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Review of Robert Bonfil, *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*

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Abstract

This is a major work by one of the most creative and original historians of medieval and early modern Jewish history. Based on his extensive scholarship on Italian Jewry over the past twenty years, published primarily in Hebrew and Italian, it brings to the English reader a bold but mature synthesis of a significant epoch in Jewish and western history. Eschewing extensive annotation, the book, while hardly a popular survey, has a quality made more accessible to a wide readership by the elegantly simple and supple prose of the English translator Anthony Oldcorn, which captures Bonfil's original insights and observations concerning Italian Jewish culture and the Renaissance.

Disciplines

Cultural History | European History | History | History of Religion | Jewish Studies | Medieval History

Reviews

Robert Bonfil. *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994. 20 pls. + xviii + 320 pp. \$30.

This is a major work by one of the most creative and original historians of medieval and early modern Jewish history. Based on his extensive scholarship on Italian Jewry over the past twenty years, published primarily in Hebrew and Italian, it brings to the English reader a bold but mature synthesis of a significant epoch in Jewish and western history. Eschewing extensive annotation, the book, while hardly a popular survey, has a quality made more accessible to a wide readership by the elegantly simple and supple prose of the English translator Anthony Oldcorn, which captures Bonfil's original insights and observations concerning Italian Jewish culture and the Renaissance.

Bonfil begins with a comprehensive critique of the standard interpretations of Cecil Roth, Moses Avigdor Shulvass, Attilio Milano, and others, who understood — and positively viewed — the Renaissance as a period of intense Jewish assimilation of the values and life style of the Christian majority. This was followed by an abrupt closure and involution of Jewish culture engendered by the Counter-Reformation's aggressive new stance towards Judaism and by the emergence of the ghetto system throughout the Italian peninsula, which the writers viewed negatively. Bonfil refuses to accept the assumption that acculturation was necessarily good while isolation was necessarily bad. He insists instead on writing a history "seen from the inside" from the point of view of the Jewish minority (xi). Rather than

a history determined either by the forces of influence and acculturation or by those of insulation and traditionalism, his is one "of coming to awareness of the Self in the act of specular reflection in the Other" (xi). By this he means a kind of two-way mirroring of the Self in the Other, as a pole of comparison acting as a catalyst for self-definition; and the mirroring of the Other in Oneself, as an element bearing the essential components of that very self-definition" (6).

Viewed through such nuanced lenses, the entire cultural development of Italian Jews emerges in a radically different way from the conventional viewpoint. Until the mid-sixteenth century, Jewish society was marked by constant migratory movement and was made up of widely scattered, minuscule, and vulnerable Jewish settlements. This period's most enduring characteristic was the essential abnormality of Jewish life in the many communities Jews founded and the constant need to justify their continued existence before despots and democratic communes alike. Bonfil paints an unflattering portrait of Renaissance life from the perspective of its Jewish minority, marked by Franciscan vituperations, crowd violence, even blood libels. For Bonfil, Jews were tolerated because they offered a palliative to the poor through their money lending, performing — like prostitutes — a useful but despised service. While a handful of Jewish intellectuals were aware of the new vistas of Renaissance culture, this did not imply a reduction of the gap between the two religious communities but merely "a natural

communality of mental structures shared by people living in the same historical context" (152). When Jews cited Christian and pagan writers they did so to affirm their own cultural superiority or they simply borrowed new cultural fads as if they represented mere "technology" to enhance and bolster their own hallowed truths (151).

All of this radically changed with the construction of the ghettos, first in Venice in 1516 and then throughout the second half of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in other Italian cities. The ghetto for Bonfil represented a kind of revolution in the Jewish condition, signifying the beginning of a change in Christian attitudes toward Jews; the adoption of a kind of middle position between unconditional acceptance and expulsion; an entitlement through segregation, which meant a relatively more liberal treatment of the Jewish minority even when it became more expendable economically; and a radical change in the Jewish mentality. Jews were now more urbanized and concentrated in the heart of the largest Italian cities, more polarized both economically and culturally, attuned to the sounds and sights of the Christian majority, and secure in their new neighborhoods. In the ghetto communities, the kabbalah — embodying the mystical tradition of Judaism — and the new Jewish confraternities performed the paradoxical task of restructuring religious notions of space and time, separating the sacred from the secular, and even serving as "an agent of modernity" (170).

This brief summary hardly does justice to the carefully constructed and thought-provoking arguments of the book. I have excluded several important sections, especially Bonfil's delightful excursion into the history of Jewish mentalities, which encompasses several stimulating chapters on time and space,

loudness and silence, colors, tastes and odors, and birth, marriage, and death.

Since this work is the most significant interpretation of Jewish culture in Renaissance Italy to appear since the 1950s, it will undoubtedly be discussed for years to come by students of both Jewish and Christian cultures of the Renaissance. Given the severe limitations of space in this review, it is impossible to address adequately the many facets of Bonfil's rich analysis here. I restrict my remarks to only several key issues.

To Bonfil's credit, the position he adopts in this work is the result of a real evolution in his thinking. Since the appearance of his first publications in the late 1970s, certain themes have remained constant: his internalist perspective, his depiction of Jewish culture in the Renaissance — primarily as an expression of Jewish cultural superiority — and most importantly his critique of the apologetic historiography of Cecil Roth and an earlier generation of historians. On the other hand, his understanding of the significance of the ghetto environment in shaping a new cultural consciousness — even a "modern" consciousness — is decidedly a significant rethinking of his earlier conclusions. Moreover, his understanding of the kabbalah in this formative process as an "agent of modernity" suggests as well a striking reformulation.

Bonfil, like Croce, reminds his readers on more than one occasion that all history is ultimately contemporary history. In contrast to the optimism and enthusiasm for Western cultural values shared by Roth and his contemporaries, the mood of Bonfil's book is markedly different. The Renaissance, despite its great promise, reveals itself as a barbaric universe, at least in the eyes of its Jewish minority. The cheerful confidence of a Jacob

Burkhardt in the promise of Western civilization has been replaced by the basic distrust and disillusionment of a Theodore Adorno. In so cruel and hostile an environment, a beleaguered Jewish minority has no recourse but to assert its own will and shape its own destiny, as in the case of the proud Jewish inhabitants of the sixteenth-century ghettos or the Zionist settlers who survived the Nazi Holocaust of the twentieth century. Yet despite the essential failures of Western civilization to tolerate and appreciate the Jewish other, there is no call for isolationism or defiant withdrawal from cultural interaction. On the contrary, the ghettoized Jews were attuned to their larger cultural landscapes in ways unanticipated by earlier generations. If I may be bold enough to suggest, that existential complexity of Italian Jewry in its simultaneous embrace of closure and openness, of insulation and integration, and in its repudiation of and identification with Western cultural values not only constitutes a deep-rooted condition of its collective psyche but also that of this author.

Bonfil's unique formulation of the relationship between the Jewish Self and the Christian Other remains, however, rather opaque. It is one thing to correct the excesses of Roth's enthusiasm for Renaissance culture and the flaws that reduce the Jewish minority to mere imitators of the majority's lifestyle and values. It is another to abandon altogether the language of influence in characterizing Jewish interaction with the Christian world. I must confess that I do not find Bonfil's mirror metaphor or his other shifting formulations any more precise or surefooted than Roth's in defining the protean relations between Jews and Christians in Renaissance Italy. Bonfil speaks of a two-way mirroring process whereby the Self sees itself in contrast to the Other

but also sees the likeness of the Other in itself. A truly remarkable mirror but indeed a slippery image! The processes by which an Italian Christian majority influences its Jewish minority and how that minority either accepts or denies, reformulates or integrates a specific attitude, value, or pattern of behavior in defining its own cultural autonomy conveys to me the same elusive reality Bonfil labors to describe.

No doubt the author's major contribution is his insightful depiction of the ghetto experience as decisive in the restructuring of Jewish cultural identity. Nevertheless, his argument requires, to my mind, the following refinement. Although the majority of Jews living in Renaissance Italy were only superficially affected by the cultural proclivities of their Christian environment, a small elite group was still deeply affected, forced as they were to reformulate their faith in the context of new forms of Christian syncretism. In the period of the ghetto, as a result of their topographical and socioeconomic transformations, a larger number of Jews more readily absorbed patterns of thought and behavior of the Christian societies surrounding them. Their synagogues became cathedral-like, their wedding feasts, iconography, entertainment, music, notions of time and space, confraternal piety, and political tastes — all came to reflect the patterns of the Christian majority. I have referred to this phenomenon elsewhere as a Baroque sensibility and suggested that it faithfully conveyed the mentality of Jews as well as Christians in post-Renaissance, Counter-Reformation Italy.

Be that as it may, Bonfil is thoroughly convincing when arguing that "the beginning of the actual process of assimilation and the enfeeblement of the Jewish consciousness were

paradoxically signaled by their enclosure in the ghetto" (177). I would hasten to add, however, that the Christian architects of the ghettos, even though they actually baptized only a small percentage of their Jewish subjects, nevertheless succeeded in remaking the Jews into a community very much to their own liking, and very much in their own image.

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John Martin. *Venice's Hidden Enemies: Italian Heretics in a Renaissance City*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. 9 illus. +xiv + 287 pp. \$42.50.

As a commercial entrepôt and publishing center, Venice stood at the intellectual crossroads of sixteenth-century Europe. By skating between diplomatic pressures emanating from Catholic Rome and the Protestant north, it also maintained a reputation for stable republican government and religious toleration at home. John Martin eloquently probes the myth of Venice — the *serenissima* — by examining the indigenous and evanescent communities of its "hidden enemies," the evangelicals, anabaptists, and millenarians who, from the imposition of the Venetian Inquisition in 1547, were pursued as heretics. Around a social profile of the 730 individuals denounced to the Inquisition in the ensuing forty years, he has woven together the literatures on Venetian social history, sixteenth-century Italian reform, and the Inquisition, to survey the shifting currents of reformist aspiration, religious dissent, and repression over the course of the century. Aimed at a wide academic audience, the study is also framed as an evaluation of the influence of social and cultural forces on religious conviction. By turning from older questions of Lutheran

penetration of Italy and Italy's export of religious radicals, to a specific religious context, Martin challenges traditional notions of the Renaissance and Reformation.

Their social power at home and influence in Rome made Venetian aristocrats such as Gasparo Contarini the best hope of Catholic reform in the early sixteenth century. Though strongly influenced by Luther, they had already developed independently an evangelical spirituality based on Augustine, Renaissance traditions of civic charity and elements of late medieval thought that emphasized the primacy of the individual's relation to God and grace over works in the economy of salvation. But the failure of the Regensburg Colloquy in 1541, followed by the death of Contarini and the flight of other Italian reformers, dashed the hopes of moderate Catholic reform, and the creation of Inquisitions in Rome and Naples drove Italian evangelicals to shelter in Venice. There, nourished by the wide dissemination of popular evangelical literature and the preaching of Franciscans and Augustinians, evangelism acquired a popular base. A community of conventicles grew up in homes, shops, taverns and parishes, often linked by priests.

Further disillusionment came in 1547, when Venice itself cautiously embraced the Inquisition. Though republican in principle, Venice's oligarchic aristocrats had been closing their ranks and tightening their grip on society since the defeat of Agnadello in 1509; and while they mistrusted Roman interference and favored religious inclusiveness, they also regarded religious conformity as a fundamental requirement of the state. Martin acknowledges the "impressionistic" nature of the data on heresy provided by the Inquisition. Nevertheless, he dem-