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The Cultural Significance of the Ghetto in Jewish History

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Abstract

Surely one way of understanding the title of our distinguished conference, "From Ghetto to Emancipation," is the conventional way.² One might assume that the direction of our deliberations should lead from an inherently bad condition, designated by the term "ghetto," to a good one, leading to a desirable state of freedom. This trajectory follows that of most standard accounts of the Jewish experience: Jews who had lived a "ghettotized" existence were finally "emancipated" in the modern era, and despite the negative consequences of their liberation and integration within Western secular cultures—virulent anti-Semitism and genocide—their emancipated state was surely a boon in comparison with the hermetically sealed and alienated existence of their preliberated state. And indeed, for most modern Jews, the term "ghetto" is laden with similar negative connotations. Such expressions as "the age of the ghetto," "ghetto mentality," "ghetto Jew," "out of the ghetto," all imply a highly negative existence, a throwback to an era when Jews were legally and socially restricted and when their culture revealed narrow and pedestrian features, clearly the result of their sequestration. The term "ghetto" has now assumed an even more general designation for neighborhoods densely inhabited by members of minority groups, such as African-Americans or Native Americans, who are forced to live in miserable and deprived conditions because of socioeconomic restraints as well as legal ones.³

Disciplines

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

Comments

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THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GHETTO IN JEWISH HISTORY¹

David B. Ruderman

Surely one way of understanding the title of our distinguished conference, “From Ghetto to Emancipation,” is the conventional way.² One might assume that the direction of our deliberations should lead from an inherently bad condition, designated by the term “ghetto,” to a good one, leading to a desirable state of freedom. This trajectory follows that of most standard accounts of the Jewish experience: Jews who had lived a “ghettoized” existence were finally “emancipated” in the modern era, and despite the negative consequences of their liberation and integration within Western secular cultures—virulent anti-Semitism and genocide—their emancipated state was surely a boon in comparison with the hermetically sealed and alienated existence of their preliberated state. And indeed, for most modern Jews, the term “ghetto” is laden with similar negative connotations. Such expressions as “the age of ghetto,” “ghetto mentality,” “ghetto Jew,” “out of the ghetto,” all imply a highly negative existence, a throwback to an era when Jews were legally and socially restricted and when their culture revealed narrow and pedestrian features, clearly the result of their sequestration. The term “ghetto” has now assumed an even more general designation for neighborhoods densely inhabited by members of minority groups, such as African-Americans or Native Americans, who are forced to live in miserable and deprived conditions because of socioeconomic restraints as well as legal ones.³

I would like to discuss the “ghetto” in its historical context in this short essay based on recent scholarship on the subject, which obliges us to reassess its cultural significance for the history of early modern Jewry. This reevaluation, in turn, might shed new light on the notion of ghettoization within a contemporary Jewish context. In short, was the

ghetto good or bad for the Jews and the perpetuation of Jewish culture, and what might we learn from the example of the past, if anything, in reflecting upon contemporary Jewish dilemmas?

Although the word "ghetto" was probably first employed to describe a compulsory residential quarter for Jews in Venice established in 1516 on the site of a foundry (*getto*), the "age of the ghetto" in Italy is usually dated some forty years later. In those years, the Jews of the Papal States, together with those in the rest of the Italian peninsula, experienced a radical deterioration in their legal status and physical state due to a new aggressive policy instituted by Pope Paul IV and his successors. Italian Jews suddenly encountered a major offensive against their communities and ancestral heritage. In 1553, tomes of the Talmud were collected in each community and incinerated. In 1555, a ghetto was established in Rome, and the Roman example was gradually emulated in city after city throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. By 1569, the Papal States expelled their entire Jewish population with the exception of the communities in Ancona and Rome. The new papal offensive included renewed conversionary activities, especially compulsory appearances by Christian preachers in synagogues and the establishment of transition houses for new converts designed to facilitate large-scale conversion to Christianity. Whether motivated primarily by the need to fortify Christian hegemony against all dissidents, or driven by a renewed missionary zeal for immediate conversion spurred by apocalyptic frenzy, the papacy acted resolutely to undermine the religious life and communal autonomy of those Jews living in the heart of western Christendom.⁴

The centerpiece of the new policy was the ghetto itself, defined simply by Benjamin Ravid as "a compulsory segregated Jewish quarter in which all Jews were required to live and in which no Christians were allowed to live."⁵ While Ravid points out that compulsory, segregated, and enclosed Jewish quarters had occasionally existed in Europe prior to the founding of the Venetian one in 1516, this was the first time that the term was used to designate the newly imposed Jewish neighborhoods, and the term continued to gain currency throughout the century. As Kenneth Stow has written, the notion of the ghetto fit perfectly into the overall policy of the new Counter-Reformation papacy. Through enclosure and segregation, the Catholic community was to be shielded most effectively from Jewish contamination. Since Jews could be more easily supervised within a closed quarter, the intense conversionary pressure would prove to be more effective while strict canon law segregating Jews from Christians could be rigidly enforced.

When the ghetto in Rome was enlarged in 1589, Jews even began to refer to it as their *ghet*, possibly ascribing a Hebrew etymology to the Italian term (the Hebrew *get*, meaning divorce). As Stow speculates, the Jews now innately felt that their “divorce” was final, that they were fated to live in a permanent state of subservience and separation from the rest of Christian society.⁶

From the perspective of the standard historical accounts of Italian Jewry, the age of the ghetto stood in sharp contrast to the period that had immediately preceded it, the Renaissance. From the thirteenth century, individual Jews were attracted to settle in the small city-states of northern and central Italy, usually as moneylenders. A small number of them soon became prominent as the economic mainstays of the fledgling Jewish communities in the region and the primary source of communal leadership. These Jewish bankers supported the cultural activities of the Jewish communities in a manner not unlike those of privileged patrons of Christian culture. By the second half of the fifteenth century, recurrent signs of organized Jewish communal activity became more visible. In the same era, immigrants from Germany and southern France joined the original native Italian element in settling these regions. The 1492 expulsion of the Jews from Spain resulted in a new influx of Sephardic Jews, who arrived in Italy as early as 1493. The infusion of larger numbers of Jews into these regions sometimes evoked hostile reactions from elements of the local populace, often fomented by Franciscan preachers who railed incessantly against the insidious effects of Jewish money lending. But this hostility was also counterbalanced by the relatively benign relations that existed between certain Jewish and Christian intellectuals in Italy at the height of the Renaissance and long after. As oft-repeated in the colorful narratives of Cecil Roth, Attilio Milano, or Moses Avigdor Shulvass, a small but conspicuous community of enlightened Jews frequented the courts of Renaissance despots and interacted socially and intellectually with their Christian counterparts. The new openness of the Renaissance created novel opportunities for Jewish-Christian rapprochement, for the infusion of new aesthetic sensibilities among Jewish savants, and for new avenues of Jewish literary creativity and pedagogic reform. Yet despite these new possibilities, the policies of the Counter-Reformation papacy brought to an abrupt end the accomplishments the Renaissance had wrought. The incipient transformations of the Renaissance era were swept away by the new religious zealots. A relatively open society was soon replaced by the closure of the ghetto space. Cultural interaction was cut short by the

newly erected walls separating the Jewish from the Christian neighborhoods. And the Jews ultimately had no other recourse than to retreat into their increasingly parochial and stifling ghetto environments.⁷

A recent treatment of the Venetian ghetto by sociologist Richard Sennett continues to view the ghetto experience, in contrast to that of the Renaissance, in similar ways. In a chapter entitled "The Fear of Touching," the author views the ghetto as a kind of urban condom, isolating the Jewish diseases that had infected the Christian community in a prophylactic space. Since Jews were considered synonymous with corrupting bodily vices, sealed barriers separating the impure from the pure were deemed the only means of preserving the spiritual and physical health of the Christian body politic. Sennett does note, however, the irony that Jews did make much out of their very segregation; their ghettos became centers of pride and honor, despite the unpleasant conditions of their imprisonment. This positive sense of self-determination seemingly shaped by the ghetto experience stands in sharp contrast to the more modern "ghettos" tainted with shame and failure. In noting the paradox of feeling good about oneself in a space of degradation, Sennett points in the direction of the rethinking about the ghetto in recent Jewish scholarship, a contradiction already alluded to by Cecil Roth many years earlier.⁸ We shall return to the "paradox" of ghetto life below, but before reconsidering the conventional view, I offer four discrete scenes of ghetto life that might serve as a basis for our discussion and analysis of the ghetto experience in Italy, particularly at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries. By offering concrete glimpses of the culture of the Jewish ghettos, I hope to probe more deeply the paradox which Roth and Sennett noticed and to try and explain it.

In 1638, a distinguished rabbi named Simone Luzzatto, of the ghetto of Venice, composed an apologetic work in Italian and submitted it to the Doge and citizenry of Venice, petitioning them to withdraw a proposal to banish the Jews from living in the city. In a powerful, rhetorical style, studded with quotations from classical writers, Luzzatto gave voice to the sense of entitlement the Jews felt in inhabiting their urban spaces. By the time Luzzatto composed his *Discorso circa il stato gl'Hebrei*, the initial space of the ghetto had grown dramatically in size holding three distinct Jewish populations: the *Tedeschi*, Ashkenazic Jews who had migrated from north-central Europe; the *Levantini*, Jews of Sephardic origin who most recently had entered the Venetian territories from the East via the Ottoman Empire; and the *Ponentini*,

recent Converso émigrés from Spain and Portugal who had returned or were candidates for return to the Jewish community and its faith. In the name of all three groups, Luzzatto underscored the political loyalty of Venice's Jewish subjects, the openness and attractiveness of their culture within a Catholic society such as Venice's, and most importantly, the critical commercial role Jews played in the economic life of Venetians which would be severely compromised by their expulsion. Although Jews had written apologetic defenses of their community and faith before Luzzatto's, his work was surely original in its design and its manifest aim; to influence the court of public opinion by demanding the Jewish right to domicile for both ethical reasons and for those related to economic and political policy.⁹

Several years earlier, in 1624, the most illustrious rabbi of Venice, Leone Modena, a close associate of the aforementioned Luzzatto, organized a major celebration in honor of the graduation of his accomplished student Joseph Hamiz, who had just received his medical diploma from the prestigious University of Padua. Taking full advantage of the printing press to publicize his message, as Luzzatto had done, Modena solicited and received numerous congratulatory poems and other messages of commendation in honor of the achievement of his brilliant protégé. This was not the first nor the last time Jewish medical graduates were honored in such a manner. But due to the prestige of Modena and those who added their names and poetic contributions to the pamphlet Modena produced, Hamiz's graduation party represented a special moment of self-adulation for a community which took great pride in its Jewish physicians, particularly those like Hamiz who integrated their medical with traditional rabbinic learning. The prestige and authority of a university degree often assured an enhanced status to an increasing number of rabbis of the Italian ghettos both among Jews and Christians alike. Unanticipated by Modena in his moment of celebration and satisfaction was Hamiz's seemingly bizarre and clearly controversial choice some years later: to abandon his life course of rationalism and science for one fueled by the spiritual energy of the kabbalah and the messianic frenzy surrounding the figure of Shabbetai Zevi. Modena could never understand, in the final analysis, why his most prized student had deserted his teacher's path to "dwell in the garden" of mystical fantasies and apocalyptic delusions. But, in 1624, Modena had no inkling about this strange course of events. Jewish students like Hamiz were entering the university in impressive numbers and they were competing with Christian students successfully, fortifying Jewish

intellectual life and enhancing the image of the Jewish communities to which they returned.¹⁰

Some years earlier, Leone Modena initiated a different but related project to enhance the positive image of Judaism within the Venetian ghetto. He recruited his talented friend, Salamone de' Rossi, to compose music to Hebrew texts, introducing for the first time polyphonic choral performances within the synagogue service. By so doing, Modena was eager to fuse Jewish cultural habits with those of the larger Catholic society. As Dan Harrán has shown, the music was simply a genus, an aesthetic experience neither Jewish nor Christian in itself. Synagogal music became Jewish only when Jewish texts were employed. Not the style of the music but its purpose was critical in legitimating its usage within the sacred space of the synagogue and within the sacred time of Jewish worship. To soften any expected criticism of this audacious transformation of the aesthetics of the traditional worship service, Modena composed a rabbinical responsum arguing that the novelties being introduced were both appropriate and spiritually worthwhile from the perspective of hallowed Jewish practice. Upholding the model of musical innovation in the ancient Biblical Temple and downplaying the break with traditional norms of mournfulness employed since the Temple's destruction, Modena could only imagine the positive benefits that appropriating the artistry of so talented a composer to amplify the spiritual power the synagogue service would convey to its congregation of worshippers.¹¹

In stark contrast to the scenes of cultural integration exemplified by Jewish political writing, university graduation, and polyphonic synagogue music, is the following portrait of the ambience of a ghetto. At about the same time that de' Rossi was introducing his new music into the synagogue, a kabbalist of the neighboring ghetto of Modena was implementing an innovation of far different consequences. Irritated by the longstanding frivolity and lack of moderation associated with the festivities on the night preceding the ritual circumcision, the rabbi set out to spoil a good time. In a way similar to the Catholic clergy of the Post-Tridentine Church, as Elliott Horowitz has pointed out, Aaron Berachia attempted to tone down a popular celebration by sacralizing it. In place of the frequently rowdy and obstreperous celebration, which often lasted throughout the night, the rabbi introduced the reading of the classic kabbalistic text, the *Zohar*, as the centerpiece of the festivity. This quickly transformed the joyous event into a somber occasion. By insisting on the priority of studying texts over the customary social

intermingling, he succeeded, as well, in curbing female participation. And by demanding that the rite be performed by members of a ritual confraternity, he insured that only the spiritually pure and ritually fit would participate in the first place. In one sweeping declaration, the rabbi of Modena had recast a popular, secular, and undisciplined social gathering, into an elitist, solemn, structured, and deeply religious occasion. And, of course, the women stayed home.¹²

What do these four disparate scenes have in common? How might their interpretation actually lead to a more nuanced understanding of the cultural ambience of the ghetto for Jews living in the Italian cities of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? What can they tell us, if anything, about the contemporary meaning of ghetto and ghettoization in the Jewish experience?

For historian Robert Bonfil, the starting point for reevaluating the ghetto period is to acknowledge that it constitutes a kind of paradox in defining the nature of Jewish life and in defining the relations between Jews and Christians in Italy.¹³ No doubt Jews confined to a heavily congested area surrounded by a wall shutting them off from the rest of the city, except for entrances bolted at night, were subjected to considerably more misery, impoverishment, and humiliation than before. And clearly, the result of ghettoization was the erosion of ongoing liaisons between the two communities, including intellectual ones. Nevertheless, as Benjamin Ravid has noticed, "the establishment of ghettos did not lead to the breaking off of Jewish contacts with the outside world on any level, much to the consternation of church and state alike."¹⁴ Moreover, the ghetto provided Jews with a clearly defined place within Christian society. In other words, despite the obvious negative implications of ghettoization, there was also a positive side: the Jews were granted a legal and natural residence within the economy of Christian space. The difference between being expelled and being ghettoized is the difference between having no right to live in Christian society and that of becoming an organic albeit inferior and often beleaguered part of that society. In this sense, the ghetto with all of its negative associations could also connote a change for the better, a formal acknowledgment by Christian society, revolutionary from the perspective of previous Jewish-Christian relations, that Jews did belong in some way to their extended community.

Bonfil extends this analysis in arguing that the shift to the ghetto also constituted a radical shift in Jewish mentality. During the Renaissance, he argues, Jewish society was marked by constant

migratory movement and was made up of widely scattered, miniscule, and vulnerable Jewish settlements. In this earlier period, in contrast to that of the ghetto, Jewish life was exceptionally precarious; Jews constantly felt the need to justify their continued existence before despots and democratic communes alike. They were subjected to the ugly face of Renaissance culture: Franciscan vituperations, crowd violence, even blood libels. They were merely tolerated because they offered a palliative to the poor through their money lending, performing, in Bonfil's dramatic simile, like prostitutes, a useful but despised service. Given the stark reality of Renaissance life, the high culture of the Renaissance and its new styles of thinking had little impact on Jewish cultural consciousness. Yet, with the ghettoization of Jewish life, some decades later, the patterns of Jewish culture and society were noticeably transformed. Jews were now more urbanized, more concentrated in the heart of the largest Italian cities, more polarized both economically and socially, more attuned to the sights and sounds of the Christian majority, and more secure in their new neighborhoods, despite the squalor and congestion. In the ghetto communities, Bonfil points out, the kabbalah, the mystical traditions of Judaism, performed the paradoxical function of mediating between medievalism and modernity, restructuring religious notions of space and time, separating the sacred from the secular, even serving as "an anchor in the stormy seas aroused by the collapse of medieval systems of thought," and simultaneously, "an agent of modernity." In exerting a wider impact on Jewish society through the public sermon and more popular moralistic writing, in encouraging revisions and additions to Jewish liturgy, in proposing alternative times and places for Jewish prayer and study, and in stimulating the proliferation of religious confraternities and their extra-synagogal activities, the kabbalah, in the era of the ghetto, deeply affected the way Italian Jews related both to the religious and secular spheres of their lives. In fact, the growing demarcation of the two spheres, a clear mark of the modern era, constituted the most profound change engendered by the new spirituality.¹⁵

Religious polarization was also accompanied by social and economic polarization. In the new urban settings, the poor became poorer while the rich became richer. And whereas the affluent had the time and leisure to pursue cultural and artistic pursuits, the knowledge of Hebrew and traditional texts among the poor conspicuously deteriorated. While rabbis complained about the loss of Hebraic literacy among the children of the ghetto, Jewish intellectuals wrote Hebrew

essays, sermons, drama, and poetry using standard Baroque literary conventions. They composed complex synagogal music, as we have already seen, produced artistically elaborate synagogue interiors, ritual objects, and marriage contracts. And despite the insufferable ghetto for many, some Jews, obviously the most comfortable and most privileged, seemed to prefer their present status, as Bonfil points out.¹⁶

Bonfil's revisionist perspective has not yet been fully absorbed by contemporary historiography.¹⁷ His major contribution is, no doubt, in perceiving the ghetto experience as more decisive than the Renaissance in restructuring Jewish identity. But one might still raise questions about his emphatic emphasis on the sharp rupture and discontinuity engendered by the ghetto. Did the Renaissance have no significance at all, even upon a small group of Jewish intellectuals, in the shaping of a novel and even modern Jewish cultural experience? Might one appreciate, nevertheless, certain lines of continuity between the earlier and later periods? And how might one describe the process of Jewish cultural transformation during the ghetto period? Bonfil, especially in his most recent formulation, eschews the language of influence and acculturation in defining the Jewish stance toward the majority Catholic culture, and adopts instead the more ambiguous notion of becoming aware of the Self through a "specular reflection of the Other."¹⁸ Bonfil defines his history as one "seen from the inside," the point of view of the Jewish minority, in opposition to previous approaches that define the history of Jewish culture exclusively in terms of difference to or opposition between the Christian majority and its Jewish minority, whether minimizing or maximizing it. Bonfil maintains that these earlier approaches were responsible for the distorted picture discussed above, of seeing the Renaissance as a period of intense Jewish assimilation of the values and lifestyle of the Christian majority followed by an abrupt closure and involution of Jewish culture engendered by the ghetto system. Bonfil's "insider" perspective thus seeks to correct the distortion so as to allow the historian to place great historical significance, in terms of the formation of Jewish culture, on the ghetto period rather than the Renaissance. Leaving aside for the moment the intricacies of Bonfil's debate with the earlier historians of Italian Jewish culture, let us now return to the four scenes presented above and, following Bonfil's lead, try to interpret them in the light of his bold hypothesis, thus testing its validity, and perhaps in the process, refining it a bit more.

Simone Luzzatto's self-confidence in addressing the Doge and

citizenry of Venice is surely the most dramatic example of what Mark Cohen has called “incipient Jewish attempts to reorient the Christian attitudes toward the Jews”¹⁹ that emerged in the seventeenth century, and which include those by David de Pomis,²⁰ Leone Modena,²¹ and Menasseh ben Israel.²² Bonfil would surely see as paradoxical the fact that this project of influencing public opinion emerged from the ghetto. He would argue that the distancing of the ghetto actually created a proximity and new-found understanding of the other. These first steps toward presenting a rehabilitated image of the Jew before the eyes of the non-Jewish world, a kind of “anti-defamation” literature written in European languages and later translated into others, constitute a product of a modern secularism or political activism. It is rooted in an incipient psychological security stemming from the ghetto environment itself. The ghetto, in confirming the Jews’ right to reside within Christian society and to belong to it, was ultimately a critical factor in providing that modicum of self-assurance that encouraged Luzzatto and the others to take pen in hand in order to demonstrate the benefits Jews offered their Christian neighbors. Luzzatto’s pro-Catholic loyalties, also reflected in the writing of his Italian contemporary Modena and of Judah del Bene,²³ may have made good political sense; it might also suggest their enhanced sense of belonging to Catholic society in Italy and a deep-seated identification with its political and economic fate. As a proud citizen of the ghetto of Venice, Luzzatto believed he had every right to demand that his fellow citizens acknowledge the legal residence of Jews in their city, an entitlement the creators of the ghetto had assured.

The graduation party of Joseph Hamiz reveals another face of the ghetto ambience, its openness to scientific and medical learning. The ghetto walls could not filter out the new scientific discourse that marked the seventeenth century, the age of Galileo, Vesalius, Bacon, and Descartes. When the gates of their locked neighborhood opened at the crack of dawn, young Jewish students were on their way to the great medical schools of Italy, especially Padua. While great scientific advances often took place outside the universities, the latter still remained exciting intellectual centers, where original research was fostered and pursued, where students were regularly exposed to the latest scientific thinking even within the curricular framework of seemingly outdated medical and scientific textbooks.²⁴ For Jews, the encounter with the university was momentous in opening them to new vistas of knowledge, new languages, new social relationships, and even new values. The communities that sent them to study were energized by their

return. The graduates often maintained social and intellectual relationships with each other long after graduation. More than ever before, particularly in Italy, Jewish communities were led by men who creatively fused their medical and rabbinic expertise.

The new ascendancy of the rabbi-doctor in the Italian ghetto was also the result of an emerging intellectual style marking the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the cultural ambience of the ghetto, the old synthesis between Aristotelian philosophy and Jewish revelation had been dethroned. While the old philosophy, which had arrogantly claimed to fathom the secrets of the Divine and His creation, was perceived as threatening to religious faith, the new empirical study of nature was seen as complementary and even inspirational to the faithful. With philosophy discredited within the Jewish community and disassociated from the sciences, even the most pious students of the kabbalah could appreciate the spiritual resources nature offered them. Hamiz's later infatuation with Jewish mysticism and his attempt to link it with his medical and scientific background were not so anomalous within the culture of the ghetto as they might first appear. In fact, the links between nature and spirituality were not an uncommon occurrence among Catholics as well. The growing number of rabbis flaunting their medical diplomas before their students and congregations shared a remarkable kinship with a community of Jesuit clerics, enthusiasts of science in their own right, who similarly proclaimed the majesty of God's creation before their own communities in neighborhoods just beyond the ghetto walls.²⁵

Modena's recruitment of Salamone de' Rossi to compose and perform choral music in a synagogue leads us to another dimension of the ghetto ambience, not unrelated to the political and cultural apologetics of Luzzatto nor to the medical and scientific involvements of Hamiz. In all three cases, the political writer, the physician, and the composer were engaged in acts of cultural mediation between Christian and Jewish cultures, between the secular and the religious, between the old and the new. In the case of de' Rossi's music, as Dan Harrán has argued,²⁶ the effort was one of harmonizing differences, and again, paradoxically, of bringing Jewish and Christian cultural sensibilities under one roof in the most Jewish place of all, the synagogue. The new polyphony bespoke an awareness that what Christians think about Jews is important to the latter. Reorienting the fallacious assumptions of Christians about Judaism through an apologetic treatise was one strategy of cultural integration. Another was to transform the synagogue from an

unfamiliar and offensive “cacophony of discordant sounds”²⁷ into a harmony of perfectly blended voices attuned to Christian ears, or at least to Jewish ones displaying a budding appreciation of Christian sensibility.

Since, from the point of view of Jewish law, only the words and the intention, not the music, should matter, the external medium could be legitimately aligned to the accepted tastes of the larger environment. Medium could never be confused with the message. And if one were to bring the music of the church into the synagogue, it had to be done in a restrained, understated, and ambiguous way, as Harrán has pointed out. The remarkable collaboration of Modena and de’Rossi in remaking the image of the synagogue through the music of the Baroque Church was not merely an audacious act, not merely a form of accommodation with the outside world, but also an integral part of that restructuring of the Jewish cultural and religious experience that the architects of the ghetto unwittingly had set in motion.

The striking cultural similarities between Jews and Christians of the Italian cities were not limited to expression of political loyalty, the study of nature and medicine, or even musical taste. As Elliott Horowitz has shown regarding the final scene presented above,²⁸ the Jewish religious leadership that transformed the popular celebration on the evening preceding a ritual circumcision into a subdued mystical ceremony of study and prayer, was acting in precisely the same way as the Counter-Reformation Catholic clergy. They attempted to regulate the behavior of the masses by directing their ritual and spiritual lives. They accomplished their goal by demarcating the boundaries of the sacred and the profane, by separating the sexes, and by underscoring the confraternity’s central role in the ceremony to the exclusion of other willing participants. Whether or not the Jewish leaders were aware that their behavior appeared to resemble that of their Christian counterparts, it would be hard to deny that they conformed predictably and reflexively to a larger pattern associated with the Catholic Counter-Reformation.

The final scene returns us finally to Bonfil’s provocative reconstruction of the culture of the ghetto. It underscores, along with the others, Bonfil’s strong conclusion regarding the decisive force of the ghetto environment in restructuring ritual and liturgical norms and cultural tastes. At the same time, the four scenes point to the primary cause of these transformations. Instead of becoming more inner-directed, more independent or defiant of the norms of the majority, a greater number of Jews living in close proximity to their Christian neighbors absorbed more readily patterns of thought and behavior

stemming from the Christian society that surrounded them. Their synagogues became more cathedral-like; their wedding feasts, their iconography, their entertainment, their liturgical music, their confraternal piety, their intellectual and political tastes all reflected those of the world they shared with the Christian majority. The Christian planners of the ghetto had conceived these enclosed neighborhoods as a means of leading Jews to the baptismal font. While a small number of Jews were enticed to convert, the overwhelming majority remained firmly anchored in their ancestral traditions. But in ways unbeknown to either the Christian leadership or their degraded Jewish subjects, they did succeed in remaking the Jews into a community more like them than they ever had imagined.

In a setting such as this conference, where our conversations lead us ultimately to consider the contemporary setting of the Jewish community and its challenges, it is tempting to reflect upon the ghetto experience in terms of present realities. Of course, such exercises in learning “the lessons of the past” are usually misleading and inaccurate when drawing simplistic analogies between the social and cultural world of such divergent settings as Baroque Italy and the United States at the end of the twentieth century. The “ghettos” of America, whether Jewish or otherwise, bear little resemblance to the reality we have described above. Nevertheless, we can at least rethink our image of ghettos, particularly the notion that they inevitably lead to cultural isolation and stifling parochialism. The Italian ghetto was hardly an ideal living arrangement for its Jewish inhabitants but it did provide them with two critical ingredients that ensured their survival and creativity over a long period of time: a sense of Jewish space where Jews retained a vital feeling of group solidarity and cultural autonomy; and, at the same time, a constant and intense cultural negotiation and dialogue with the outside world. The notion of open ghettos, balancing the intensity of group living with constant conversation and interaction with the larger non-Jewish society, seems to offer a paradigm worthy of some consideration in addressing contemporary dilemmas. No one would dare suggest that the horrendous conditions that created and shaped the Italian ghettos are analogous in any way to present circumstances. Nevertheless, that appealing side of their ambience should be appreciated by more than those professional students of the historical past. When understood in their complex historical settings, the Italian ghettos offer a striking blueprint of how Jewish communities survived and sometimes flourished in an often hostile and debilitating environment. In our own era, one of relative

freedom and tranquility, their legacy might even provide at least some clue as to how the Jewish community might conceive of itself in facing the still formidable challenge of creative survival at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

NOTES

1. The following represents a written version of oral comments presented informally before an audience of academics and nonacademics at the University of Scranton on March 26, 1995. I have purposely retained the informality and nonacademic quality of this presentation and also have kept my annotation to a minimum. Although presented in a different format and for a different audience, this talk draws substantially from the introduction to my edited anthology entitled *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy* (New York, 1992) and from my forthcoming review of Robert Bonfil's *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1994) to appear in a future issue of *Renaissance Quarterly*.
2. This was not, however, the understanding of the organizer of the conference, David Myers, who opened our session by reference to the more nuanced view of Salo W. Baron in his classic essay: "Ghetto and Emancipation," *Menorah Journal* 14 (1928), 515–26.
3. This is succinctly discussed by Benjamin Ravid in his "From Geographical Realia or Historiographical Symbol: The Odyssey of the Word Ghetto," in *Essential Papers*, 373–85.
4. On these developments, see especially K. Stow, *Catholic Thought and Papal Jewry Policy* (New York, 1977); Idem., "The Burning of the Talmud in 1553 in the Light of Sixteenth Century Catholic Attitudes toward the Talmud," *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et Renaissance* 34 (1972), 435–59; D. Carpi, "The Expulsion of the Jews from the Papal States During the Time of Pope Pius V and the Inquisitional Trials against the Jews of Bologna [Hebrew]," *Scritti in memoria di Enzo Sereni*, eds. D. Carpi and R. Spiegel (Jerusalem, 1970), 145–65 [Also reprinted in Carpi, *Be-Tarbut ha-Renesans u-ven Homot ha-Geto* (Tel Aviv, 1989)]; D. Ruderman, "A Jewish Apologetic Treatise from Sixteenth Century Bologna," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 50 (1979), 253–76.
5. Ravid, "From Geographical Realia," 373. See also his "The Religious, Economic and Social Background and Context of the Establishment of the Ghetti in Venice," in G. Cozzi, ed., *Gli ebrei e Venezia secoli XIV-XVIII* (Milan, 1987), 211–59; and his "New Light on the Ghetti of Venice," *Sefer Yovel le-Shlomo Simonsohn*, eds. A. Oppenheimer et al. (Tel Aviv, 1993), 149–76.
6. K. Stow, "The Consciousness of Closure: Roman Jewry and Its *Ghet*," *Essential Papers*, 386–400.

7. See especially, C. Roth, *The Jews in the Renaissance* (New York, 1959); Idem., *The History of the Jews in Italy* (Philadelphia, 1946); M. A. Shulvass, *The Jews in the World of the Renaissance* (Leiden, 1973; first published in Hebrew in 1955); A. Milano, *Storia degli ebrei in Italia* (Turin, 1963).
8. R. Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York, 1994), 212–51. Compare especially Roth's long chapter on the ghetto in his *History of the Jews in Italy*.
9. On Luzzatto, see B. Ravid, *Economics and Toleration in Seventeenth-Century Venice: The Background and Context of the Discorso of Simone Luzzatto*. American Academy for Jewish Research Monograph Series, no. 2 (Jerusalem, 1978); The Hebrew translation of the *Discorso* (*Ma'amar al Yehudei Venezia*), by D. Lattes, with introductions by R. Bachi, and M. A. Shulvass (Jerusalem, 1950); and D. Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* (New Haven and London, 1995), 153–84.
10. This is fully discussed in D. Ruderman, "The Impact of Science on Jewish Culture and Society in Venice (With Special Reference to Jewish Graduates of Padua's Medical School)," in Cozzi, *Gli ebrei e Venezia*, 417–48 and republished in *Essential Papers*, 519–53.
11. See D. Harrán, "Tradition and Innovation in Jewish Music of the Later Renaissance," *The Journal of Musicology* 7 (1989), 107–30 [Reprinted in *Essential Papers*, 474–501].
12. See E. Horowitz, "The Eve of the Circumcision: A Chapter in the History of Jewish Nightlife," *Journal of Social History* 23 (1989), 45–69 [Reprinted in *Essential Papers*, 554–88].
13. See especially, "Change in Cultural Patterns of Jewish Society in Crisis: The Case of Italian Jewry at the Close of the Sixteenth Century," *Jewish History* 3 (1988), 11–30; and Idem., *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1994).
14. Ravid, "From Geographical Realia," 384.
15. This paragraph summarizes Bonfil's conclusions in the two works mentioned in note 13 above. The quotation is found in *Essential Papers*, 405. See also his "Cultura e mistica a Venezia nel Cinquecento," in Cozzi, *Gli ebrei e Venezia*, 469–506.
16. Bonfil, "Change in the Cultural Patterns."
17. For the time being, see H. Tirosh-Rothschild, "Jewish Culture in Renaissance Italy: A Methodological Survey," *Italia* 9 (1990), 63–96, and the reviews of Bonfil's book by T. Rabb in *Times Literary Supplement*, December 23, 1994, 25; A. Molcho in *Jewish History* 9 (1995), 113–18; by G. Mazzotta in a forthcoming issue of *Jewish Quarterly Review*; and by D. Ruderman mentioned in note 1 above.
18. Bonfil, *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*, xi, 6.

19. M. Cohen, "Leone da Modena's *Ritti*: A Seventeenth Century Plea for Social Tolerance of Jews," *Jewish Social Studies* 34 (1972), 287–319 [Reprinted in *Essential Papers*, 429–73; the citation is on p. 429].
20. On David de Pomis's work, see H. Friedenwald, *The Jews and Medicine* (Baltimore, 1944), vol. 1, 33–53.
21. See note 18 above.
22. See most recently the collection of essays edited by Y. Kaplan, H. Mechoulan and R. Popkin entitled *Menasseh ben Israel and his World* (Leiden, 1989).
23. On Modena's pro-Catholic loyalties, see the aforementioned article by Cohen cited in note 19; for del Bene's, see Ruderman, *Jewish Thought*, 185–98 and the earlier studies cited there.
24. See Ruderman, *Jewish Thought*, 229–55.
25. See note 9 above and Ruderman, *Jewish Thought*.
26. See note 10 above.
27. The expression is used by the French humanist François Tissard when visiting the synagogue of Ferrara at the beginning of the sixteenth century. See D. Ruderman, *The World of a Renaissance Jew* (Cincinnati, 1981), 101.
28. See note 12 above.