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Jewishness Contested: The 1771 Chelsea Murder Case and its Narration

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12:15-13:45

Room 146 (Library Auditorium)



Abstract: On June 11, 1771, a group of thieves broke into a private house in Chelsea, a village outside of London at the time, with the intention of robbing it. The event ended with the killing of one of the servants, in addition to the theft itself. Soon enough it became known that the thieves were Jewish, and the case became a cause célèbre, attracting wide public attention and resonating into the nineteenth century. What made it, atrocious though not uncommon in contemporary standards, a catalyst of such broad public agitation? I argue that it became a compelling case because it effectively featured the contradictions that were embedded in the imagery of the Jew – specifically of the masculine Jew – at the time, oscillating between an assimilated gentleman and a perilous criminal; at the same time, and relatedly, it touched on the open nerves of the question of the borders of Englishness. The question whether Jews could be part of English civil society became a contested issue in the second half of the eighteenth century, a debate that reflected the uncertainty of the definitions of both Jewishness and English identity. As we shall see, gender and masculinity were hotspots of the vulnerability of both concerns, and they figured prominently in depictions of the event.

Bio: Avinoam Yuval-Naeh is a cultural and intellectual historian of Early Modern Europe, specializing in British History and focusing on questions of economic culture, crime and punishment, and popular print. He is currently a member in the ISF project led by Zoe Beenstock, *A New Sacred Geography: Imagining Biblical Antiquarian History in British Romantic Literature, 1764-1815*. His book, *An Economy of Strangers: Jews and Finance in England 1650-1830*, is forthcoming at the University of Pennsylvania Press (January 2024). It explores the ways in which conceptions of Jews and Judaism changed during this period and served as means for Britons to think through on their commercializing society. He earned his PhD from the Hebrew University (2018) and spent a year as a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University (2018-2019), at the Safra Center for Ethics at Tel Aviv University (2019-2020), and at the Hebrew University (2021-2022).