
12:45 – 13:35	<b>When the Rabbi Met the Sceptic: Richard Popkin's Friendship with Judah Goldin</b> <i>Asher Salah (Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design)</i>
13:35 – 13:45	<b>Short Break</b>
13:45 – 15:15	<b>Discussion about Popkin's Letters and Interview</b> <i>Carlos Cañete (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid), Jeremy Popkin (University of Kentucky), Matt Goldish (Ohio State University), Giuseppe Veltri (Universität Hamburg)</i>
15:15 – 15:30	<b>Coffee Break (Room C315)</b>
15:30 – 16:30	<b>Final Discussion</b> <i>Matt Goldish (Ohio State University) and Giuseppe Veltri (Universität Hamburg)</i>
18:30	<b>Dinner (restaurant)</b>

## Abstracts (in alphabetical order)

### In the Footsteps of Richard Popkin: Paul of Burgos and the Marranos

Guido Bartolucci (Università della Calabria)

On 8 April 1960, Richard Popkin wrote to Judah Goldin that he was working on a new project on the Marranos. In particular, he was focusing on the work of Paul of Burgos's *Scrutinium scripturarum*, which "convinced Servetus that the doctrine of the Trinity was false, and it also converted several prominent Marranos back to Judaism."

Paul (1350–1435) was born Salomon ha-Levi and belonged to one of the most important families of the Burgos Jewish community. His *Scrutinium scripturarum* is a dialogue between a Jew and a convert in which the latter attempts to prove to the former the truth of the Christian faith based on Jewish sources. This work became one of the masterpieces of anti-Semitic literature of the early modern period.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the circulation of this work in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially amongst the Marranos, in order to verify Popkin's ideas.

### Amatus Lusitanus and the Making of Science in Motion

Avner Ben-Zaken (Ono Academic College)

The ways in which Sephardic carriers of scientific knowledge travelled from West to East during the Renaissance have thus far been misevaluated or simply ignored. In a footnote in the third edition of his *History of Skepticism*, Richard Popkin pointed out that this migration intensified the already inherently sceptical sentiments of Sephardic men of science. Following Popkin's insightful comment, this paper aims to engage with the history of early modern Sephardic science by focusing on the career and travels of one particular Sephardic individual: Amatus Lusitanus, a prominent Renaissance Marrano physician. By excavating the social contexts of his wanderings as he traversed the continent from Salamanca through Antwerp to the intellectual culture of northern Italy and as far as Ottoman Salonika, he managed to absorb, exchange, process, and transmit local knowledge of medicine and botanical medicine. He further conceptualised this local medical knowledge and experience by publishing a pioneering publication on Dioscorides's *Materia medica* along with seven volumes of *centuria*, each of which contains a hundred medical cases that he treated in the various cities to which he travelled. This paper will argue that Lusitanus's cross-cultural skills allowed him to process, conceptualise, and synthesise local practical knowledge, experimenting on patients in diverse loci and giving him the edge to make scientific achievements and to become a prominent Renaissance physician. In his character, biography, and scientific publications, he embodies the quintessential role of Sephardic Jews in Arabic–Hebrew–Latin intellectual exchanges and their part in stimulating scepticism that permitted the rise of modern science.

## **“What Do We Know of Popkin?”: The Pre-Adamite Theory, Millenarianism, and Scepticism in an Age of Conspiracies**

*Carlos Cañete (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid)*

Richard Popkin's *History of Scepticism* stands today as one of his more important works, and one that greatly transformed the study of the history of philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century. However, some of his other works show us how the decades-long elaboration of this masterful contribution went hand in hand with the development of a particular perspective, a way of looking at things, showing us what is missing or what we take for granted in the history of ideas. This talk will draw on the examples of Popkin's works on the history of the pre-Adamite theory and millenarianism in order to explore his way of unravelling those hidden threads, or, as he would call them, the "Third Force." It will situate the development of this particular perspective in relation to his personal, religious, and political experiences, relying on my work with his documentary legacy held at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library. The final goal will be to show how Popkin's work still serves today not only to deepen our understanding of intellectual history, but also to maintain a sceptical view in our Age of Conspiracies.

## **Millenarian Dreams in a Catholic Guise: New Historiographical Perspectives on Popkin**

*Cristiana Facchini (Università di Bologna)*

This contribution will further explore how notions of messianism/millenarianism were deployed in Popkin's narrative regarding the rise of modernity. It will therefore focus on currents of millenarianism within the context of Catholicism, partly departing from Popkin's focus on Abbé Gregoire and the impact of his religious thought on the French revolution. Moreover, it will attempt to reflect upon recent historiography that has investigated prophetic agency and religious enthusiasm.

## **Scepticism and Kabbalah in Spinoza and Other Thinkers According to Richard Popkin**

*Andrew L. Gluck (Hofstra University)*

As is well known, Richard Popkin was among the greatest historians (and was perhaps *the* greatest historian) of scepticism from the twentieth century. Later in life, he became quite interested in Judaism and expanded his field to include such thinkers as Menasseh ben Israel, La Peyrère, and many others who either came from Jewish stock or were influenced by Judaism and scepticism. In 1992, he published a very interesting article entitled "Spinoza, Neoplatonic Kabbalist?" and in 1994, he edited *Jewish Christians and Christian Jews* with Gordon Weiner.

What this paper aims to achieve is to extract fundamental philosophical themes and to ask whether Popkin had a systematic religious/philosophical agenda or whether he was simply acting as a historian of philosophy. Its tentative conclusion is that he was attempting to integrate his earlier interest in scepticism with his newfound faith. And it is indeed true that there seems to be a meaningful connection between Judaism and scepticism, which has become quite evident in the most recent Pew Research. But is that connection strictly a modern, secular phenomenon, an ideational one relating Judaism and scepticism, or is it rather between scepticism and the rabbinic temperament? This paper

will look again at Popkin's thesis with the help of R. Travers Herford, Sergey Dolgopolski, and others, and will attempt to answer this question.

### **How Sceptical Studies Led to Jewish Studies**

*Matt Goldish (Ohio State University)*

Richard Popkin's research on scepticism guided him towards certain Jewish figures, which led him into his groundbreaking studies of the Western Sephardim. This talk will draw more explicit lines between scepticism and Jewish studies in Popkin's work.

### **A Split Identity: Marranos in the Work of Richard Popkin**

*Thomas Kaal (Queen Mary University London)*

Marranism and the troublesome history of Iberia's secret Jews was a recurring theme in Richard Popkin's work. However, the way in which he dealt with this subject changed considerably over the course of his life. In his 1960 edition of *The History of Scepticism*, the Marranos are not even mentioned. Later that same year, however, Popkin professed his growing interest in Marrano thinkers and their invaluable contribution to the European Renaissance. His first publications on the subject followed soon afterwards. With great interest, he received the insights of leading scholars in the field, such as Israël Salvator Révah and Cecil Roth, and expanded upon their work. In the last revision of *The History of Scepticism*, which was published in 2003, the Marranos featured prominently as harbingers of modern (religious) scepticism. This paper will focus on how Popkin's changing view of the Marranos reflected his personal relationship with Judaism, which was complex and sometimes paradoxical. Subsequently, it will examine how his work continues to influence the contemporary debate about the "split identity" of Iberia's secret Jews.

### **Just the Fax, Sir: Popkin's Private Republic of Letters**

*David S. Katz (Brandeis University)*

Before there was email, the only way to communicate instantly in writing was by sending faxes. For twenty-five years, beginning in 1980, Richard Popkin sent a stream of faxes, sometimes several times a week. In these faxes, he talked of current events, Israel, Judaism, and the many friends and colleagues who comprised his own private "republic of letters."

### **Popkin's Historiography of the Seventeenth-Century System of Thought and Delmedigo's Writings on Science and Kabbalah**

*Joseph Levi (Shemah Institute of Jewish Studies and Culture, Florence)*

In his illuminating historiographical writings, Popkin proposed and delineated an accurate and fascinating model of intellectual history built on a realistic reconstruction of contacts, relationships,

and meetings between radically contrasting systems of seventeenth-century thought. In this context, he described the figure of Abraham Cohen Heirera and the secret contacts that Spinoza had had with Christian Quakers and millenarists who occupied themselves with calculating the end of the millennium. The proposed model and description of a meeting between seemingly contrasting models of thought is particularly valid for understanding the neo-Scientific and neo-Kabbalist thought system of Joseph Solomon Delmedigo of Candia, a Jewish student and a follower of Galileo Galilei. In his writings, Delmedigo presents a clear Galilean reasoning for building and undertaking scientific observation based on a sceptical anti-Aristotelian model. At the same time, he was publishing long expositions dealing with neo-Kabbalistic ideas exposing Isaac Luria's Kabbalist models of creation. Thus, following Galileo's teaching, Delmedigo (Yashar) proposes a mathematical and empirical model for doing science in order to be able to read the "book of nature," yet at the same time he proposes a speculative theory of creation based on Lurianic Kabbalistic teachings exposed through ancient pre-Aristotelian atomistic theories that can offer an atomistic mathematical model for Kabbalistic terms and symbols, such as the mythical malbush (the divine coat), with the help of which, according to the new Kabbalah, God created the universe.

From a methodological point of view, this paper will attempt to elucidate Delmedigo's views as exposed in his two main published works (*Elim* and *Ta'alumot Hokhma*, 1629–1630) concerning the role of mathematical ideas and geometrical forms such as the triangle, the circle, and the point, understood as theoretical and instrumental models for describing nature and the universe. At the same time, atomistic pre-Aristotelian theories serve Delmedigo as a model for an exposition, using a mathematical-style model, of the Kabbalist malbush, a tool of creation, as described by Lurianic Kabbalah and its seventeenth-century followers.

From a social history of science perspective, this paper will expose Delmedigo's connections with scientific Galilean circles in Poland, Italy, Holland, Germany, and Belgium (some of whom were themselves millenarists), as well as his connections within the Jewish world with the heliocentric views of both pro- and anti-Galileans, with Karaite and Rabbinic circles in Turkey and (Great) Poland, and finally with Menasheh ben Israel, Heirera, and the emerging leadership of the Jewish community in Amsterdam.

### **Popkin's Newton: Bible Scholar and Christian Hebraist**

*Diego Lucci (American University in Bulgaria)*

Among Richard Popkin's many achievements is his contribution to the reassessment of Isaac Newton as a thinker who regarded the Book of Nature and Scripture as sustaining and complementing each other. Popkin's studies on Newton examined his biblical hermeneutics; his reflections on prophecy and chronology; his views on the connections between Judaism, ancient polytheisms, and deism; his interest in Maimonides; and his synthesis of religious and scientific ideas and methods. This paper will point out the originality of Popkin's approach to Newton as a Bible scholar and Christian Hebraist, against the background of the rediscovery of Newton's religious thought in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. In doing so, it will also call attention to the important role that Newton's biblical theology and theological physics played in Popkin's treatment of the epistemological, sceptical crisis of the early modern period. Moreover, it will highlight the stimuli that Popkin's analysis of Newton's hermeneutical methods and theological views gave to the reappraisal of Newton's



combination of theology and science in historiography on this author produced in the past three decades or so.

### **The Jewish Lives of Richard Popkin**

*Jeremy Popkin (University of Kentucky)*

Richard Popkin's scholarship on Jewish issues in the early modern period was only one aspect of his complicated relationship with Judaism and Jewish life. As a member of the "third generation" of Eastern European Jews in America, he was the product of a particular period of American Jewish history, marked by a reaction against the revolt of the "second generation" against Jewish tradition and by the experiences of the Holocaust and the establishment of Israel. He entered academia as the barriers against Jews were disappearing and as Jewish studies was becoming established in secular American universities. He also had a strong attraction to the academic community in Israel, although he could not reconcile himself to Israeli politics or to the difficulties of daily life there.

### **When the Rabbi Met the Sceptic: Richard Popkin's Friendship with Judah Goldin**

*Asher Salah (Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem)*

A significant gap exists between Richard Popkin's deep emotional involvement with Judaism and the weak reflection of it in his academic output. The correspondence between Richard Popkin and Judah Goldin (1914–1998), his life-long friend, a major figure in twentieth-century American Judaic studies, and an internationally renowned scholar of rabbinic literature, is of crucial importance to understanding how Popkin's strong Jewish commitment affected his perception of Jewish history and Jewish philosophy. Among his numerous correspondents, Goldin stands out as Popkin's main mentor and confidant for all that concerned Judaism and his religious crises.

### **Reconsidering Richard H. Popkin's Views on Marranism and Judeo-Christian Millenarianism**

*Claude Stuczynski (Bar-Ilan University Ramat-Gan)*

This paper will analyse Richard H. Popkin's contributions to both the Marrano or converso phenomenon and early modern Judaeo-Christian millenarianism, showing how much these two issues were intertwined according to Popkin's *Weltanschauungen*. It will also ponder how much contemporary historiography accepts or rejects Popkin's pioneering research and interpretations of phenomena.

### **Popkin's Jewish Scepticism as Mirrored by His Letters**

*Giuseppe Veltri (Universität Hamburg)*

In *The History of Scepticism* (first edition 1960), Popkin refers to Jewish sceptical thinkers such as Yehudah Halevi and Hasday Crescas. While there are some arguments in favour of there being a

sceptical approach to philosophy in Judah Halevi's work, it is highly disputable whether Ḥasdai Crescas was a sceptical thinker. In 1993, Richard Popkin edited an insightful book, *Scepticism and Irreligion*, which nevertheless did not contain a single contribution on Jewish thought. In his 1996 *Prophecy and Scepticism*, he mentions Simone Luzzatto's *Discorso* as reader of Sextus Empiricus (referring to Ruderman's *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe*), but not the *Socrates*, where his engagement with Sextus is immensely important although no direct connection to religion is evident. In Popkin's letters, the picture changes: they reveal that he was interested in Jewish scepticism, or at least in the phenomena of the Marranos. The lecture will sketch Popkin's scepticism as mirrored by his letters in comparison with his publications.