The Italian Renaissance and Jewish Thought

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At the time of this publication, Dr. Ruderman was affiliated with Yale University, but he is now a faculty member of the University of Pennsylvania.

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The Italian Renaissance and Jewish Thought

Abstract
One notable example of the asymmetry between general European and Jewish historiography is their respective treatments of the Renaissance period. At least since the appearance of Jacob Burckhardt's classic study, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, historians have thoroughly discussed the significance of this cultural epoch, often with great intensity and acrimony. Despite their diverging and often contradictory perspectives, few would now argue with Burckhardt's initial assessment that the Renaissance marks a momentous transformation in European civilization in general and in Italian culture in particular. ¹

Disciplines
Cultural History | European History | History | History of Religion | Jewish Studies | Medieval History | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Comments
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transformation in European civilization in general and in Italian culture
in particular.¹

In striking contrast, the meaning of the Renaissance, especially in
Italy, is far less clear for the history of Jewish civilization. The flourishing
of a small, enlightened Jewish society during the late fourteenth and
fifteenth centuries in Italy has long been recognized, but the precise ways
in which the majority culture symbiotically affected the Jewish commu-
nity and its intellectual life have not been thoroughly elucidated.² To what
extent were Jews earnestly preoccupied with the concerns of Renaissance
culture? Was there a Jewish humanist movement comparable to that of
Italian culture of the period? Can one legitimately speak of a Jewish
Renaissance in Italy coterminous with the Italian Renaissance? Was there
something unique about the development of Jewish thought in the Italian
Renaissance to distinguish it from that of other enlightened Jewish civi-
lizations in Spain, Provence, or Turkey? Did Italian Renaissance culture
actually exert a decisive influence on Jewish thought or did its impact
constitute no more than a passing fad or superficial encounter? When
weighed against other factors affecting Jewish culture throughout the Eu-
ropean continent—such as the expulsion from Spain, the creation of new
Jewish settlements in the Ottoman Empire and eastern Europe, dramatic
developments in Jewish political organization, in religious law and ethics,
and in mystical speculation—was the Renaissance relatively less impor-
tant to Jews, even those living in Italy, than to Christians living in the
same era?³

Such questions have not been fully answered; only in recent years
have researchers of Jewish civilization begun to address them seriously. In many respects, the cultural and intellectual history of Italian Jewry is still in its infancy. Extant sources still remain unpublished and even unstudied. The manuscript and printed writings of many of the major cultural luminaries have yet to be investigated carefully and systematically. Moreover, because general historians have often disagreed as to the specific character of the Renaissance or of humanism, “Renaissance” influences on Jewish culture have not always been easily understood nor properly assessed by Jewish historians. Because of the obvious gaps of knowledge that currently exist, it is still premature to establish a clear and comprehensive conceptual framework in which to place Italian Jewish thought in this period, and in later years as well. In thus treating the subject of the impact of the Renaissance environment on some major Jewish thinkers, this essay can offer something less than a synthesis of this period—instead a tentative statement of general and fluid impressions, a preliminary report of recent research, as well as a sense of what yet needs to be explored before a complete picture emerges.

* * *

Any serious consideration of Jewish thought in the era of the Renaissance should first assess the particular social and economic circumstances determining Italian Jewish life. At least three factors are of primary importance in this regard. First of all, Italian Jewish communities, especially the majority situated in the northern and central regions of the peninsula, were relatively small and recent, consisting of only a few families with limited political power and institutional resources. Second, these fledgling communities were composed of Jews who were primarily immigrants with diverse cultural and religious backgrounds—either migrants from other regions in Italy, or French, German, or Spanish Jews. Under such circumstances, the process of political and social self-definition and differentiation that these communities underwent from the late fourteenth century to well into the sixteenth was naturally accompanied by considerable stress, internal conflict, and often bitter struggles over religious and political authority. Third, the economic power of these communities was concentrated in the hands of a small number of relatively affluent banking families who exerted considerable influence over the political and cultural life of their own communities. Not surprisingly, the major Jewish thinkers of this period were aligned to this group; their intellectual activities were supported by these privileged patrons of higher culture in a manner not unlike that of their counterparts in the Christian world of letters.

In addition to these three factors, one should also stress the
relatively benign relations that existed between certain Jews and Christians in Italy, which facilitated the intense interaction between the two communities, at least until the mid-sixteenth century. That certain Christian intellectuals were more positively disposed to Jewish culture should not imply that traditional animosities between Jews and Christians did not persist in this era. One need only recall that in the same period in which some Christian humanists studied Hebrew texts with Jews, pogroms, blood libels, and forced religious debates were still as prevalent as they had been in previous centuries. Nevertheless, some Jews had more access to Christian society than before, and, accordingly, their impact on certain sectors of that community was more profound. Since Jews were not only recipients of external culture but also served directly in their own right to shape particular aspects of Christian culture in this era and in subsequent ones, this essay must consider the extent to which the Jewish presence was a factor in the Italian Renaissance. How did the role of Jews and Judaism in Renaissance civilization affect, in turn, the self-perception of Jews and their own sense of cultural dignity?

All three of the major intellectual traditions of Renaissance culture affected Jews living in the fifteenth century and at the beginning of the sixteenth and will constitute the foci of this inquiry. They are Aristotelianism, humanism, and Neoplatonism, the latter reflected especially in the writings of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and his circle. A separate consideration of the impact of each of these traditions on Jewish thought should not obscure, however, the obvious interrelatedness of all three. Ideas and cultural concerns found within each tradition affected simultaneously Jewish intellectuals, who, like their Christian counterparts, often drew indiscriminately and eclectically from variegated sources of knowledge. Yet in responding to the new concerns raised by Renaissance culture, they generally favored one tradition over another in adopting their own particular solutions. Despite the overlapping categories in their thought, a consideration of the distinct influence of each of these traditions on the major Jewish intellectual figures of the period thus appears warranted.

On the basis of such an examination, some observations about the character of the interaction between the Italian Renaissance and Jewish thought will be proposed. A fresh look at this relationship should also lead to an appraisal of the way this period has previously been viewed by earlier Jewish historians. It also elicits some reflection on the correlation between Renaissance Jewish thought and later Jewish intellectual responses to modern European civilization in the period of the Enlightenment and after.

* * *
Due to the recent work of Charles Schmitt and others, the dominant role of Aristotelian philosophy and the scholastic tradition in Renaissance culture has now been fully recognized. The Peripatetic tradition not only survived during the Renaissance but even flourished in all the major Italian universities, utilizing newly discovered materials and fresh translations of Aristotle and his commentators, and absorbing some of the new linguistic-humanistic methodology for the study of ancient texts. Despite strong opposition to specific Aristotelian views expressed throughout the period, all the diverging medieval schools of the Peripatetic tradition—the Averroists, Thomists, Scotists, Albertists, and Ockhamists—markedly persisted, even coexisting with other systems of thought, often found in the thinking of the same person.

For fifteenth-century Italian Jews, the scholastic tradition remained a dominant aspect of their intellectual life, the rich legacy of Judeo-Arabic philosophy, as exemplified by Moses Maimonides, amplified and refined by Christian scholastic influences of the later Middle Ages. The Latin scholastic traditions especially inspired the writings of Italian Jewish philosophers in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—figures such as Hillel of Verona, Judah Romano, and Emanuel of Rome. Christian scholastic influences were also widespread among Spanish and Provençal Jews throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The most prominent Jewish scholastic living in fifteenth-century Italy was Elijah Delmedigo (1460–1493). Born and raised in Crete, where he also died, Delmedigo spent considerable time among scholastic academic circles in Venice and Padua, where he acquired his fame as an authority on the writings of Averroës. His most important legacy consisted of a large corpus of translations and original treatises, explicating the doctrines of Averroës to a learned and distinguished audience of Christians including Domenico Grimani and Pico della Mirandola. Having access to Hebrew translations of the famous Arabic philosopher that were unavailable to his Christian contemporaries, Delmedigo, as other Jews before him, elected as his life work the translation and publicizing of Averroës’s doctrines predominantly to non-Jews. Of special significance was the publication during his lifetime of five of his works under the patronage of Domenico Grimani in Venice in 1488. Taking full advantage of the new authority and wider diffusion of the printed word, Delmedigo’s publications clearly crowned his previous literary achievements, adding considerable luster to an already distinguished career in the company of elite intellectual circles. Besides his translations, Delmedigo wrote two major treatises on Averroës, explicating in the first Averroës’s doctrine of the unity of the intellect, and in the second his theory of conjunction.
For Delmedigo, the goal of philosophy was limited to the clarification of previous philosophic doctrines, in his case, those of Averroës. Thus as he explained to Pico: “Just as Averroës explained Aristotle’s words fully, I have to explain the words of Averroës, since such wisdom has almost been lost in our day.” Delmedigo’s perception of the restricted role of philosophy is especially evident in his Behinat ha-Dat (Examination of the Faith), his major work of Jewish philosophy, written in Hebrew at the request of his student, Saul Cohen Ashkenazi, in Crete in 1490. In clarifying the traditional problem of the relation between faith and reason, Delmedigo relied heavily on his Arabic mentor Averroës, especially The Decisive Treatise, but went further than Averroës in limiting the application of philosophic reasoning to matters of faith. Averroës had maintained in The Decisive Treatise that Scripture was to be interpreted esoterically to conform with reason. While there was for him only one truth, Scripture could be interpreted on three different levels of understanding: rhetorically for the masses, dialectically for the theologians, and demonstratively for the philosophers. But all three groups were obliged to assent to three major principles of faith—belief in God, prophecy, and reward and punishment. When each group accepted the principles of religion according to their proper mode of understanding, no conflict between philosophy and revelation existed for Averroës.

Delmedigo generally followed Averroës’s basic assumptions about restricting philosophy to philosophers. He likewise maintained that philosophers must accept certain principles of Judaism but, unlike Averroës, he disallowed the philosopher from rationally interpreting the principles of Judaism. The Jewish people were identified by a specific set of beliefs, which for the sake of social harmony were resistant to philosophical investigation. While recommending the study of philosophy, Delmedigo departed from his teacher in holding that philosophy and religion each maintained their separate methodologies. The goal of Judaism was to implant in every Jew an understanding of divine truth; philosophy was circumscribed to clarifying earlier philosophical doctrines. In the case of disagreement between the two, the truths of Judaism clearly had the upper hand. Maintaining a position that paralleled the Paduan school of secular Aristotelians, especially the followers of the views of Siger of Brabant (ca. 1240—ca. 1284) and John of Jandun (ca. 1275—1328), Delmedigo’s inquiry into the relation of faith and reason fits squarely into an intellectual context of contemporary philosophical discussion in Italy as well as a long tradition of speculation among earlier medieval Jewish philosophers.
Delmedigo’s collaboration with the illustrious Florentine Neoplatonist, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, was clearly the most distinguished feature of this Jew’s career, superseding in importance his philosophic writings and even his translations. In 1480, Pico met Delmedigo in Padua, initiating a relationship of some five years out of which Pico acquired a more solid grounding in Averroistic philosophy. He asked Elijah to translate Averroës’s paraphrase of Plato’s Republic. Elijah later translated other works of Averroës for Pico, wrote a commentary on De substantia orbis and a treatise on essence, being, and unity that clearly influenced Pico’s own writing on the subject. Of particular interest was Delmedigo’s elucidation for Pico of certain kabbalistic concepts on the doctrine of the Sefirot and the Ein Sof, his acquisition for Pico of a translation of Menahem Recanati’s (late thirteenth to early fourteenth century) mystical commentary on the Pentateuch, and his compilation of a list of essential works of kabbalah, which he presented to Pico, works with which he was apparently familiar. The knowledge Pico acquired from Delmedigo regarding Averroës, and to a lesser extent the material prepared for him on the kabbalah, had a formative impact on Pico’s syncretistic theology and are reflected in the outlines of Pico’s thinking published in his famous theses presented in Rome in 1486.

While Delmedigo, in his Behinat ha-Dat, was extremely critical of both the kabbalah and the traditional Christian exegesis of Jewish sacred texts, he did not hesitate to expound for Pico kabbalistic doctrines to which he did not subscribe. Apparently, Delmedigo’s clarification of kabbalah paralleled the role he had earlier assumed in explicating philosophical texts. A philosopher is essentially an expositor of earlier philosophic views; he may elucidate concepts, even kabbalistic ones, without affirming their veracity with respect to his own religious faith. By placing kabbalistic concepts in the framework of philosophical analysis, Delmedigo also associated himself with an approach to Jewish mystical sources particularly characteristic of other Italian Jews—the fusion of kabbalah and philosophy. This approach is especially important in understanding Pico’s attitude to Jewish mysticism and will be considered later in this essay.

Italian scholasticism molded the intellectual interests of other eminent Italian Jews besides Elijah Delmedigo. Judah Messer Leon, who lived in Italy at the end of the fifteenth century in Ancona, Bologna, Padua, Venice, Mantua, and Naples, earned a doctorate in philosophy and medicine and was even granted the unique privilege of conferring medical degrees on his own students. Messer Leon’s intellectual commitment to the study of Aristotle and Averroës closely parallels that of
Delmedigo’s. Though clearly differing in personality and to a great extent in academic interests, Messer Leon shared with his Jewish contemporary a view of philosophy as primarily the elucidation of earlier philosophical texts, while maintaining a subordinate position for rational thought in relation to fundamental Jewish beliefs. Although two of his original works on Jewish thought are no longer extant, it is possible to reconstruct partially the direction of his scholastic interests from those works that are preserved. The latter include scholastic commentaries on grammar, logic, and rhetoric. With respect to the first two subjects Messer Leon’s philosophical method, like Delmedigo’s, is essentially limited to expounding Averroës’s commentary on Aristotle’s fundamental works. Utilizing the Hebrew translation of Averroës’s middle commentary on the Organon, for example, Messer Leon composed a paragraph-by-paragraph commentary on Averroës, carefully harmonizing it with a Latin text of Aristotle, noting any difficulties in the text, and attempting to explain them. In his commentary on the Isagoge, he slavishly copied from Walter Burley’s (ca. 1275–1345) commentary on Aristotle’s logic and apparently relied heavily on Paul of Venice (ca. 1370–1429) in writing his commentary on the Posterior Analytics and on the Categories. When Messer Leon came to compose a treatise on rhetoric, some years after completing his earlier commentaries, the same scholastic methodology of textual explication, unwavering reliance on earlier authorities, and the reconciliation of all textual “dubia” still dominated the style and structure of his work.

David, the son of Judah Messer Leon (ca. 1460–1530s), shared with both his father and Elijah Delmedigo a scholastic orientation that influenced the form and content of his extant writings. His philosophical works, especially his Magen David and his Tehilah le-David, constitute original expositions of his thought in contrast to the linear commentaries of his father and those of Delmedigo. However, David too understood his primary role as a philosopher to be one of explicating earlier philosophical positions; he chose to elucidate the philosophy of Moses Maimonides in a work he called Ein ha-Koreh. As an expositor of a Jewish philosophical authority, David felt obliged to present a reliable exposition of the philosopher’s views, severely maligned in the earlier commentary of Moses Narboni (d. 1362), even when David himself could not uphold a particular Maimonidean position. In his other writings, he offers a systematic presentation of Jewish beliefs by clarifying earlier philosophical positions of Jewish and Arabic thinkers—especially those of Averroës and Ibn Sina. And like Delmedigo before him, he considers the elucidation of earlier philosophical views to include those found in kabbalistic works. In Magen David he argues against Menahem Recan-
ati’s view of the Sefirot by quoting verbatim an earlier contemporary, Isaac Mar Hayyim (late fifteenth century). But in so doing, he clearly treats his material as a philosopher and not as a kabbalist. Kabbalah for David is equivalent to other speculative fields of knowledge and accordingly can be reduced to rational analysis. Precisely like Delmedigo, he is naturally inclined to expound any earlier intellectual idea, even that voiced by a kabbalist. And like his father, he clearly understands the kabbalah to be a philosophic system conceptually related to Neoplatonic thought.

David ben Judah’s views closely parallel those of Delmedigo and Averroës on the relation between Judaism and philosophy. Like Delmedigo, David acknowledges the superiority of Torah over philosophy. Like Averroës, he sees philosophy as a necessary tool for the study of Scripture, sharpening human reason and bringing the human mind from potentiality to actuality. But while philosophy is necessary, it is not sufficient to transform the mind to a higher level, one of communion with God. In the first part of Tehilah le-David, David, like Delmedigo, elucidates the fundamental principles of Judaism, which cannot be proved by rational analysis.

David ben Judah differed from Delmedigo, however, in deviating from Averroistic positions by adopting, even copying, the views of Thomas Aquinas. His theology of Judaism consists of a merging of Averroist and Thomist sources with a particular emphasis on dogmatic theology. Whether he was influenced in this direction by his father’s views is virtually impossible to surmise, in view of the absence of Judah’s theological writings. What is clear, however, is his indebtedness to the views of Thomas, Judah ha-Levi, and the Spanish Jewish philosopher Abraham Bivago, particularly in his extended analysis of faith and miracles. In his special emphasis on the significance of faith in attaining truth, in his concept of divine grace, and in his delineation of the relation between religious love and the divine commandments, David Messer Leon introduced into Italian Jewish thought religious themes that were to become more prominent throughout the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, as an expositor of earlier philosophical authorities, as a systematizer of religious beliefs heavily reliant on Thomas and Averroës, Messer Leon reveals a striking affinity to the scholastic interests of his father and of Delmedigo. Clearly different in many respects from both in the direction his theology took, he nonetheless was clearly wedded, like them, to the scholastic world of his contemporaries. For all three Jewish thinkers, it was necessary to formulate their Jewish faith by reference to Aristotelian texts or through scholastic modes of study and investigation.
Judah Messer Leon, and to a lesser extent David his son, parted company, however, with Elijah Delmedigo in widening their intellectual horizons beyond scholasticism. Messer Leon’s intellectual interests were broader than his contemporary’s in absorbing profoundly the influence of the humanistic studies of his day. In composing his Hebrew work Sefer Nofet Zufim, Messer Leon introduced for the first time to his Italian Jewish readers a new genre of rhetorical writing that placed him squarely in the center of a new and dominant expression of Renaissance cultural life of the fifteenth century, that of Italian humanism.43

With Poggio Bracciolini’s famous discovery of Quintilian’s rhetorical handbook in 1416, rhetoric began to assume a broader and more important place in the culture and educational program of Renaissance Italy.44 In Greek antiquity, rhetoric as an independent subject of inquiry either had been rejected out of hand or had been treated as a subordinate part of philosophy. Only with the Latinists Cicero and Quintilian was rhetoric integrated with philosophy into a broader scheme of education and learning. With Cicero, the ideal of true eloquence, a harmonious union of wisdom and style, was elevated to a societal ideal. Rhetoric had a beneficial end—the development of high moral character—when combined with the knowledge of philosophy. In the Middle Ages, by contrast, Judeo-Arabic philosophy generally maintained the attitude of Greek philosophy regarding rhetoric. Like theology, it was considered inferior to scientific or demonstrative reasoning; its only useful function was to persuade the uneducated masses, those incapable of understanding demonstrative proofs. In the Latin West, however, rhetoric assumed a more important place, although it was confined to practical purposes—the composition of letter-writing manuals, thematic sermons, or grammar textbooks.45

By the fourteenth century with the revival and imitation of classical antiquity, the humanists reclaimed rhetoric as a significant and independent part of the new studia humanitatis, which also included grammar, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. As a reaction to the more technical philosophical interests of the scholastics, the humanists revived the Ciceronian ideal, the combination of wisdom with eloquence. Throughout the Renaissance, scholastics and humanists debated the question of the legitimacy of philosophy over rhetoric, drawing from either the Greek or the Roman traditions to substantiate their positions.46

It is in this context, in the centrality of the debate over philosophy and rhetoric between the humanists and scholastics, that Messer Leon’s Sefer Nofet Zufim can best be understood.47 The novelty of Messer Leon’s rhetorical compendium lies not only in his use of most of the major classical sources available in his day for the mastery of the rhetor-
tical art; more significant is the bold hypothesis suggested by the work and its general implications for Italian Jewry—the projection of a "good and righteous man," gifted in the oratorical art and so combining his knowledge and noble character as to produce a new and effective leadership for the Jewish community.\textsuperscript{48}

The image of the orator construed by Judah Messer Leon corresponds directly to that of Cicero and Quintilian, revived by the Italian humanists to uplift the place of rhetoric in relation to the study of philosophy, to strive for that blend of wisdom and eloquence exemplified in the new humanist leader who by his speech and personal example would directly affect the moral fiber of society. This image was in direct opposition to that of medieval Jewish thought, exemplified by the posture of Messer Leon's contemporary, Elijah Delmedigo, and earlier by that of Moses Maimonides. For Averroës and for the entire tradition of medieval Jewish philosophy, rhetoric's status was decidedly inferior to that of demonstrative argumentation. Its function was merely to persuade the multitude, and if used to disclose the esoteric philosophic insights of the elite, it was potentially dangerous, for the masses would then be exposed to ideas corrosive to their simple faith.\textsuperscript{49} Despite their common scholastic backgrounds, Delmedigo apparently objected to Messer Leon's ennoblement of the rhetorical art; he may also have taken exception to similar ideas voiced by Messer Leon's student, Yohanan Alemanno (1433-ca. 1504), for precisely the same reason.\textsuperscript{50}

What is most interesting about Messer Leon's grafting of the Ciceronian ideal onto Judaism is his attempt to portray his new image of leadership as an intrinsic part of Jewish tradition in the first place. The orator is equated with a good and righteous man, one who is "perfect in his character and philosophic notions." The Latin ideal of \textit{vir bonus} is equated with the traditional Jewish ideal of the \textit{Zaddik}\textsuperscript{51} and also appears to be related to another designation of a leader, one that most probably encapsulates the image Messer Leon conceived of himself. This image was that of the \textit{homo universalis}, the \textit{hakham kolel}, the leader who was obliged to lead his community by right of a unique combination of broad and substantive learning together with good character. The prerogative to lead, even to impose his authority on those unwilling to listen to him, articulated so well by his son David,\textsuperscript{52} clearly helps to explain Judah's own career in the Jewish community, his self-righteous and aggressive behavior, and his sense of superiority in dealing with other Jewish leaders.\textsuperscript{53} Projecting the image of the complete Jewish leader in \textit{Sefer Nofet Zufim}, he was also, in a real sense, describing himself.\textsuperscript{54}

As he Judaized the civic orator, so too did he treat the entire field of
rhetoric as conceived by the classical theoreticians. The model of classical oratory was initially conceived not in Greece or Rome but in Israel itself, so he claimed. The novelty of the rhetorical art had been anticipated by the divine Torah:

For when I had studied the Torah in the habitual way, I had not been able to fathom that it embraced that science (of rhetoric) or part of it. Only after I had learned, searched and mastered it [rhetoric] in all its depth from the writings of the Gentiles, could I visualize, when returning to the Holy Scriptures, what they were like. Now the eyes of my understanding were opened and I saw that there was, in fact, a great difference between the pleasantness and elegance of speeches . . . and all this found, in this [genre], among the rest of the nations, the difference resembling that between the “hyssop out of the wall” and “the cedar that is in Lebanon” (1 Kings 5:13).55

If indeed the entire Hebrew Bible, especially its prophetic orations, were the font and exemplar of the rhetorical art, it followed not only that rhetoric was a worthy subject for Jews but also that it was incumbent upon them to appreciate and to master a discipline that had been theirs in the first place. Moreover, the idea that rhetoric had first been perfected by the Hebrews offered to Jews a satisfying reassurance regarding the intrinsic worth of their own cultural legacy. Judaism was not out of fashion with the times; on the contrary, it was avant-garde; it had long ago anticipated every seeming novelty appearing in the cultural world of the non-Jews. The humanist revival of the art of rhetoric thus served to highlight from a previously ignored perspective the unique contribution of Judaism to western civilization.56

The compendium that Messer Leon compiled represented an eclectic selection of the traditional and more recently available classical texts on rhetoric. It was based heavily on Averroës’s middle commentary of Aristotle’s Rhetorica, as well as on the pseudo-Aristotelian Rhetorica ad Alexandrum, but it also included Cicero’s De inventione, the most popular Rhetorica ad Herrenium, Fabius Laurentius Victorinus’s Explanations in rhetoricam M. Tullii, and Quintilian’s Institutio oratoria.57 Notwithstanding the originality of his use of sources, Messer Leon’s mode of presentation characteristically follows that of his other works written in a scholastic mold: a linear commentary establishing one source as the basis of his presentation and an excursus of the basic source working out any difficulties by reference to other sources. He then supplements his theoretical remarks with illustrative material from the Bible
to demonstrate his theory of the biblical origin of rhetoric. By following tenaciously the scholastic method of inquiry and by relying heavily on Averroës on the one hand while invoking the authority of Cicero and Quintilian on the other, Sefer Nofet Zufim uniquely embodies the cultural tension between scholastic and humanistic elements in Messer Leon’s thought.

Notwithstanding its scholastic format, the sheer novelty of the subject and approach of Sefer Nofet Zufim was not lost on its author. Incorporating newly published rhetorical works to substantiate a daring hypothesis of Jewish cultural superiority and consciously deciding to disseminate his work in printed form, Messer Leon creatively and expeditiously responded to an intellectual challenge of his day. Like Delmedigo, Messer Leon, some years later, was fully attuned to the dramatic changes wrought in his cultural world by the invention of the printing press and by the potent authority it was to claim in fashioning intellectual change.

The influence of Sefer Nofet Zufim on Messer Leon’s contemporaries has never been systematically investigated, but it is apparent nevertheless that Judah’s effort served to inspire Jewish humanist interests well into the sixteenth century. Most apparent is the influence Judah had in this discipline on his son, David. David’s humanistic proclivities cannot be fully documented since a number of his writings in this area are lost, but there is no doubt that he was not unlike his father. In his Shevah Nashim, he displays a substantial awareness of the classical sources of rhetoric and poetic theory. He mentions five of Cicero’s works, quotes Quintilian among other classical writers, and even refers to Petrarch’s remarks on love. He mentions that he wrote sermons, ostensibly based on classical theory; but these are no longer extant. Most importantly, he strongly articulates his father’s ideal image of the homo universalis, an image that understandably included mastery of the art of persuasion. And like his father, he absorbed humanistic values without surrendering his scholastic orientation to learning.

Another clear example of Judah Messer Leon’s humanist influence is the case of Abraham ben Mordecai Farissol (1452–ca. 1528), his younger contemporary who apparently made his acquaintance when both of them were living in Mantua in the early 1470s. Judging by the evidence of materials probably used in Farissol’s classroom in the neighboring community of Ferrara, this young Jewish pedagogue introduced to his Jewish students the rudiments of rhetorical theory, which he may have mastered through his contact with Judah Messer Leon and his works. Farissol’s students learned about the qualities of a good speaker and the four Aristotelian causes of an address, while
practicing the proper form of humble apology that opened the exordium of a sermon. Their rhetorical skills were also enhanced by studying a model epistolary collection in Hebrew, at least one of whose letters was penned from the hand of Messer Leon himself. Most likely, under Messer Leon's influence, Farisoller's young students studied elementary grammar and logic, humanistic subjects preferred and upgraded in Messer Leon's other writings, all intimately known to Farisoller as well.

Whether under Judah Messer Leon's direct influence, the significance of rhetorical skills was well appreciated by his Florentine contemporary, Moses ben Yoab, who apparently addressed his congregation in Italian while composing polished Hebrew sermons that displayed a knowledge of classical theory. The importance of elegant style in writing letters is particularly evident in the outstanding collection of model Hebrew epistles assembled by Solomon of Poggibonsi and by numerous other collections assiduously gathered and even printed by Italian Jews well into the next century.

The most outstanding example, however, of Judah Messer Leon's humanistic influence on a contemporary Jew is that of Yohanan Alemanno. Alemanno, who was awarded a doctoral degree after completing his medical studies under Judah Messer Leon's tutelage, apparently was also affected by his mentor in his humanist interests. Alemanno lived in a number of Italian cities throughout the fifteenth century but spent most of the time in the stimulating intellectual environment of Florence and in direct contact with one of its major intellectual figures, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Alemanno's appreciation of the importance of Sefer Nofet Zufim for a Jew well rounded in Jewish and classical sources is attested by the prominent place he assigns the book in his ideal curriculum of Jewish study. More generally, Alemanno shared with his teacher the image of a new Jewish leader, both wise and eloquent, committed to inculcating a large audience of followers through his persuasive rhetoric. In the introduction to his Commentary on the Song of Songs commissioned by Pico himself and entitled Shir ha-Ma'alot le-Shlomo, Alemanno skillfully presents an encomium of virtues in praise of King Solomon, the perfect embodiment of the ideal Jewish leader as perceived to suit the needs of Italian Jewish culture in his day. While the specific dimensions of King Solomon's learning as delineated by Alemanno, particularly in the arcane fields of magic, alchemy, and the like, might have been distasteful to Messer Leon, the general portrait of Solomon as an imposing scholar and orator certainly would have appealed to him. Equally engaging to him would have been the form of Alemanno's composition. Based on rhetorical epideictic discourse, Alemanno created a new genre in Hebrew literature, appropriating the humanist norms of
style, moral exemplification, and communal patriotism in constructing his biography of Solomon. For Alemanno, it was entirely appropriate for a Hebrew writer to produce, in the style of Petrarch’s *De viris illustribus*, a literary work on the exemplary life of an author and king. Moreover, it was not surprising to him that the most worthy exemplar of such a hero should be located in a biblical setting and not in a classical one. Sharing a common perception with his teacher, Judah Messer Leon, Alemanno had no doubt that the classical ideal of sagacity and virtue revived by Italian humanism was more fully personified by the figure of an ancient Hebrew sage than by either a Cicero or a Plato.

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Even more decisive than the impact of scholasticism or humanism on Italian Jewish thought in this period was that of Neoplatonism, associated primarily with Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Out of a mutually stimulating interaction and prolonged study of Jewish texts between Pico and his associates and a number of contemporary Jews, one of the most unusual and obscure currents in the intellectual history of the Renaissance, the Christian kabbalah, emerged. While in the case of both scholasticism and humanism, the interaction between Renaissance and Jewish culture was generally one-sided, whereby Jews were primarily recipients of cultural forms and ideas which they absorbed and appropriated into their own cultural experience, the encounter with Pico and the Neoplatonists was substantially different. The interaction was indeed a mutual one. Jews were certainly affected by the rich and variegated intellectual currents emanating from the Florentine school, but they also had the opportunity in a very real and concrete way to exercise influence on an area of western thought. In a relatively unprecedented manner, Christians actively desired to understand the Jewish religion, its culture, and its texts in order to penetrate more deeply their own spiritual roots. For the first time in the history of western thought, postbiblical Judaism as conceived by Christians was neither negative, irrelevant, nor peripheral to their culture; on the contrary, to a select but influential group of Christian scholars, Judaism had intrinsic worth and represented a significant dimension of the human experience. As one scholar has recently written: “Through Pico’s introduction of Christian Cabbala, a contemporary and modern Jewish movement affected the development of the European mind and soul.” Such a major reevaluation of contemporary Jewish culture by Christians was also to leave a noticeable mark on Jewish thinking and Jewish self-consciousness in the period.

While the beginning of the Christian kabbalistic study in the Renaissance generally has been attributed to Pico, the count of Mirandola
was hardly the first Christian to pursue the study of rabbinic and kabbalistic texts. As Gershom Scholem has pointed out, by the time Pico decided to master Jewish sources, especially kabbalistic ones, he consciously or unconsciously conjoined himself to a long tradition of Christian interpretation of Jewish texts and of the kabbalah originating in Spain in the early fourteenth century. Essentially through the activity of Jewish converts to Christianity, rabbinic homilies and kabbalistic texts had been exhaustively combed for hints of Christian truths that could be used by Christian missionaries and polemists to demonstrate the veracity of their newfound faith and the perversity of Judaism. As earlier Christian disputants had assiduously collected Christian “testimonia” from the Old Testament to legitimate the new Christian faith in opposition to the “stubborn” errors of the Jews, these Spanish apostates extended the approach to include the postbiblical writings of the Jews. The narrative and imaginary character of rabbinic homilies and kabbalistic discourses were particularly susceptible to the new Christian exegesis. Converts like Raymund Martini (1220–1285), Abner of Burgos (ca. 1270–1340), and Pedro de la Cavalleria (fifteenth century) were especially skillful in locating particularly obscure and ambiguous passages in Jewish literature that could be implanted with christological meaning.

By the fifteenth century, these Christian readers of Jewish writings boldly expanded their activity to include the fabrication of newly created homiletic and kabbalistic collections, written in Hebrew and Aramaic, cleverly designed to preserve the same style and outward appearance of authentic Jewish writings. The most notorious of these authors was Paul de Heredia, whose writings reached Italy and were probably known to Pico himself during the time preceding the Spanish Inquisition. But Paul was not the only creator of such materials. Abraham Farissol testified that he had examined in his home in Ferrara a collection of Christian forgeries originating in Spain, similar but not identical to those invented by de Heredia. Such materials were widely used and circulated throughout the sixteenth century in Italy and elsewhere by such well-known converts as Paulus Ricius and Petrus Galantinus and may even have been used by certain church circles as a deliberate tactic in encouraging Jews to approach the baptismal font.

That Pico and his colleagues in Florence shared with these earlier converts a sincere devotion to missionary activity among the Jews need not be doubted, but this fact would not explain in itself their newly discovered passion for unraveling the mysteries of arcane Jewish texts. Pico’s attraction to the kabbalah can best be understood by placing it in the broader context of his intellectual background and philosophical development. While nurtured in the cultural world of Italian humanism,
Pico was more than a humanist; above all he was a metaphysician and a theologian. His philosophy was fashioned through intense encounters with a number of contemporary intellectual movements, which he syncretized in his own unique manner of thinking and which facilitated his entrance into the world of Jewish mysticism. Of decisive importance was his prolonged study of scholastic philosophy in Padua and later in Paris. While in Padua between 1480 and 1482, he attended courses with the leading Averroist of the day, Nicoletto Vernia, and also gained the acquaintance of Elijah Delmedigo, among others, as discussed above. His Paduan studies may eventually have furthered his kabbalistic studies in at least two ways. From the study of Averroës, Pico may already have come to appreciate the existence of a universal core of knowledge available only to a philosophical elite who could decipher a hidden concordance of truth that effectively transcended the seeming differences separating Platonists from Peripatetics, Christians from Jews. More tangibly, Pico’s relationship with Delmedigo clearly opened for him a direct avenue to Jewish learning, beginning with a rich philosophical tradition but leading eventually to an equally fertile mystical legacy.

From an intense exposure to the thought of Marsilio Ficino, the leading Neoplatonist of Florence, Pico gained an even broader perspective in which to place his kabbalistic studies. From Ficino, he derived the vital concept of *prisca theologia*, or ancient theology. This idea, first articulated by Ficino, maintained that a single truth pervades all historical periods. Ficino argued that a direct line of thinking can be traced back to Plato through such pagan writers as Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, Aglaophemus, and Pythagoras. By discovering, translating, and misdating the primary writings of these authors, Ficino came to argue that all of them believed in God, that underlying the external differences between each of them and between their work and the sacred writings of Christians was to be found a unity and harmony of religious insight, a basic core of universal truth. The history of culture was nothing more than the accretions and predilections of particular cultures and traditions, which had surrounded the common nucleus with a tapestry of disparate customs, ideas, and artistic expressions. In this new statement of the universal history of mankind, every philosophy and every religion thus possessed some good. Moreover, there was no longer any clear demarcation between philosophy and religion. The traditional reason–faith problem that had engaged a philosopher like Delmedigo had little relevance to thinkers like Ficino or Pico. For them, the end of philosophy was piety and the contemplation of God, and thus the subject of philosophy could be located simultaneously in an Aristotelian demonstration, an Orphic chant, or a Hebrew commentary. Moreover, their search for
truth constituted a search for the earliest, the most ancient expressions of wisdom from ages supposedly more profound and more spiritually inclined than their own. Their genealogy of knowledge through pagan sources to Plato could eventually lead to an era prior to the Greek master, to the birthplace of all wisdom, that is, to the Hebrew Bible and the Mosaic tradition itself. By universalizing all religious knowledge, Ficino and Pico fashioned an open and more tolerant theology of Christianity; in searching for the source of universal truth in ancient cultural and religious settings distant and alien from their own, they came to appreciate the centrality and priority of Hebrew culture in western civilization.  

While ancient theology led Pico back to the beginnings of Jewish civilization, the concept of poetic theology employed by the Florentine Neoplatonists facilitated his concentration on the kabbalah. For Pico, the ancient pagan religions had concealed their secret truths through a kind of “hieroglyphic” imagery of myths and fables designed to attract the attention of their following while safeguarding their esoteric character by not fully divulging their divine secrets. Thus, in studying the Orphic hymns, Pico wrote: “In this manner, Orpheus interwove the mysteries of his doctrines with the texture of fables and covered them with a poetic veil, in order that anyone reading his hymns would think them to contain nothing but the sheerest tales and trifles.” But so too Moses had addressed the Hebrews with his face veiled and had revealed to the many only what they were capable of understanding. The spiritual understanding of the Mosaic law was available only to an elite within the Jewish people, the kabalists. The wisdom of their literature had not been conceived in the Middle Ages—so thought Pico—but reflected instead the real intentions of Moses himself as conveyed to him by divine revelation. The kabbalah therefore constituted that part of the Jewish tradition in which the essential divine truths could be located. The kabbalah corresponded to both the divine secrets extrapolated from the Orphic hymns by the Neoplatonists and the divine secrets of Christ revealed to St. Paul as understood through the mystical writings of pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (early sixth century). In outward appearance, pagan, Jewish, and Christian theologies appeared to have little in common; but by unraveling their inner cores, an unsuspected affinity could be discerned. For Pico the kabbalah was the key to lay bare the secrets of Judaism, to reconcile them with the mysteries of other religions and cultures, and thus to universalize them. Through kabbalah, the essential differences between Judaism and Christianity could be eradicated: “Taken together, there is absolutely no controversy between ourselves and the Hebrews on any matter, with regard to which they cannot be refuted and gainsaid out of the cabalistic books, so that there will not
even be a corner left in which they may hide themselves.” By extracting from Jewish culture its vibrant and indispensable sparks of divine consciousness as manifest in the kabbalah, Pico made Judaism lifeless and ghostly; it had no rationale to exist in and of itself. It only had meaning in its merger with the esoteric, ageless, and catholic divine truths that were the common possession of all humanity.

The kabbalah for Pico was not merely an individual tile in the universal mosaic of divine mysteries about to be unearthed by the Florentine and his associates; it was in fact for him the central piece around which the other tiles might cluster. The humanist tradition had sensitized Pico to the importance of language and communication in understanding and appreciating the inherent character of any culture, and this feature was precisely what Pico found attractive in the study of kabbalah—its cultivated sense of the meaning of language as a vehicle for penetrating deeply the underlying significance of human experience. For the kabbalists, the words and letters of “the holy language,” if correctly deciphered, could restore a means of direct communication with God himself. The techniques of letter combination (ars combinandi) associated with the school of Abraham Abulafia were particularly fascinating to Pico. Kabbalistic language thus provided him with a unifying principle, a powerful tool for fathoming the harmonious agreement of all cultures and tongues, all corruptions of the veritable divine words once spoken at Sinai.

Kabbalah also represented power for Pico, a means of enhancing man’s ability to control his own destiny, to tap the higher spiritual powers of the cosmos for his benefit and delight. In fusing the kabbalah with the cultures of pagan antiquity, Pico also juxtaposed it with magic, with the traditions associated with the ancient Hermes Trismegistus, whose writings had been recently brought to prominence by Marsilio Ficino. For Pico, kabbalah was more than a spiritual tradition of passive piety or meditation. It was, rather, a higher form of licit magic establishing a direct link between heaven and earth whereby man could capture the divine effluvia in order to transform himself into a divine being. Kabbalah in this active, theurgic sense, when fused with hermetic magic, could help to prove the divinity of Christ. It could also enable man to assert his true nobility and dignity as a true “magus” with divine power.

Pico’s fascination with the kabbalah, and subsequently that of a surprising number of other Christians in later centuries, thus had real meaning in the broader context of his religious quest and syncretistic thought. As for earlier Christians, it was also for him an effective strategy for converting Jews. But it was clearly more than that. It was a natural outgrowth of his scholastic, humanistic, and Neoplatonic studies. He was led to Hebraic culture by his preoccupation with ancient theology.
and to Jewish mysticism by his attraction to poetic theology. And in its refined sense of language, its ubiquitous grasp of human power, it provided Pico and later students of Christian kabbalah a dramatically potent instrument to make sense out of the highly complex and variegated intellectual world in which they lived.95

Pico’s writings that deal with the kabbalah include his commentary on Girolamo Benivieni’s Canzone d’amore and his commentary on the first twenty-seven lines of the Book of Genesis, the Heptaplus. But even more important is the outline of his views as presented in his famous nine hundred theses published in Rome in 1486, written as a manifesto of the perceived unity of all truth.96 Of the nine hundred theses, two parts are specifically concerned with the kabbalah: forty-seven conclusions “according to the Hebrews” and seventy-two kabbalistic conclusions according to Pico’s “own opinion.” In addition, Pico uses the kabbalah in a number of his conclusions regarding other categories of human knowledge. Because of the research of the late Chaim Wirszubski, the precise manner in which kabbalistic thought was joined to Pico’s thought is now more fully understandable.97 Wirszubski, in a number of studies on the kabbalistic conclusions, demonstrated how Pico expanded the use of the kabbalah by Christians in ways never before imagined.

After mastering a kabbalistic idea, Pico could place it in an entirely different intellectual context either by Christianizing it or by relating it to an idea found in Hermetic writings, in a Chaldean oracle, a Zoroastrian statement, an Orphic poem, or a Neoplatonic insight on love.98 An example of the latter is Pico’s understanding of the Neoplatonic concept of the mors osculi, the kiss of death, discussed at length by Pico in his commentary on Benivieni’s Canzone d’amore and later repeated by other Neoplatonists such as Leone Ebreo, Celio Calcagnini, Francesco Giorgio, Egidio of Viterbo, Baldassare Castiglione, and Bruno.99 Ultimately Pico derived this remarkable idea of a spiritual kiss between the lover and the beloved, the union of the soul with its divine source at the moment of the death of the body, from Menachem Recanati’s Commentary on the Pentateuch, translated from the Hebrew by Flavius Mithridates and from an interpolation by the latter in Gersonides’s Commentary on Job. In so doing, Pico uprooted a kabbalistic idea from its source and applied it in an entirely novel fashion to illustrate a Neoplatonic concept.100

But Pico’s innovation in using the kabbalah went even beyond placing a kabbalistic idea he found in Jewish sources into an entirely alien context. For Pico also appropriated the methods of kabbalistic thought, removed them from their original Jewish thought system and applied them to his own thought system, totally unrelated to the ways they had
been employed by Jewish kabbalists. Thus, as Wirszubski so aptly explained, Pico's innovation was not merely to write a Christian commentary on the Jewish kabbalah but also to create a mystical commentary on Christianity based initially on Jewish thought but ultimately becoming a mystical distillation of its own accord. As an example of this second usage of kabbalistic methodology in Pico's thought, Wirszubski offers, among others, Pico's commentary on the first word of the Hebrew Bible, "Bereshit." By demonstrating how the first letter of the word "Bet" (which signifies for the Jewish kabbalists the Sefirah—*hokhmah* [wisdom]) can be related to other Hebrew letters, Pico was able to derive the Christian trinity, relating it as well to the Neoplatonic concept of three basic processes found in the thought of Proclus. By manipulating the number-letter symbolism of the kabbalists for his own purposes and by integrating his findings with a Neoplatonic idea, Pico successfully metamorphosed the Jewish concept into a Christian one. The kabbalist approaches employed by Jews were now estranged from their original cultural and spiritual source in Judaism and instead confronted a new mixture of radically different associations and meanings blended together from pagan and Christian modes of thinking. The Jewish kabbalah, in Pico's hands, was literally recast into a Christian kabbalah.

Understandably, Pico's creative thinking on the kabbalah depended to a great extent on his Jewish teachers. They served him by initially making accessible to him Latin translations of Hebrew works, by offering him personal instruction in Hebrew and Aramaic, by studying with him Jewish ideas as found in a wide array of Jewish exegetical, kabbalistic, and philosophical texts, and by integrating these ideas with concepts familiar to Pico and his associates from the ancient corpus of writings they had enthusiastically studied.

The critical role of Elijah Delmedigo in translating and conveying to Pico aspects of Averroistic thought as well as exposing to him some preliminary kabbalistic notions has already been mentioned. Even more important was the role of a Jewish convert to Christianity, Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada, better known as Flavius Mithridates. This former Sicilian rabbi abandoned Judaism early in his career and was soon noticed by a number of Christian intellectuals, especially Pico himself. After preaching before the pope and his associates in Rome in 1481, he joined Pico and proceeded over the course of the following years to translate for him some forty kabbalistic and other works, still extant in some 3,500 folio pages. This massive undertaking included translations of almost all the major kabbalistic works available to Pico's contemporaries and those which most decisively influenced the course of Pico's thinking. They include Recanati's commentary, the writings of the
thirteenth-century kabbalist Joseph Gikatilia, Abraham Abulafia’s commentary on Maimonides’s *Guide to the Perplexed*, a new translation of the Book of Job systematically employing Gersonides’s commentary on the biblical book as well as Gersonides’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, and Joseph Ibn Waker’s *Sefer ha-Shorashim*, a glossary of kabbalist symbols, to mention only a few. Mithridates’s efforts to make available to the Christian intellectual reading public such a large body of Jewish knowledge constitutes in itself a critical moment in the infiltration of Jewish thought into the Christian world. It clearly corresponds to the earlier efforts of Ficino to translate the large corpus of Hermetic writings previously unknown to the Latin world. Both Ficino’s and Mithridates’s translations constituted major events in the intellectual development of Renaissance Neoplatonism, the former shaping Ficino’s theology, the latter Pico’s.104

But Mithridates, as Chaim Wirszubski has clearly shown from his study of his Roman sermon, functioned in more than the capacity of translator. His *Sermo*, delivered some five years before Pico’s conclusions, already establishes the new trend of utilizing esoteric Jewish ideas to prove the mysteries of the Christian faith. Although Mithridates never mentioned the kabbalah, he spoke instead of an ancient arcane Talmud, a “vetus talmud” containing implicit Christian secrets. Like Pico and unlike earlier Christians who quoted from Jewish sources, he employed ancient Jewish texts not to refute Judaism but rather to verify Christianity. Relying heavily on the earlier work of Raymund Martini, Mithridates consciously fabricated his sources, claiming to deduce dramatic revelations from made-up authorities. Pico probably read Mithridates’s sermon and was apparently impressed by Mithridates’s erudition and by his willingness to exploit his knowledge of Judaism to authenticate the Christian faith.105

Even more substantial were Mithridates’s modifications of the translations he made for Pico. By interpolating passages to reveal a Christian or magical stance, his own way of thinking had a direct impact on Pico’s initial impression of Jewish texts. Thus by a slight interpolation in Joseph Ibn Waker’s kabbalistic glossary, Pico was led to believe that the kabbalah actually hinted at the trinity.106 By relying on Mithridates’s translation of the Book of Job, he came to appreciate the philosophical and astrological conception of the Jewish philosopher Gersonides in understanding the sacred text.107 He learned what he thought was Maimonidean philosophy through Mithridates’s translation of Abraham Abulafia’s commentary on the *Guide to the Perplexed*.108 As Wirszubski has persuasively demonstrated, “Pico formed his view of kabbalah not only because he read them with Christian eyes and preconceived ideas
but also because he read them in translations weighted by interpolations to invite Christian interpretations." Thus the whole character of Pico's kabbalistic thinking was shaped conclusively by a comprehensive exposure to Jewish sources skillfully patterned through the stamp of Flavius Mithridates.

Besides Delmedigo and Mithridates, Pico was directly influenced by another Jewish savant, Yohanan Alemanno, the student of Judah Messer Leon, a doctor and prolific writer who lived in Florence for an extended period of time at the end of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. Aside from Pico, he had personal contact with other Christian intellectuals including Pico's nephew Alberto Pio, Domenico Benivieni, and Paride da Cesara, a distinguished Mantuan humanist and alchemist. His relation to Pico is attested by his own account in the opening of his Song of Solomon's Ascents: "When I came to take shelter in the shadow of this cherub, crowned with divine lights, a prince perfect in knowledge, the Lord, who shields him and his intelligence day and night and is never separated from him, stirred his mouth and tongue to ask me if, in my vain life, I had seen any brilliant light among the commentators on the Song that is Soiomon's... this is my lord, called Count Giovanni della Mirandola." Pico asked Yohanan in 1488 to explain the allegorical sense of the Song of Songs after learning of Yohanan's own study of the biblical work. Yohanan's writing apparently influenced Pico's thoughts on the same subject and probably constituted only a part of an ongoing contact between the two. Alemanno betrays the profound influence of the Florentine ambience in his own writings considerably more than Pico's previous teachers in Judaism. His references to Neoplatonic and hermetic sources and their fusion with Jewish kabbalistic concepts clearly mirror similar efforts on the part of Pico. Because of the similarity of their intellectual systems, it is difficult to determine who stimulated the other. Alemanno's writings have yet to be studied exhaustively, but what is already clear is that he too, in ways more subtle than Mithridates, undoubtedly affected Pico's theological development, most obviously his study of the Song of Songs, during the later years of Pico's life. While there is little doubt how profoundly Pico's thought influenced Alemanno, the latter's impact on his illustrious Christian colleague has yet to be elucidated precisely.

Thus Pico, through the influence of his Jewish teachers and through his own synthetic powers, became the pioneer figure in the gradual penetration of contemporary Jewish thought into fifteenth-century European culture. Pico's Christianization of kabbalistic techniques and his amalgamation of magic and Jewish mysticism, while officially condemned by the church, were enthusiastically received by a notable number of
Christian thinkers in Italy, France, Germany, and England well into the eighteenth century. Christian kabbalah through Pico left its mark on Renaissance culture through its integration with Neoplatonism; it also influenced both the Catholic and the Protestant Reformations through its impact on such thinkers as Egidio of Viterbo, Francesco Giorgio, Cornelius Agrippa, and Johann Reuchlin, to name only a few. Its remarkable persistence as a formative factor in post-Renaissance cultural developments in art, literature, and even scientific thought is only now fully coming to light.114

* * *

Beyond the impact of Pico’s kabbalistic studies on Christian thought is the noticeable effect of such activity on contemporary Jewish culture. That Pico’s syncretism affected deeply the thought of one of his close Jewish associates is fully attested by the writings of Yohanan Alemanno.

During Alemanno’s long sojourn in Florence, he composed a number of significant works that reveal distinctly his involvement with the cultural concerns of Pico and his colleagues. In his two major Hebrew compositions, Hesek Shlomo and Hai Olamin, and in his informative notebook compiled over a number of years, Alemanno occupied himself with themes—the immortality of the soul, the unity of truth, the dignity of man—and with special fields of inquiry—magic and Neoplatonism—that paralleled precisely those of Pico’s intellectual circle. Of particular importance is Alemanno’s coadunation of magic and the kabbalah.115 Alemanno was surely not the first Jewish thinker to introduce discussions of magic into his Hebrew writings; for this endeavor, Alemanno himself found ample precedents in the writings of such fourteenth-century Sephardic Jewish writers as Samuel Zarza, Samuel Ibn Motot, Judah Ibn Malkah, and Joseph Ibn Wakar.116 Neither was the attempt to integrate the kabbalah with another system of thought completely alien to earlier kabbalists in Italy, individuals like Abraham Abulafia, Menahem Recanati, or the author of the Ma’arakhet Ha-Elohat, who had anticipated Alemanno’s integration by already combining philosophical ideas with kabbalistic ones.117 Yet the degree to which Alemanno recast the kabbalah from a magical and Neoplatonic perspective clearly separates him from his predecessors and displays unmistakably the powerful influence of Pico’s thinking.

Like Pico, Alemanno imparted to the kabbalah a new understanding by equating it with a higher form of magic, a method superior to natural magic or to astrology. Kabbalah now constituted much more than speculation on the divine mysteries; it provided human beings with the capability to influence the heavens. Thus Moses was really a kabbalistic
magician, the Torah was ultimately an instrument of magic, and both the tabernacle and the holy temple were in fact instruments for performing magical functions to those who understood their true purpose.

Alemanno’s total commitment to magic and to its legitimation as a distinctly Jewish discipline is made especially evident in an ideal curriculum of Jewish study he drafted, which is found in his notebooks. Alemanno not only supplements a list of traditional philosophical works of his Judeo-Arabic predecessors to include classic kabbalistic and magical sources; he also boldly suggests that magic is the pinnacle of all human knowledge. It marks for him the total spiritual development of the complete man and the height of Jewish spiritual development. Magic is validated as a Jewish discipline because it constitutes the ancient wisdom of Israel as conceived by Solomon. Rather than an artificial grafting of a foreign limb alien to Jewish tradition, the discovery of magic for Alemanno was indeed the restoration of Israel’s rightful inheritance.118

Equally innovative was Alemanno’s use of Neoplatonic sources and integration of them with the kabbalah. As with magic, Alemanno was able to find ample precedents in Jewish tradition for his amalgamation of Judaism with Neoplatonism, beginning with such thinkers as IsaacIsraeli and including especially the Spanish Neoplatonists, Solomon Ibn Gabirol and Abraham Ibn Ezra as well as the later Isaac Ibn Latif (thirteenth century). But Alemanno exceeded all of them in his absorption of Neoplatonism and particularly in his attempt to force the kabbalah into a Neoplatonic mold.119 Thus Alemanno could demonstrate that Plato’s theory of ten ideal numbers as discussed in Aristotle and a similar determination found in the Liber de causis corresponded precisely to the ten Sefirot.120

Alemanno’s magical and Neoplatonic interpretation of Judaism and in particular the kabbalah reveals the way Renaissance culture could profoundly affect the thinking of one Jewish intellectual in close liaison with Pico and his associates. Yet Alemanno was not an isolated case of such obvious stimulation. Ideas similar to those of Alemanno are found in a number of sixteenth-century Italian Jewish thinkers who were even more conversant than Alemanno in magical and Neoplatonic sources. While their influence was eclipsed by the new system of Lurianic kabbalah emanating from Safed by the end of the sixteenth century, their hybrid systems of thought suggest the substantial impression Pico made on at least one group of contemporary Jewish writers.121

These thinkers were not the only Jews affected by the Florentine philosopher. While Pico’s interest in Jewish sources, especially the kabbalah, differed radically from earlier Christians in the multiple ways he used these sources, he still shared with them a traditional Christian
willingness to attract Jews to the baptismal font. This point is certainly suggested by a letter written by Marsilio Ficino to Domenico Benivieni describing a series of disputations at Pico’s home between two Jews, Elijah Delmedigo and another named Abraham, against Flavius Mithridates.122 The prolonged discussions centered not on issues of philosophical import but rather on subjects relating to the traditional polemics debated between Jews and Christians for centuries and still disputed even in the relatively tolerant surroundings of Renaissance Italy by the late fifteenth century.123 Ficino testifies: “They [the Jews] insist that the divine words of the prophets do not refer at all to Jesus but were intended in another sense. They turn them all in a different direction, so far as they are able, wresting them from our hands; nor does it seem that they will be easy to refute unless the divine Plato enters the debate, the invincible defender of the holy religion.” The fact that one of the clear by-products of the close relationships Pico and others in his group had fostered with contemporary Jews was often the conversion of the latter to Christianity can hardly go unnoticed. For Flavius Mithridates was only the most conspicuous of the converts associated with Pico; he was later joined by other Jews who were apparently so attracted to the social and intellectual climate surrounding the Florentine that they too converted: Jews such as Dattilo, one named Clemente, another named Fortuna. Other luminaries of Pico’s circle like Sebastiano Salvini and Santi Pagnini revealed openly their passion to convert Jews. And by the sixteenth century, such converts clearly associated with Christian kabbalist circles were even more noticeable—men like Petrus Galatinus, Emmanuel Tremellius, Sixtus of Siena, and Paulus Ricius. Statements by Abraham Farissol and perhaps Elijah Delmedigo in their fifteenth-century Hebrew writings already may have expressed the later fears of the sixteenth-century Jewish community toward a growing number of proselytes, initially attracted by the warm respect extended to Jews and their rich cultural heritage by enlightened Christians, but who ultimately abandoned Judaism and who, like Mithridates, even defiantly turned against their former religion by attacking the foundations of the Jewish faith.124

By the latter half of the sixteenth century, Jews came to recognize and fear the Christian use of the kabbalah as an effective missionary tactic avidly pursued by a growing number of Christian missionaries, most of them former members of the Jewish community.125 Thus one clear effect of Pico’s theological syncretism on Jewish culture was the successful conversion of a small but conspicuous number of Jews and their eventual involvement in proselytizing activities among their former coreligionists. In this sense, Renaissance culture represented a continuum
of the medieval Jewish-Christian relationship in its undiluted concern
with the conversion and "salvation" of its Jewish minority.

A consideration of the impression Pico and Florentine Neoplaton-
ism made on Italian Jewry would be incomplete without mention of the
most illustrious Jew of the Italian Renaissance, Judah ben Isaac Abrava-
nel, better known as Leone Ebreo (ca. 1460–ca. 1523). Unlike the case
of Alemanno, however, there is no firm evidence that Leone ever visited
Florence or that he ever met Pico before the latter's death in 1494. Yet
without assuming that Leone knew intimately the cultural ambience of
Pico's circle, it becomes most difficult to comprehend the genesis of his
well-known work, the Dialoghi d'amore. More than any other Jewish
work written during the Renaissance, Leone's composition has been
linked to the same literary and intellectual currents associated with the
Florentine school of Ficino and Pico. Exhaustively studied by numerous
scholars and passionately hailed as the most truly representative Jewish
work of Renaissance culture, Leone and his treatise on love still remain
somewhat of a mystery to contemporary scholarship regarding the pecu-
liar background of the author and the extraordinary literary and intel-
lectual sophistication of his final printed work. In view of the seminal
importance of Leone Ebreo to Renaissance culture, how might he be
understood in relation to the other expressions of contemporary Jewish
culture discussed above?

Most studies of the Dialoghi have focused on its relationship with
the Neoplatonic discussions of love initiated in Florence by Ficino and
with the literary genre of the trattati d'amore, of which the Dialoghi has
been considered to be the most distinguished masterpiece. Inspired by
Plato's Symposium and by his Phaedrus, Ficino first formulated a theory
of Platonic love that was widely imitated and expanded upon by other
Italian writers well into the sixteenth century. Ficino spoke of love as a
force common to all existing things, which universally connected the en-
tire world. Driven by a basic restlessness, the lover rises in successive
stages of loving until at last he reaches the boundless love of wisdom,
perceiving the idea of beauty itself by contemplating God.

In the direct tradition launched by Ficino, a large number of love
treatises and prose commentaries on love verses subsequently appeared
in Florence, including Pico's own commentary on Giovanni Benivieni's
Canzone d'amore and elaborate discussions of love by Pietro Bembo,
Francesco Cattani da Diacceto, Mario Equicola, and Castiglione.
Though not identical with any of these works, Leone's work has general-
ly been placed together with them, and considered as the most widely
received work of this genre, the primary source of which was Ficino.
The *Dialoghi d'amore* represents a loosely structured series of three discourses (a fourth is apparently missing), dealing with an encyclopedic variety of questions generally unified by the idea of love. The love between the two participants of the dialogue, Philemon and Sophia, provides the ornamental frame for the three sections, dealing roughly with each of the following subjects: the definition of the essence of love and desire, the broad community of love, and the origins of love in the universe. Because of the complexity of the work, it would be impossible here to summarize Leone's major ideas as articulated by his two characters.\(^{133}\) Yet at least three basic threads of the work need to be mentioned briefly before discussing its significance for Jewish thought of the period.

One of these major motifs is the kinship between love and intelligence, constantly reiterated throughout the dialogues.\(^{134}\) Like Maimonides, Leone maintains that intellectual preparation is necessary to reach man's highest beatitude. The most authentic love is one whose object is the intellect. At the moment of illumination by the agent intellect, man enjoys his most intense felicity, the intellectual vision of God, where a union of love and knowledge is wonderfully realized. This highest act of union Leone characteristically expresses by the sexual term of *copulazione*, the copulation of the human and divine intellect.\(^{135}\) Throughout his work, Leone thus deliberately affirms the identity of rational and religious illumination.

Another of the major themes developed by Leone is the image of the love circle.\(^{136}\) The image constitutes a natural development of the cumulative portrait of love that emerges especially in the last two dialogues. For love is the principle governing the whole universe, the force of interaction and unification between the material, intellectual, and divine worlds. Since love is the omnipresent law of the universe, even God loves his creatures which are inferior to him for the sake of his own self-perfection. When men sin, their sins adversely affect God, and thus, out of an act of pure paternal beneficence, God loves all his beings and is deeply involved in their righteous strivings. Men in turn love what is superior to them, desiring to ascend ultimately to God from whence they came. Through love men increase in perfection and consequently add to the world's perfection by striving to attain their fit position in a harmonious order depicted as a revolving love circle—a circular line from God descending to the first matter and then up again to the conjunction of the human intellect and the divine beauty. In this circular revolution, all beings love not only what is superior to them but also what is inferior to them.\(^{137}\) Thus Leone dramatically conceives of the world as a dynamic organism in which love represents the universal bond that vivifies the
entire universe. Clearly not unnoticed by his Christian readers, God's beneficent love as portrayed by Leone strikingly conforms to the concept of divine grace and Christian charity.\textsuperscript{138} Out of a genuine concern for his creation, God's love is beneficently offered, inspiring the uninterrupted revolution of the circle.

Of special attraction to the \textit{Dialoghi}'s Jewish readers was Leone's employment of Greek and pagan mythology, his depictions of the stories of the pagan deities as allegories that represented poetically to him various levels of truth. Like Pico, Leone's poetic theology allowed him the possibility of finding equivalence between two apparently disparate spiritual traditions. Thus Philone tells Sophia how Plato's view of creation may be harmonized with that of Moses.\textsuperscript{139} The myth of the Androgynes was really what the Book of Genesis had depicted in the figure of Adam. When the first man was created, Adam and Eve were in reality housed in one body, one name "Adam" sufficing to describe their dual character. By creating Eve, God divided the two, thus conforming to the fable related by Plato. By deciphering the essence of the two accounts of creation, Leone was able to penetrate the unitary truth common to both.

Leone's successful effort to syncretize scholastic, Neoplatonic, Jewish, and pagan sources into his dramatic narrative obviously drew from a wide variety of materials available to him during his lifetime. Clearly indebted to Ficino and Pico, the \textit{Symposium}, and some of the Platonic dialogues, he also relied on Islamic sources—Averroës, al-Farabi, Avicenna, al-Ghazzali, and Jewish sources—Maimonides, Ibn Gabirol, and Crescas.\textsuperscript{140} While a precise determination of their influence is yet to be made, he undoubtedly was affected by the writings of his father, on the one hand, and by those of his older contemporary Johanan Alemanno.\textsuperscript{141} But the work he finally achieved was clearly much more than the sum of its composite sources. Its unusual acceptance and popularity among a wide Christian literary audience in Italy, France, Spain, and elsewhere are remarkable in that the author never denied his Jewish ancestry or the superiority of the Mosaic tradition.\textsuperscript{142} Its approval has to be attributed to the sheer quality of the work, its dramatic effect, its tasteful style, its rich speculative content, and apparently because of the deeply religious elements injected into its discussion of Neoplatonic love, which provided it with a broad universal appeal.\textsuperscript{143} The astounding success of the \textit{Dialoghi}, however, hardly helps to explain the unusual circumstances of the work's evolution. In fact, it seems to encumber even more a reasonable explanation of how a Spanish Jewish émigré reared in a scholastic tradition, living for only a short time in a number of southern Italian cities, was capable of producing such a sophisticated and learned work
so different, indeed so alien, to his known background and experience. In short, the work and the author do not neatly fit together at all. How did Judah Abravanel actually become Leone Ebreo?

Already some fifty years ago, Isaiah Sonne, in a number of studies, raised this central problem in understanding Leone and his work.\textsuperscript{144} Focusing on the question of the original language of the \textit{Dialoghi}, Sonne astutely pointed out that Judah remained in the locale of his family throughout his entire life, that he was basically a product of Spanish Jewish culture proudly cultivated by his own family during their entire sojourn on Italian soil, and that his proper social and cultural milieu was never the Italian nor especially the Florentine literary and intellectual world but only a Jewish one circumscribed by the recent colony of Spanish Jews living in Naples, Genoa, Venice, or Ferrara. Sonne thus hypothesized that Leone Ebreo wrote his original work in Hebrew and was introduced in Rome at the end of his life to a Christian literary circle that assisted him in translating the work, albeit in unfinished form, into Italian.\textsuperscript{145} Only in 1535, some years after his death, did this same circle first publish the Italian translation.

In the absence of more concrete evidence regarding the secret prehistory of the \textit{Dialoghi}, Sonne's theory still failed to explain the puzzling dichotomy between the work and its author. More recently Carlo Dionisotti has offered some additional evidence, which at least supplies some small pieces of the puzzle surrounding his life and composition, if not resolving the entire mystery of Leone.\textsuperscript{146} Dionisotti reported the discovery of a manuscript of the third book of the \textit{Dialoghi}, clearly drafted before the first known printed edition, that contained minor variations with more Latinisms but still displayed the sophisticated literary taste of a disciplined oration written in Tuscan Italian. Even more remarkable is a document, first discovered by Roberto Weiss, of a collection of Latin commemorative poems written in Rome in 1522.\textsuperscript{147} At the end of the collection a Hebrew poem appears, apparently written by Leone. If this poem can be attributed definitely to Leone, the document thus establishes his place, toward the end of his life, amid a Roman humanist circle of poets who wrote primarily in Latin on military themes. Despite the fascinating indication of Leone's acceptance within such a group, the enigma regarding Leone still remains. None of the members of this circle appears capable of assisting Leone, let alone composing, in their own right, such a sophisticated Italian work composed in a Tuscan linguistic ambience.\textsuperscript{148} The mystery seems even more pronounced, as Dionisotti observed, for how could such a work, brilliantly crafted in the \textit{volgare}, be written by a virtual stranger to the Italian literary tradition? How
could a Jew like Leone become saturated in Tuscan literary tradition from a relatively brief sojourn, not in Tuscany, but in southern Italy? Where are the traces of linguistic and stylistic travail necessarily accompanying the literary development of a foreigner writing in an alien tongue? The audacious act of composing such a work defies complete understanding on the basis of the extant data regarding Leone’s whereabouts. The secrets surrounding Leone might best be solved, concluded Dionisotti, by Hebrew rather than by Italian scholars.149

Indeed the most promising directions researchers might now follow in exploring the yet unanswered questions surrounding Leone involve a more careful investigation of the potential influence of Leone’s Jewish contemporaries on his intellectual development, particularly his father Isaac Abravanel and the previously mentioned Yohanan Alemanno.150 But barring the possibility of future dramatic discoveries regarding Leone, the most celebrated Jewish writer of Renaissance Italy ironically remains a most elusive figure.

One fact is certain, however, in assessing the significance of Leone Ebreo to Jewish thought in the Renaissance period. Whatever the original language of his composition, Leone’s work was known to both a Christian and a Jewish intellectual world in Italian or Latin.151 The ultimate language of the Dialoghi seems to signal a more substantial feature of the entire work. Even more than Alemanno, Leone seems to accept at face value the ideals and intellectual assumptions inherent in Pico’s dual concepts of ancient theology and poetic theology. Leone, like Pico, believed in a universality of knowledge, upholding a vision of the commonality of all humanity that transcended the particularistic cultures and traditions of world civilizations. Undoubtedly, Leone never denied his Jewish background; he proudly affirms it throughout his work, but it in no way obviates the obvious novelty of his thinking. He wrote for all men, not only for Jews; his message of a universal bond of love was ultimately directed to the widest possible audience, and thus in its final form, the work had to appear in a language accessible to a large number of people. Leone had no cause to negate his Jewish origins in the light of the central role of Judaism in the priscia theologia of human civilization. But despite his Jewish affirmation, it was most appropriate for him to refer as well to pagan myths or even to quote St. John.152 As for Spinoza after him, for Leone Jewish civilization was most relevant when it transcended its own exclusivity, when it became the province of all men and all nations.153 Whether or not Leone personally remained a faithful Jew during his lifetime (and there is no reason to assume he converted), his work demonstrates beyond a doubt the degree to which his intellectual
proclivities and his spiritual temperament extended far beyond the Jewish community.

* * *

Having examined how three major traditions of the Italian Renaissance—scholasticism, humanism, and Neoplatonism—affected Jewish thought by the beginning of the Cinquecento, we might now address again the questions posed at the beginning of this essay. Did the Renaissance exert a decisive influence on Jewish thought? Was there a Jewish Renaissance that paralleled the Italian Renaissance? Despite obvious lacunas of research, some answers to these questions have already been offered by previous historians. In the nineteenth century, the historian Heinrich Graetz found in the enlightened Jewish culture of the Renaissance period a model worthy of emulation for contemporary Jews still fettered, so he thought, in the bonds of obscurantism and medieval fanaticism.154 Jewish culture and thought in the Renaissance period has been similarly regarded by twentieth-century Jewish historians as a positive change in the reception by traditional Jews of external secular forms of culture.155 Sharing a perspective of traditional Judaism that was predominantly east European Ashkenazic, often narrow, and generally intolerant to cultural change or pluralism, these more secularly inclined historians were clearly enamored of the Italian Jewish environment that offered them a refreshingly different case study of a traditional Jewish society more open and more receptive to cultural change than that which they had intimately known. In holding up a single monolithic concept of Jewish traditional society and by generally approaching Renaissance culture from a superficial and overly romantic perspective mainly derived from Burckhardt, their idealized portrait of Jewish culture in the Renaissance was imprecise, unbalanced, and highly apologetic. By maintaining a fundamental opposition between a traditional Jewish culture, antirationalistic and unreceptive to external culture, and an open, rational, tolerant Renaissance culture, they tended to distort the nature of Jewish culture in its medieval setting as well as the heterogeneous character of Renaissance civilization.156 The history of Jewish culture was often reduced to a treatment of the supposed tension between the core and the shell, the original essence and its external borrowings, the Volksgeist versus the Zeitgeist.157

More recently, a number of younger scholars have attempted to view this period from a different perspective than that of the scheme of rationalism versus antirationalism. Robert Bonfil has attempted to shift the emphasis from focusing on external influences in Jewish culture to what he calls an internal Jewish development. Instead of concentrating
exclusively on the dramatic yet often superficial ways in which every contemporary fad or modish philosophy affected the life-style of Jews, this historian would prefer to examine Jewish culture from an inwardly directed perspective in which every change or development in Jewish culture need not be reduced facilely to external influences. While advocating this revision, he also offers his own definition of Jewish culture in the Renaissance. For him, Jews primarily responded to the cultural world of their contemporaries by reasserting their own national consciousness, their own sense of uniqueness and cultural superiority, a feeling reinforced by the newly awakened interest in Judaism on the part of their Christian contemporaries.\footnote{158}

Another approach, recently put forward by Arthur Lesley, has even taken exception to posing the general question of how Renaissance culture influenced the Jews. In its place, it substitutes what is considered to be a more manageable and realistic way of understanding the period, using primarily the tools of contemporary literary history. This emphasis shifts from the wider history of culture to Hebrew literary activity, to the norms shared by Italian-Latin and Hebrew literature of the period and to the question of whether a humanistic movement among Jews existed in this era.\footnote{159}

On the basis of the evidence explored in this chapter, it would appear to me that any broad characterization of Jewish culture or thought in the Renaissance period would still be premature.\footnote{160} Yet some initial impression of this cultural experience seems appropriate on the basis of the areas treated above and in response to the reconstructions of this epoch presented by others. It does appear legitimate to me to ask how Italian culture in all its multiple dimensions influenced Jewish intellectual activity, with the proviso that in asking the question one approaches it without a subjective or distorted view of the nature of either Jewish or Renaissance culture. To focus exclusively on internal Jewish development seems both ambiguous and misleading in placing undue emphasis on organic developments at the expense of external factors. It seems to deny arbitrarily the complex and subtle ways in which Jewish thought was shaped in any period by interaction with its majority culture.\footnote{161} The question of whether there existed a Jewish humanist movement is certainly a worthy one to ask. But it cannot be substituted for the broader question of how to understand the symbiotic relationship between the Jewish and Christian cultures in the Renaissance. The Renaissance was more than its humanist movement, and similarly Italian Jewish thought of the period was shaped by much more than humanistic concerns, as this essay has demonstrated.\footnote{162}

How then might one characterize the development of Jewish
thought at the end of the fifteenth century in the context of the Italian Renaissance? On the basis of the limited evidence discussed above, it appears misleading to speak of a Jewish Renaissance in the same way one might speak of the Renaissance in western civilization. Jewish thought was not radically transformed in the same way the thought of the majority culture seemed to be affected—there was no major cultural shift, no rebirth, and certainly no new vision of mankind. The Renaissance appears to carry less significance for the history of Jewish thought than it does for that of general culture.

Nevertheless, if one is not entitled to speak of a Jewish Renaissance, one might legitimately speak of a real impact of Renaissance culture on Jewish cultural processes and thought. The evidence considered in this essay underscores a cultural efflorescence among certain Jews stimulated and eagerly responsive to the external environment in which they lived. Whatever the ultimate impact of Renaissance culture on their own Jewish identities, some of them, at least, now talked about Judaism in entirely novel terms and expressed themselves in a new cultural idiom. The language of Renaissance Jewish culture was now enlarged and enriched to include references to Greek and pagan mythology; it revealed a preoccupation with the elegances of proper style in oral and written communication, as well as an increasing tendency to draw from a wide array of pagan and Christian, classical and contemporary sources when writing about Jewish matters for either a Christian or a Jewish audience. The most clearly discernible difference between Jewish writing at the end of the fifteenth century and that of previous centuries is the relative change in the universe of discourse—new terms of reference, new literary sources, new ideas, and new modes of self-expression.

Of all the major traditions of Renaissance culture that affected contemporary Jewish thought, Pico's syncretistic philosophy and Renaissance Neoplatonism may well have constituted the most intense and most significant interaction between the two cultures. Especially in this area, Jews made the greatest impression on contemporary Christians, while Christians in turn left a lasting mark on Jewish thought. The importance of Pico to Renaissance Jewish culture seems to lie primarily in the novel challenge he posed to the continuity of Jewish national existence. He introduced Jews for the first time to the image of a universal cultural experience transcending either Christianity in its present form or Judaism. He argued for a new cultural world in which all separatisms would be obliterated, and the best of every nation and culture, including Judaism, would be fused into a universal human spirit. With Pico and with Renaissance culture in general, Jews entered for the first time into a new dialogue with the western world. Jewish–Christian polemical and
apologetic thinking in the Middle Ages had generally been restricted to
demonstrations of the superiority of one faith over the other. By the end
of the fifteenth century, however, the conditions of the Jewish–Christian
dialogue seem to have been altered substantially. Pico no longer simply
juxtaposes a superior Christian faith to an inferior Jewish one. He argues
instead that a human cultural experience consisting of the best of all
previous religious and national cultures was infinitely superior to Jewish
culture. Though still clothed in Christian guise, Pico’s cultural image
uniquely adumbrated for Jews the chasm between their own national
aspirations and their growing desire to participate in and belong to a
larger family of humanity. How much richer and more meaningful would
the Jewish heritage become, so Pico argued, if the walls of separation
between Jew and Christian could now be broken down, whereby the
essence of Jewish culture would then be shared by all mankind? What
greater appeal could Pico offer to enlightened Jews than the promise of
mutuality in place of separatism, of spiritual concord among all men
instead of hatred and divisiveness? In a real sense, Pico’s religious syncre-
tism had ushered in a new dimension to Jewish–Christian relations, one
that would become a dominant factor in challenging the viability and
justification of Jewish particularity in the modern western world. And
Pico’s philosophy constituted only a part of the new cultural challenge
that the Renaissance as a whole presented to Jews. Not only the Chris-
tian kabbalah, but certainly humanism in general, ultimately threatened
Jewish culture in a similar way. For it too juxtaposed a cultural experi-
cence open to all mankind, transcending the seemingly irreconcilable dif-
fences between peoples and religious faiths.\(^{163}\) One need not deny the
deep Christian coloring of Renaissance culture by emphasizing this dom-
inant image of a new universal human experience open to Jews and
Christians. Christians still preoccupied themselves with converting Jews,
as they had done for centuries before, but the specific character of their
dialogue with Jews was different—more subtle, more intellectually stim-
ulating, and ultimately more persuasive.

In this context of a new universal image of human experience, Jews
were pressed to respond creatively to a dramatically new intellectual and
spiritual challenge. Clearly, one major way to justify themselves and their
own distinctiveness was to evoke a renewed image of the superiority of
Jewish culture, to emphasize, as Judah Messer Leon had done, the origi-
nal role and centrality of Judaism in western culture.\(^{164}\) The bold image
of Plato and Aristotle having learned from Jeremiah or Moses seemed as
convincing a rationalization as any that Jewish culture still played a ma-
jor role in the history of mankind. Whether such assertions signified an
expression of vigor and self-confidence or of weakness and insecurity is
not always easy to determine. Did Messer Leon actually believe that by labeling rhetoric an originally Jewish discipline it was indeed so, or were later sixteenth-century Jews who used similar apologetic clichès of Jewish superiority equally convinced of their claims? The contemporary historian in reading such statements cannot readily decipher the psychological attitude—whether confidence or insecurity—accompanying their writing.\textsuperscript{165} What is clear, however, is that the constant need to evoke such myths of Jewish superiority might in fact signal a clear manifestation of spiritual crisis inherent in the recognition that everything of value need not be found only in Judaism and that a Jew might be enticed to look elsewhere to satisfy his own spiritual and cultural appetites.

Thus, ideological statements regarding Jewish superiority were only one way of coping with the new challenge posed by Renaissance culture. Clearly another response was conversion, as advocated by Flavius Mithridates and other former Jews intimately involved in the new Christianity of Pico and his associates. And between the two extremes, of reasserting Jewish specificity or of surrendering totally any Jewish affiliation, lay a wide array of other responses. One could affirm his Jewishness like Leone Ebreo, while speaking in the idiom and within the conceptual framework of the new universalism. Or one could remain solidly within Jewish culture by expanding the character of Judaism to include magic, Neoplatonism, and the \textit{prisca theologia}, as Yohanan Alemanno had done. In this case, remaining a Jew at least implied the recognition of the relative value of other cultural experiences and the need to reexamine Judaism in their light. All of these approaches adopted by Italian Jews in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had been partially anticipated before their time.\textsuperscript{166} The novelty of their cultural world did not necessarily lie in the responses they fashioned in understanding themselves in relation to their majority culture. It lay rather in the particular way in which the majority culture now addressed its Jewish minority. By defining the matrix of Jewish intellectual activity in a Renaissance environment as primarily a set of responses to the new universal image of mankind projected by the Renaissance, it may be easier to grasp the dynamic cultural setting of Jews living in Italy at the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth. Moreover, it might also suggest the underlying significance of this age for Jewish history and thought in subsequent centuries. Earlier students of this period have seen in Renaissance Jewish culture the seeds of modern Jewish consciousness—an intellectual world increasingly secular, rational, and less traditional, and an age already prefiguring for Jews the world of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and beyond. The limitations of their perspective have already been pointed out. Yet perhaps this understanding of Jewish Renaissance culture is cor-
rect in at least one respect: the Italian Renaissance did offer certain Jews a preview of the intellectual and cultural challenges their descendants would face with growing regularity and intensity in the modern world. In sensing a greater urgency to justify their own particularity before an intellectual community increasingly ecumenical and cosmopolitan in spirit if not in practice, Renaissance Jews had entered the modern age.

NOTES

The following is a list of books and articles for the reader seeking a broad introduction to the subject of this essay. General studies of Jewish civilization in Renaissance Italy include: C. Roth, The Jews in the Renaissance (New York, 1959); M. A. Shulvass, The Jews in the World of the Renaissance (Leiden, 1973); I. Zinberg, A History of Jewish Literature, ed. and trans. B. Martin (Cincinnati, OH, 1974), vol. 4; and R. Bonfil, Ha-Rabbanan be-Italyah bi-Tekufat ha-Renesance (The Rabbinate in Italy in the Period of the Renaissance) (Jerusalem, 1979). This book is to be published in English in the Littman Library of Jewish Civilization by Oxford University Press. The first three are limited by their particular biases toward the nature of Jewish traditional culture on the one hand, and their idealized vision of Renaissance culture on the other. Bonfil’s work, which purports to be an institutional history of the rabbinate, is in fact a more expansive social and cultural history of Italian Jewry in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For a portrait of one Jewish intellectual living in Renaissance Italy, see my The World of a Renaissance Jew: The Life and Thought of Abraham ben Mordecai Farissol (Cincinnati, OH, 1981). A recent book of essays dealing with sixteenth-century Jewish thought, including a number of studies related to the Renaissance, is Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century, ed. B. Cooperman (Cambridge, MA, 1983). S. W. Baron, in A Social and Religious History of the Jews (New York, 1969), devotes a large part of volume 13 to Jewish life in Renaissance Italy.


2. Some of the earlier studies include Roth, Jews in the Renaissance; Shulvass, Jews in the World of the Renaissance; Baron, Social and Religious History, 13:159–205; Zinberg, History of Jewish Literature; and, more recently, Bonfil, Ha-Rabbanut, esp. chap. 6, which focuses more on sixteenth-century developments.

3. Compare, for example, the recent volume, Jewish Thought, where the Renaissance is a part of but not the central focus of the volume.

4. See J. Sermoneta’s comments in this regard on I. Barzilay’s Between Faith and Reason: Anti-Rationalism in Italian Jewish Thought, 1250–1650 (The Hague and Paris, 1967), which he reviews in Kiryat Sefer 45 (1970): 539–46 (Hebrew). It should be added, however, that in the past fifteen years since Sermoneta made these comments, a considerable amount of new work has appeared, primarily from scholars in Israel and the United States. Much of this work is mentioned in the notes that follow.

5. Since this essay focuses on certain aspects of Italian Jewish thought substantially influenced by the Italian Renaissance, it obviously ignores other di-
mensions of Jewish thought, such as that shaped by the uninterrupted study of rabbinic texts, still a primary expression of Jewish culture in this period. Rabbinic culture in this period is discussed by Bonfil in *Ha-Rabbahut*. On the evolution of Jewish thought and culture in earlier periods, particularly in Christian Spain and Provence, see the earlier volumes of S. W. Baron’s *Social and Religious History*. See also *Jewish Society Through the Ages*, ed. H. H. Ben Sasson and S. Ettinger (New York, 1971), especially the essays by Twersky, Ben Sasson, and Beinart; Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews of Christian Spain*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1961–66). A more comprehensive treatment of Jewish culture, including such areas as music, art, science, and literature, is beyond the scope of this essay. Also lacking is a consideration of more popular expressions of Jewish culture and of the extent to which the writings of a Jewish intellectual elite are representative of other segments of Jewish society. Understandably, all of these areas need to be fully integrated with the subject matter of this essay before a history of Jewish culture in this period can be written.

Some additional remarks should also be made about the parameters of this essay. It deals primarily with Italian Jewish thought in the second half of the fifteenth century. However, the impact of certain Renaissance trends on Italian Jewry extends well into the sixteenth and even into the early seventeenth century. It is anomalous that Leon Modena, the Venetian rabbi of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, is often referred to as a typical Renaissance rabbi! There exists no complete synthesis of Jewish thought in this later period, but the following recent works should be noted: Bonfil, *Ha-Rabbahut*, esp. the final chapter; idem, “Change in Cultural Patterns of Jewish Society in Crisis: The Case of Italian Jewry at the Close of the Sixteenth Century,” in *The Transformation of Jewish Society in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, forthcoming; idem, “Cultura e mistica a Venezia nel ’500,” in *Gli ebrei e Venezia*, ed. G. Cozzi (Milan, 1987), 469–509, 543–48. M. Idel, “Major Currents in Italian Kabbalah Between 1560–1660,” *Italia Judaica* 2 (1986); idem, “Particularism and Universalism in Kabbalah 1480–1650,” in *The Transformation of Jewish Society in the 16th and 17th Centuries*, forthcoming; idem, “Differing Perceptions of the Kabbalah in the Early Seventeenth Century,” in *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. I. Twersky and B. Septimus (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 137–200.

In addition to this temporal limitation, there is a spatial one. Italy, especially at the end of the fifteenth century, was a temporary haven for Spanish Jews and Conversos fleeing the Iberian peninsula in search of religious freedom. Some of these immigrants remained; many others moved on to Turkey, Israel, and elsewhere. In this sense, Italian Jewish culture should be viewed as a part of a larger Jewish civilization throughout the Mediterranean basin. For the purposes of this essay, however, the subject of immigrants and temporary residents is not treated, with the outstanding exception of Judah Abravanel and, to a lesser extent, his father, Don Isaac.

It should be obvious from the above that in writing this essay, I have
selected themes and individual authors (some of whose literary output extends into the early sixteenth century) who most clearly exemplify the most interesting interactions between Renaissance and Jewish thought, and the consideration of whom allow some initial observations about the character of such interactions. Needless to say, such a choice is somewhat arbitrary, reflecting the personal interests and proclivities of the author.

6. For the social and economic background of Jewish life during the Italian Renaissance, see the works of Roth, Jews in the Renaissance, Shulvass, Jews in the World of the Renaissance, and Bonfil, Ha-Rabbanut. See also A. Milano, Storia degli ebrei in Italia (Turin, 1963). The social setting of one Jewish intellectual in this period is treated in Ruderman, World of a Renaissance Jew.


12. On earlier Jewish translators, see Roth, Jews in the Renaissance, 64–85; A. Ivry, “Remnants of Jewish Averoism in the Renaissance,” in Jewish
Thought, 243–45. A complete list of Delmedigo’s translations is found in Geffen, “Insights,” 85–86.


16. MS Paris heb. 968, fol. 3a, trans. in Geffen, “Faith and Reason,” 256.

17. Printed three times: Basel, 1629; Vienna, 1833; and most recently Tel Aviv, 1984, ed. J. J. Ross.


20. See the references cited in n. 13, above.


23. Behinat ha-Dat (Vienna, 1833), 38, 43, 45, 47, 53, 58, and passim; M. Mortara, “Expurgated Passages in the Printed Sefer Behinat ha-Dat” (Hebrew), Ogar tov (Hebrew supplement to Magazin für die Wissenschaft des Judenthums) 1 (1878): 082–084. These passages are discussed at length in Ruderman, World of a Renaissance Jew, chap. 4. See also Ross, Introduction to the Bebinat ha-Dat, 25ff.


26. On his exceptional arrogance, see his remark quoted by Carpi, “R. Judah Messer Leon,” 293. On Messer Leon’s disputes with his contemporaries, see M. A. Shulvass, “The Disputes of Messer Leon with His Contemporaries and His Attempts to Exert His Authority on the Jews of Italy” (Hebrew), *Zion* 12 (1947): 17–23; and Bonfil, introduction to *Sefer Nofet Zufim*, 1ff.

27. Bonfil, introduction to *Sefer Nofet Zufim*, 7ff.


30. See below, and Bonfil, *Sefer Nofet Zufim*, introduction, 11ff., who compares this scholastic approach with that pursued in the Ashkenazic academies of rabbinic learning of northern Italy.


34. Ibid., 119ff.


38. Rothschild, “Philosophy of... Messer David Leon,” chap. 7.

39. Ibid., esp. 300–305.

40. Yet note the parallel of their views regarding Kabbalah and Plato referred to in n. 37, above; and their antagonism to the philosophy of Gersonides: compare Judah’s view in Husik, Judah Messer Leon’s Commentary, 93ff., and Asaf, “From the Hidden Treasures,” 226–27, with David’s view in Ein ha-Koreh, published by P. Perreau in Hebraische Bibliographie 8 (1865): 64–65, and in Tehilah le-David (Constantinople, 1567), 79a, 80a, 80b, chaps. 19 and 22.

41. Rothschild, “Philosophy of... Messer David Leon,” esp. chaps. 7–8.

42. Rothschild’s view of David ben Judah as a transitional figure between the crisis and subsequent decline of scholastic philosophy and the rise of kabbalah (“Philosophy of... Messer David Leon,” 301ff.) is clearly indebted to R. Bonfil’s view of sixteenth-century Jewish thought (Ha-Rabbanut, chap. 6). Bonfil similarly describes Judah Messer Leon’s thinking (introduction to Sefer Nofet Zufim, 5) in the context of a supposed beginning of a “crisis” in scholastic philosophy. I consider both characterizations somewhat misleading, for scholasticism in both Judah’s and David’s times had not yet experienced a major crisis or decline. Both figures fit well into the heterogeneous intellectual climate of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian scholasticism. The hybrid character of their thought, instead of being indicative of declining scholastic influence, might also suggest the continued vitality and openness of Aristotelianism among Italian Jewish thinkers well into the sixteenth century.

43. See Sefer Nofet Zufim and the English trans. by Rabinowitz.

44. J. J. Murphy, Rhetoric in the Middle Ages (Berkeley, 1974), 359.


49. Ibid., 3–4.
52. See below, n. 62.
54. See Book of the Honeycomb’s Flow, 35: “the most effective speakers in all generations have been morally sound and good men: lands are called after their names (Ps. 49:12). . . . It is impossible for a speaker to succeed in persuading with even the most wholly persuasive of words unless both his mouth and his heart be whole.”
55. Ibid., 145 (I have used Altmann’s translation of the passage, 13).
56. See Altmann’s perceptive comments in this regard (“Ars Rhetorica”), 8, 13, especially on the potential seeds of secularism in Messer Leon’s approach to seeing Scripture as great literature. See also Bonfil, introduction to Sefer Nofet Zufim, 13–15, and his citation of similar approaches by other Italian Jews in his “Expressions of the Uniqueness of the Jewish People During the Period of the Renaissance” (Hebrew), Sinai 76 (1975): 36–46.
57. Messer Leon’s sources are discussed by Bonfil, introduction to Sefer Nofet Zufim, 10–22; Altmann, “Ars Rhetorica,” 6–7; Book of the Honeycomb’s Flow, liv ff.; and much earlier by N. Brüll, L. Löw, and M. Steinschneider (full references in Bonfil, 23, n. 83).
58. Bonfil, introduction to Sefer Nofet Zufim, 10–12.
62. David Messer Leon, Kevod Hakhamim (Berlin, 1899; reprinted Jerusalem, 1970), 54, 65; and see Bonfil, introduction to Sefer Nofet Zufim, 4; and Ha-Rabbani, 41–42.
64. U. Cassuto, Un rabbino fiorentino del secolo XV (Florence, 1908).


68. Idel, “Study Program.”


71. Ibid., 72.

72. Of course, a scholar like Delmedigo exerted some influence on the thinking of his Christian associates, including Pico, through his interpretations of Averroës, but his influence as a teacher of Jewish learning was relatively less significant than such figures as Mithridates and Alemanno, considered below.


77. On Paul, see A. Freimann, “Paulus de Heredia als Verfasser der kabbalis-


79. See above, n. 72, and below, n. 125.


81. Ibid., 58–64.


Recently, W. Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Symbol of His Age* (Geneva, 1981), has questioned some conventional notions about Pico’s philosophy, specifically his supposed universalism, his involvement in ancient theology, and his use of the kabbalah as a general hermeneutic. Craven instead claims that Pico only dabbled briefly in ancient theology and saw in kabbalah only a Christian apologetic resource for use against the Jews (see esp. 98, 107, 111, 125, 129). I cannot here refute Craven’s challenging assessment of the overall picture of Pico presented by Kristeller, Garin, Wind, Yates, and others, one generally followed in this essay. Suffice it to say that Craven displays only a superficial awareness of Pico’s knowledge and creative use of the kabbalah and has read little of the recent scholarship summarized in this essay. (He mentions only F. Secret as his major source on the subject, 4.) Because of this deficiency, it seems premature to conclude, as he does, that the study of Pico’s kabbalistic sources has had little effect on the general interpretations of his philosophy (3–4).


92. Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 95–96; and see the studies of Wirszubski discussed below.


95. Bouwsma, “Postel,” 266.

96. On the theses, see the works of Wirszubski cited in n. 97, below.

97. Wirszubski, *Sheloshah Perakim*; idem, *Mekkubal Nozri*. The major points of these works, as well as those of Wirszubski’s studies of Mithridates (see below), are succinctly described by M. Idel, “Two Books on Christian Kabbalah of Professor Chaim Wirszubski” (Hebrew), *Eshkolot* n.s. 4 (11) (n.d.): 98–103. Wirszubski’s book-length manuscript on Pico, finished before his death, will soon be published by Harvard University Press.


110. On Alemano, see the works of Idel, Novak, and Lesley mentioned above in notes 50, 67, 69, and 73.
116. On these thinkers, see G. Vajda, Recherches sur la philosophie et la kabbale dans la pensée juive du Moyen Âge (Paris, 1962); idem, Juda ben Nissim ibn Malka, philosophe juif marocain (Paris, 1954); idem, “Recherches sur
la synthèse philosophico-kabbalistique de Samuel ibn Motot," Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge 27 (1960): 29–63; and Idel, "Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations."

117. Idel, "Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations," 188–91; idem, "Major Currents in Italian Kabbalah"; and articles cited above, n. 35.


120. Ibid., 221–24.


122. Marsilio Ficino, Opera omnia (Basel, 1576), 1:873. The letter is discussed at length in Ruderman, World of a Renaissance Jew, chap. 4.

123. On earlier Jewish–Christian debates in fifteenth-century Italy, see Ruderman, World of a Renaissance Jew, chaps. 5–7, and the bibliography presented there.

124. This is my thesis in World of a Renaissance Jew, chap. 4. Craven, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, 98, understands Pico’s use of the kabbalah in a similar fashion as a "God-sent apologetical weapon for use against the Jews."

125. I. Sonne, "The Place of Kabbalah as a Means of Incitement of the Church in the Seventeenth Century" (Hebrew), Bizzano 36 (1957): 7–12, 57–66; K. Stow, Catholic Thought and Papal Jewry Policy 1555–1593 (New York, 1977); Idel, "Differing Conceptions of Kabbalah."

126. Bibliography on Leone is quite extensive. Besides the works cited below, some of the earlier studies include B. Zimmels, Leo Hebreus, ein judischer Philosoph der Renaissance (Breslau, 1886); idem, Leone Hebreo: Neue Studien (Vienna, 1892); H. Pfalma, Die Idee der Liebe, Leone Ebreo (Tübingen, 1926); C. Gebhard’s edition and massive study, Leone Ebreo: Dialoghi d’amore (Heidelberg, 1924); G. Saitta, "La filosofia di Leone Ebreo," in Storici antichi e moderni (Venice, 1928). See, more recently, S. Damiens, Amour et intellect chez Léon l’Hébreu (Toulouse, 1971); the new Hebrew edition of the Dialoghi translated and edited by M. Dorman, entitled Yehudah Abravanel, Sihot al ha-Ahavah (Jerusalem, 1983), and the critical review by A. Lesley in Renaissance Quarterly 38 (1985): 145–48; the Hebrew collection of essays entitled The Philosophy of Love of Leone Ebreo (Hebrew), ed. M. Dorman and Z. Levy (Haifa, 1985); and Lesley, "Place of the Dialoghi d’amore."

127. This point is persuasively argued by I. Sonne, Intorno alla vita di Leone Ebreo (Florence, 1934), who discounts the testimony of Amatus Lusitanus.

128. So argued in Roth, Jews in the Renaissance, 131.

129. For example, see Pfalma, Idee der Liebe, 145; J. Guttmann, Philosophies of Judaism (Garden City, NY, 1966), 294.


133. An excellent summary of the work is provided by Perry, Erotic Spirituality, chap. 1.

134. This topic is discussed thoroughly by Damiens, Amour et intellect.


138. Ibid., 154; Damiens, Amour et intellect, 179.

139. Leone Ebreo, Philosophy of Love, 345ff.


142. This fact is emphasized by J. Klausner, “Don Judah Abravanel and His Philosophy of Love” (Hebrew), Tarbiz 3 (1931): 67-98. See Idel, “Kabbalah and Ancient Theology,” and Lesley, “Place of the Dialoghi d’amore.”


145. Sonne, “On the Question,” 147-48, where he refers to a letter of Tolomei Claudio (1543), which suggests that the work was translated into Italian from the original, “in lengua sua.” Lesley, in “Place of the Dialoghi
"d'amore," also argues in favor of Hebrew as the original language of the work.

148. Ibid., 428.
149. Ibid., 419ff.
150. See n. 141, above.
151. On the knowledge of Leone's work among Christians, see Pflaum, Idee der Liebe, 149–54; Dorman, introduction, 96ff.; among Jews, see Sonne, "Traces of the Dialoghi d'amore."

152. He quotes St. John in Philosophy of Love, 330. My emphasis here is somewhat different from that of Moshe Idel in his recent essay on Isaac and Judah Abravanel and their respective attitudes toward ancient theology. Idel maintains that both father and son polemiced with the Christian view of ancient theology. Unlike their Christian counterparts, who acknowledged two "independent" paths to universal truth, that of paganism and Christianity, they claimed that there was only one path to the truth, which came exclusively from Jewish revelation. They had little interest in ancient pagan writers, with the exception of Plato, who was made a student of Jeremiah and the Hebrew prophets and thus "Judaized" in their hands. By subordinating Plato to Jewish revelation, Judah and Isaac only allowed ancient theology to infiltrate Judaism to the extent that it served to promote their notion of Jewish superiority. Idel thus views the Dialoghi not as a work of universal truth but as a Jewish polemic against the claims of Pico and ancient theology as understood by contemporary Christians. See also a similar view in his "Kabalah, Platonism, and Prisca Theologia: The Case of R. Menashe b. Israel," in a forthcoming volume devoted to the thought of Menasseh ben Israel; and Lesley, "Place of the Dialoghe d'amore," which also emphasizes the Jewish "apologetic" tendency in the Dialoghi.

To my mind, Idel somewhat distorts the view of ancient theology as understood by Ficino, Pico, and other contemporary Christians. Instead of allowing pagan philosophy a totally independent status, they also subordinated it to the truth of their own religious heritage in precisely the same manner as that of the Jews. (Lesley puts it this way in "Place of the Dialoghe d'amore": "If the Florentines could turn pagan myths into secret avowals of Christian truth, if they christened pagan myths, Abravanel would circumcise them.") They also utilized the myth that Plato had learned from Jeremiah, as Idel admits, and they claimed that the truths of pagan philosophy came from a single fountain, which was the Mosaic revelation and which led ultimately to their own Christian religion. (See the summaries by Schmitt and Walker of ancient theology, above, n. 83.) Furthermore, Idel exaggerates the polemical quality of Leone's work. No doubt, Judah affirmed the superiority of the Jewish faith as the font of all pagan and Christian truth, but he expressed this affirmation in a veiled and subtle manner. If his work had been conceived as a polemic with Christianity,
Christians would not have read it with such great interest and delight. Idel may be right in detecting a vindictive and victorious tone in the Dialoghi, but it was so faint that it went unnoticed and unappreciated by its large readership. More striking to the latter was its universal and human message. 153. On the potential influence of Leone on Spinoza, see E. Solmi, Benedetto Spinoza e Leone Ebreo (Modena, 1903); Damiens, Amour et intellect, 174ff. However, H. A. Wolfson, The Philosophy of Spinoza, 2 vols. (Cleveland and New York, 1958), 2:277, discounts any relationship between the two. He contends that any common passages are no more than “philosophic commonplaces.”


157. My formulation here is indebted to an unpublished manuscript by Arthur Lesley.

158. In his recent essay, “Historian’s Perception of the Jews,” for example, Bonfil writes of “shifting our focus from stressing imitation or even adaptation to non-Jewish values and standards, whatever they may have been, to internal Jewish wrestling with the problem of maintaining the validity of Jewish cultural uniqueness while confronted with changing non-Jewish values and standards” (80). See his Ha-Rabbanan and “Expressions of the Uniqueness,” as well as his two recent essays on Italian Jewish culture in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, “Change in Cultural Patterns” and “Cultura e mistica,” where he continues to refine his earlier position. See also my review of Bonfil’s book in Association for Jewish Studies Newsletter 26 (1980): 9–11.

159. See Lesley’s essays mentioned above, n. 69, esp. his “Jewish Adaptation of Humanist Concepts.” See also his “Recovery of the Ancients in Sixteenth-Century Italy,” paper delivered at the Association for Jewish Studies, 17 December 1985. He is preparing a forthcoming book entitled All the Wisdom of Solomon: The Jewish Humanist Movement in Italy, 1450–1600.

160. I should stress again that any full characterization of Jewish culture in the Renaissance period must take into account the more complex developments of the sixteenth century, where some “Renaissance” trends persisted in Jewish intellectual life, despite the increasing isolation and ghettoization of the Italian Jewish community. See above, n. 5, especially Bonfil’s “Change in Cultural Patterns,” where this “paradox” is discussed.

161. See my review of Bonfil’s book, cited above, n. 158. I should add that Bonfil’s latest formulation of his approach, “Historian’s Perception of the Jews,” appears more balanced and less ambiguous than his earlier ones. See also
Lesley's gentle critique of Bonfil in "Hebrew Humanism in Italy" and in his "Recovery of the Ancients."

162. One additional question for Lesley concerns his use of the term "Jewish humanist movement." Is it legitimate to characterize the intellectual proclivities of a small handful of Jewish writers—primarily Messer Leon and Alemanno—as a movement, the cultural or political program of which could claim a sizable following within the Jewish community?


164. See Bonfil, "Expressions of the Uniqueness"; Idel, "Kabbalah and Ancient Theology"; Lesley, "Recovery of the Ancients."

165. Thus Bonfil's assertion that Messer Leon's vigorous statement of Jewish rhetorical supremacy in the fifteenth century expressed vigor and self-confidence, while Judah Moscato's sixteenth-century comments on Jewish supremacy in music reflected weakness and spiritual decline, appears unwarranted to me. See R. Bonfil, "Some Reflections on the Place of Azariah de Rossi's Me'or Enayim in the Cultural Milieu of Italian Renaissance Jewry," in Jewish Thought, ed. Cooperman, 34.

166. It is instructive in this regard to compare the style and subsequent audience of Solomon Ibn Gabirol's Mekor Hayyim (Fons vitae) with that of Leone's Dialoghi.
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