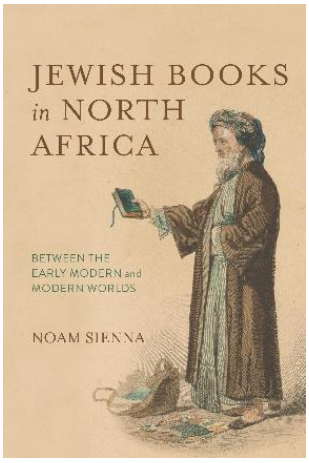


Noam Sienna.- ***Jewish Books in North Africa: Between the Early Modern and Modern Worlds*** **(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2025), 348 p.**

Noam Sienna, formerly a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Toronto (2023-2025) and currently Visiting Scholar at the Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, Rutgers-New Brunswick, belongs to a new generation of scholars who, since the early 2000s, have been rewriting the history of the Sephardi and North African Jewry. This wave brings together book history and the social history of religious minorities in the Mediterranean. This current, represented by Francesca Bregoli, Clémence Boulouque, Sebouh Aslanian, Hala Auji, and Kathryn Schwartz, has moved the field beyond the bibliographic-cataloguing approach of an earlier generation represented by Avraham Yaari. For these scholars, the book is not just a text. It is a physical object. It was copied, decorated, carried, and sold across the Mediterranean.

Sienna's study, winner of the 2025 Middle East Librarians Association Book Award, offers the first sustained methodological study of North African Jewish book culture between the late medieval and early modern periods. It is also the first systematic application of the McKenzie-Chartier "sociology of texts" tradition to North African Jewry.

The book is organised in six chapters that follow the life cycle of the Jewish book: production, printing, and circulation, reconstructing its social and material life across four centuries. It opens with the story of Rabbi Moïse Sebaoun's library in Oran, a nineteenth-century collection reportedly holding more than five thousand books, of which only 662 reached the *Consistoire israélite de Paris* in 1972. This vanished library frames the central questions of the study: how did each title travel from author to reader, and what does its material life reveal about the society that produced it?

Sienna's work sits at the intersection of three established scholarly fields. The first is the history of the Jewish book in the Mediterranean, founded by Avraham Yaari's bibliographies of Hebrew printing in the 1930s and 1950s and broadened from the 1990s onward by Francesca Bregoli's *Mediterranean Enlightenment* (2014) on eighteenth-century Livorno, Sebouh Aslanian's *Early Modernity and Mobility* (2023) on Armenian diasporic printing, and Clémence Boulouque's *Another Modernity* (2020) on Elia Benamozegh. The second is the history of printing in the Arabo-Muslim spheres, substantially renewed by Orlin Sabev's *Waiting for Müteferrika*

(2018), Kathryn Schwartz's *"Did Ottoman Sultans Ban Print?"* (2017), and Hala Auji's *Printing Arab Modernity* (2016). Their collective achievement has been to reframe Ottoman and Arab printing as an evolutionary phenomenon embedded within manuscript traditions, rather than a late adoption of a European technology. The third is Judeo-Arabic literary studies, whose literary and cultural foundations were laid by Haïm Zafrani in his three-volume *Études et recherches sur la vie intellectuelle juive au Maroc de la fin du 15e au début du 20e siècle* (Geuthner, 1972-1980), whose chronological scope coincides almost exactly with that of Sienna's study. Joseph Chetrit later extended this tradition with his work on the linguistic, poetic, and folkloric dimensions of North African Jewish vernacular culture, and most recently Yosef and Tsivia Tobi's *Judeo-Arabic Literature in Tunisia, 1850-1950* (2014) has become the standard reference on the Tunisian case. Within this triple frame, Sienna draws explicitly on Roger Chartier's principle that "no text exists apart from its physical support," D. F. McKenzie's "sociology of texts," and Hugh Amory's concept of "ethnobibliography."

In the Moroccan context, the history of the book has developed along a separate path. Sienna's work most urgently needs to engage with this literature. The foundational works in the Maghrebi Arabic-language tradition are Muḥammad al-Manūnī's *Waraqāt ʻan al-ḥaḍārat al-Maġribīyat fī ʻaṣr Banī Marīn* (1979) and especially his *Tārīkh al-Wirāqa al-Maghribiyya* (1991), which reconstructed the medieval and early modern industry of manuscript production: copying, illumination, and binding in the Moroccan imperial cities.

The definitive bibliographic and institutional history of Moroccan printing remains Fawzi Abdulrazak's *Mamlakat al-kitāb: tārīkh al-ṭibāʿa fī al-Maghrib, 1865-1912,* (Translated from English by Khalid Ben-Srhir, 1996), now extended through the Protectorate in his *Tārīkh ḥarakat al-ṭibāʿa wa-l-nashr fī al-Maghrib khilāl fatrat al-ḥimāya, 1912-1955* (2023), and supplemented by Laṭīfa al-Kanduz's *al-Ṭibāʿa wa-l-Nashr bi-l-Maghrib, 1865-1956* (2014). These works remain primarily institutional and bibliographic in orientation, emphasising the Makhzan press, official patronage, regulation, and Arabic-script lithography. The Jewish dimension appears only marginally within this framework. Abdulrazak treats the alleged 1516 Hebrew press in Fez with scepticism, while al-Kanduz gives a more explicit notice of the Nedivot press and its colophon but does not develop it into a broader history of Moroccan Jewish book culture.

The book's argument develops across six chapters. The first chapter argues that early modern North African book culture was not an isolated development. It was, rather, the continuation of a transregional tradition that

had linked Iberia and North Africa for centuries. Building on Malachi Beit-Arié's codicological work, Sienna shows that the so-called "Sephardi" book was not exclusively Iberian; many features of its production likely originated in North Africa, particularly Tunisia, and only later migrated to al-Andalus. Sienna documents the post-1492 flood of Iberian books into the Maghreb: Avraham Saba's lament over books abandoned in Portugal, Yehuda Ḥayyat's two hundred books given as ransom in Chefchaouen, and Moshe al-Ashkar's Leiria 1494 incunabula carried to Egypt. He also reconstructs the institutional innovation by which Sephardi exiles turned the yeshiva into a scriptorium (22-23). A substantial section is devoted to the Nedivot press of Fez (c. 1515/16-1522), the first press to print with movable type on the African continent in any language. Run by Shmuel Nedivot and his son Yiṣḥaq, almost certainly trained in Eli'ezer Toledano's Lisbon press, it produced approximately seven to ten rabbinic works, including *Sefer Abudarham* (1516) (23-30). Sienna rejects nationalist explanations for the press's failure, such as Spanish paper export bans or anti-Jewish disturbances. Sienna argues that the press failed for the same economic reasons most early presses failed worldwide, in a context of regional instability.

In the second chapter, Sienna offers the first sustained study of post-medieval Jewish manuscript culture anywhere in the Islamic world, applying Harold Love's concept of "scribal publication" to the Maghreb. He shows that thousands of Jewish manuscripts survive from early modern North Africa. These manuscripts were innovative objects, and they engaged actively with print culture. They were not fossilised remnants of an earlier age. Sienna identifies three regional styles of decorated manuscripts. The first is a spared ground style of white vines and arabesques against solid backgrounds, found in Fez, Meknes, Marrakech, Algiers, and Tunis. The second is a northern floral style with bold rounded vegetal decoration, associated with the *ketubot* of Tetouan and Tangiers. The third is a southern geometric style of knotwork and tessellated patterns, evidently informed by Amazigh aesthetics, found especially in the Tafilalt. The southern style includes the unique genre of decorated *daḥir,* illustrated Passover Haggadot featuring even the *tizerzai* brooches of Amazigh women (58-62). The chapter closes by engaging Elizabeth Eisenstein's "*ceci tuera cela*" thesis and rejecting it for the Maghreb. Faraj Bouchoucha's eighteenth-century *maḥzor* for Constantine, which explicitly harmonises manuscript and printed liturgical orders, is offered as the paradigmatic case of complementarity rather than rupture.

Turning to the European printing houses, the third chapter argues that the absence of a sustained printing industry in North Africa until the mid-nineteenth century was neither the result of an "Islamic" hostility to print nor of Jewish disengagement from it. Drawing on the recent reassessments of Ottoman printing by Sabev and Schwartz, and on Aslanian's work on

Armenian diasporic print culture, Sienna argues that North African Jews participated actively in transnational Jewish print culture by travelling to Mediterranean printing centres, especially Livorno. The very robustness of these external networks, he suggests, may itself be the reason why a local industry did not emerge sooner. He details the labour and risks of bringing books to press: Meir Crescas's six-year journey from Algiers to Amsterdam to print *Sefer ha-tashbeṣ*; the manuscript of Yehuda 'Ayyash's *Beit Yehuda*, as recorded by Eliyahu Ḥai Guedj, almost destroyed by seawater on its way to Livorno. The chapter looks closely at the Maghrebi Hebrew cursive script. European typesetters could not read it. The chapter also documents the work of North African Jews as print professionals. They served as editors, correctors, and typesetters in Livornese houses such as Castello and Saadun in the 1780s. The Livorno printing house of the Tubiana family, of Algerian origin and a major supplier to Maghrebi clients, illustrates the trans-Mediterranean reach of this network.

At the centre of the fourth chapter stands Elia Benamozegh (1823-1900) of Livorno, the son of Moroccan parents from Fez and Tetouan. His printing house produced 163 titles between 1854 and 1900, roughly a tenth of all Hebrew books printed in Livorno between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Following Boulouque's recent reading of Benamozegh, Sienna argues that the press was not secondary to his philosophical project. It was its applied expression. Benamozegh used the press to articulate a distinctively Sephardi-North African Jewish modernity. He examines three exemplary publications. The first is Mikhael Makhluf 'Allun's *Or ne'erav* (1854), a Judeo-Arabic Torah translation that aimed to produce a standardised, universal Judeo-Arabic comparable to Mendelssohn's German Bible translation for Jewish readers. The second is Eliyahu Bekhor Ḥazzan's *Zikhron yerushalayim* (1874). It is a hybrid work, part novel, part play, and part philosophical essay, set in Tunis. It dramatises encounters between Maghrebi, Ottoman, and European Jews. Its central question is how to be modern without assimilating. The third consists of Benamozegh's 1884-1886 collaborations with Eli'ezer Farḥi and Shalom Bekache on the Judeo-Arabic journal *Ha-mevasser / al-Mubashir*, the story collection *Anis al-wujud*, and a Judeo-Arabic *Yosippon* (97-114).

With the fifth chapter, the narrative returns to North Africa itself, as Sienna traces the development of Jewish printing from Ḥayyim Ze'ev Ashkenazi's arrival in Algiers in 1849 through the emergence of presses in Algiers (1853), Oran (1856), Tunis (1861), and Tangiers (1891). Sienna argues forcefully that the rise of these local presses cannot be reduced to a story of French colonial modernisation. Their output, on close inspection, reveals a complex negotiation between local Jewish identity, Arabic vernacular literacy, and French linguistic pull. In this regard, the first Hebrew

book printed in modern Tunis was *Qānūn al-Dawla al-Tūnisiyya* (1861), Moshe Shamama's Judeo-Arabic translation of Tunisia's Fundamental Pact and first formal constitution, which was a juridical text, not a liturgical or imitative one. The chapter then examines the press-bookstore as a community hub. Examples include Avraham Boukabza in Algiers, and Vittorio Finzi and Uzan-Castro in Tunis. It also looks at the broader Tunisian print landscape. Eusèbe Vassel's 1907 *Littérature populaire des Israélites tunisiens* listed 467 Judeo-Arabic titles since 1860, later revised to 517 by Robert Attal (2007). Finally, the chapter addresses the language politics of Hebrew, Judeo-Arabic, and French. Particular attention is given to Refael-Aharon Ben-Shim'on's *Dovevei Siftei Yeshenim* Society, founded in Fez in 1890 and devoted to publishing Moroccan rabbinic manuscripts.

The book's final chapter closes the life cycle by examining two Fez-based libraries. The first is the *estudyo* of Yaʿaqov Abensur (1673–1753), expanded by his descendants into the twentieth century and reconstructed here from letters, ownership marks, and surviving books. It reveals a library of perhaps several hundred titles, deeply rooted in medieval Sephardi manuscript heritage and actively replenished through the network of *shadarim,* rabbinic emissaries from the Holy Land, who served as the principal book-circulation channel across the Mediterranean. The second library is that of Avner-Yisraʾel Serfaty (1827–1884), chief rabbi of Fez. It includes 724 books organised in ten thematic categories, with their shelf locations recorded. What distinguishes this library are its substantial holdings in modern Hebrew science, philosophy, history, geography, and Maskilic literature, works that bring the Global Haskalah directly into Fez. The chapter analyses at some length Serfaty's *Yaḥas fes* (1879), a historical study of Jewish Fez written at the request of European Jewish leaders, and notable for Serfaty's interconfessional research practice: he consulted Muslim scholars who read to him from *Rawḍ al-Qirṭās* and provided geographic measurements. Sienna compares these collections with the contemporary Bannānī family library of Fez, a Muslim collection of 83 manuscripts endowed as waqf in the mid-eighteenth century by the daughters of Muḥammad al-Bannānī, and describes the North African Jewish library as a *semi-public* institution best captured by its vernacular name, *estudyo*: a place of study embedded in webs of intellectual, commercial, and familial relationships. The book closes with the figure of Nuna of Debdou, a Moroccan Jewish widow who in 1879 dedicated thirty *duros* and commissioned Moshe Barmalil to acquire a set of the Babylonian Talmud from Oran, to be held by her family "until the end of all generations."

Sienna's study offers three principal contributions to the field. First, it gives art historians a working vocabulary to classify and localise Maghrebi Jewish manuscripts: spared-ground, northern floral and southern geometric.

Second, the case for North African Jews as "print professionals" active across Mediterranean printing networks reframes a long-standing question about why no local Hebrew press developed before the 1850s. This absence is understood not as a shortage but as a function of the very effectiveness of those external Hebrew press networks. Third, drawing on archival evidence, Sienna argues against reading the nineteenth-century North African presses as a colonial product. In this sense, Sienna's archival depth draws on private family collections, alongside the major institutional sources, which lets him reconstruct individual libraries, such as the Abensur estudyo and the Serfaty catalogue, that institutional catalogues alone could never recover.

For a reader with a Moroccan or a broader North African perspective, several observations about this book are warranted. The first concerns the book's geographical scope. Despite the work's title, its centre of gravity is unmistakably Moroccan, and particularly Fassi. Chapters One and Six are built around Fez, whereas the central figures of Chapters Three and Four, namely, Benamozegh, Ḥazzan, and the Coriat family, are of Moroccan origin even when their activity is located in Livorno. Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya appear as supporting cases rather than autonomous cultural centres. Take Jerba, for example. Abraham Udovitch and Lucette Valensi documented it in *The Last Arab Jews* (1984) as the seat of an extended Jewish print culture in its own right. Yet it receives only brief mention here. Edmond Nathan Yafil's 1904 printed compilations of Andalusian *nūba*, treated in detail by Jonathan Glasser (2012), do not figure in the account, yet they illustrate a popular, musical, and interconfessionally collaborative register of Algerian Jewish print activity that is missing from the book's framing. Libya is almost absent, despite the work of Harvey Goldberg (1990). The book would have been stronger had it acknowledged that its real centre is Moroccan, with North African extensions.

A second observation concerns the Muslim presence. Sienna writes the history of the North African Jewish book largely as a self-contained, internally generated history. Muslim figures appear in the text on a handful of occasions: the scholar consulted by Serfaty for *Rawḍ al-Qirṭās*, the Bannani family library invoked for comparison, and the Algerian Daninos press. Yet the North African historian is aware, as the works of al-Manūnī and Abdulrazak have shown, that the manuscript industry in Fez, Marrakech, and Tetouan was a shared craft in which Muslim paper-merchants, Jewish scribes, Muslim binders, and Jewish dyers were embedded in complex economic relations. Jessica Marglin's *Across Legal Lines* (2016) has demonstrated that the legal sphere was so intertwined between the two communities that neither can be studied responsibly in isolation. Sienna's serious engagement with Sabev, Schwartz, and Auji on the broader

Mediterranean question of "Islamic hostility to printing" does not extend to the historiography of the Islamic book in Morocco specifically.

Neither of these gaps, the Moroccan tilt and the thin treatment of Muslim actors, undercuts what the book achieves. Beyond its empirical achievements, Sienna's study also offers a structural argument, although he does not name it as such. This argument should interest North African historians directly. In every chapter, real transformation comes from individuals, families, and networks, rather than from state institutions. This pattern intersects with a conclusion already reached in the Moroccan literature on Islamic printing, from Abdulrazak to al-Kanduz: that printing in Morocco was the product of individual initiative rather than a state project. Sienna's evidence pushes this conclusion several centuries further back. *Jewish Books in North Africa* consolidates a field that had not yet cohered, and it opens research paths it does not pretend to complete: toward a shared history of the book in Morocco that places the rabbinic and Islamic libraries in a single frame; toward a genuinely North African historiography that treats Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya as autonomous centres; and toward a serious dialogue with the rich North African scholarly production in Arabic.

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