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Review of Robert Bonfil, *The Rabbinate in Renaissance Italy*

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**Abstract**
At least since the publication of Shlomo Simonsohn's comprehensive study of Mantuan Jewry, Italian Jewish history has emerged as a significant scholarly field for a growing number of researchers in Israel and abroad. Their numerous publications have considerably supplemented and refined the earlier attempts by Cecil Roth, Moses Avigdor Shulvass, Israel Zinberg and Attilio Milano to chart the course of Italian Jewish history in the Renaissance period and before. They have also revealed all too glaringly the inadequacies of the edifice the earlier researchers had constructed. When Shulvass and Roth, in particular, wrote their popular surveys of Jewish life in the Renaissance, neither had sufficiently utilized the voluminous archival and manuscript resources now more readily available some twenty years later; nor did either of their works deeply penetrate the larger Christian cultural and social context of Jewish life on Italian soil.

**Disciplines**
Cultural History | European History | European Languages and Societies | History | History of Religion | Jewish Studies

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Reviewed by David Ruderman (University of Maryland)

At least since the publication of Shlomo Simonsohn's comprehensive study of Mantuan Jewry, Italian Jewish history has emerged as a significant scholarly field for a growing number of researchers in Israel and abroad. Their numerous publications have considerably supplemented and refined the earlier attempts by Cecil Roth, Moses Avigdor Shulvass, Israel Zinberg and Attilio Milano to chart the course of Italian Jewish history in the Renaissance period and before. They have also revealed all too glaringly the inadequacies of the edifice the earlier researchers had constructed. When Shulvass and Roth, in particular, wrote their popular surveys of Jewish life in the Renaissance, neither had sufficiently utilized the voluminous archival and manuscript resources now more readily available some twenty years later; nor did either of their works deeply penetrate the larger Christian cultural and social context of Jewish life on Italian soil. Yet with all their deficiencies, these works have constituted up to now the only comprehensive attempts to define the nature of the Jewish experience in the Renaissance period. With the appearance of Robert Bonfil's book, we are now treated to a new synthetic view of the period which succeeds in describing its historical subject in a far more sophisticated and insightful way than that of its predecessors.

Bonfil, of course, defines his subject more narrowly as a study of the rabbinate in the Italian Renaissance. Yet given the pivotal role of the rabbis in any Jewish community, including Italy, at least prior to the last centuries, and more significantly, given the breadth and depth of the author's own grasp of the subject of Italian Jewry, the work is much more than an institutional history. Although focused on the rabbinate it represents a bold and highly original interpretation of the social and cultural world of Italian Jewry in the 15th and 16th centuries and also offers rich and suggestive insights for the study of other Jewish communities in other cultural settings.

Bonfil begins his work by investigating the pertinent social and ideological background of becoming a rabbi in the Jewish community. Here he considers the educational goals and apparatus of the community from which the rabbinical leadership organically developed. He next considers the status and function of rabbinical ordination in Italy, the qualifications for ordination, the sacral role of the ordained rabbi and the parallel status of this title and the doctoral degree of the University. The relationship between the rabbi and the community is explored in the next chapter. Bonfil paints a clear picture of the tension between the aspirations of communal leaders to limit rabbinic authority and the self-image of the rabbis themselves attempting to exercise their absolute will as the sole embodiment of halachic norms. Carefully avoiding generalizations, Bonfil takes into account the various stages of development within individual communities, the differing personalities of the rabbis, and the contrasting perceptions of the rabbinic function among Ashkenazic and Spanish Jews. What emerges is a profile of a rabbi with limited financial security, diminished social status and constrained authority. Such a portrait leads Bonfil to reject emphatically the artificial distinction Isaiah Sonne had earlier established between official communal rabbis and "unofficial" private rabbis who supposedly challenged the decisions of the rabbinic establishment. Bonfil persuasively demonstrates how Sonne's theory ignored the social reality of the Italian community, the inability of a weak official rabbinate to challenge the authority of any other rabbi, and the absence of any clear interest groups within the rabbinic community itself. While acknowledging a certain dependence of some rabbis employed by rich benefactors, Bonfil discounts Sonne's negative evaluation of their subordinate status; on the contrary, they often functioned independently and creatively in a manner similar to that of the Italian humanists of their day.

Bonfil's chapter on the function of the rabbis within the Jewish legal system of Italy is an important contribution to an understanding of the actual authority and legal basis of the fledgling Jewish communities of 15th-16th century Italy. Following Vittore Coloni, Bonfil demonstrates the actual weakness of Jewish communal authority throughout the entire period. The rabbis were never able to establish an independent Jewish court system; at best they could expect to impose their decisions on disputing parties through binding arbitration. Bonfil skillfully demonstrates how social and legal pressures within Catholic Italy constantly attenuated the authority and autonomous status of the Halachah and its representatives within the Jewish community.

The most expansive and broadly interpretative chapter of Bonfil's work is the last dealing with the cultural world of the rabbis. The overarching theme of this chapter is to show how, over a period of some 150 years, a growing insecurity and spiritual crisis emerged within Italian Jewish culture over the adequacy of philosophic speculation to provide a meaningful response to the basic existential questions affecting the Jewish community. By the end of this period, a pervasive Jewish mysticism with its emphasis on practical acts of piety was to fill the spiritual void left by the crumbling edifice of Jewish scholasticism. Bonfil is not the first to observe this shift in cultural priorities. Yet his understanding of how and why it takes place is markedly different from his predecessors. For Bonfil, the shift from philosophy to mysticism cannot be understood solely in terms of external changes affecting Italian Jewry — the imposition of the ghetto system, the Counter-Reformation, the growing separation between Jews and Christians in the second half of the 16th century. The conventional view of essentially Ashkenazic historians, argues Bonfil, was to idealize a romantic Burckhardtian image of the enlightened Jewish culture of Renaissance Italy in striking contrast to the more insulated culturally deprived world of Ashkenazic Jewry. For Bonfil, Italian Jewish culture in the period before 1550 was essentially a triumph of rationalistic forces set in motion by the openness of Renaissance society; with the decline of this open society after 1550, Jewish culture deteriorated concomitantly and anti-rationalistic forces inherent in Jewish tradition eventually gained the upper hand. For Bonfil, this approach is simplistic and culturally biased. Jewish tradition is not inherently anti-rationalist nor is Renaissance culture inherently rationalist.

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Nor can Jewish culture be viewed one-dimensionally — as a mere mirror reflecting external changes in the general cultural landscape. In contrast, Bonfil's study focuses on the internal dynamics of Italian Jewish culture, presenting it as a living community with its own unique character and development. His thesis of a swelling spiritual crisis is supported by such diverse indicators as private library collections (a noticeable decline in philosophic books by the latter half of the 16th century), expressions of the growing sense of inadequacy of philologic answers among 16th-century Jewish thinkers, the dissemination of midrashic literature among Italian Jews, a rise in interest in Judah ha-Levi's commentaries, and in ethical writings and the dramatic proliferation of pietistic associations within the Italian Jewish community by the mid-16th century and after. Neither Christian antagonism nor the resurgence of anti-Jewish sentiment is the primary factor influencing the development of Italian Jewish culture in the Renaissance.

More influences they posited of the former on the latter. Yet his own corrective view seems to place undue emphasis on organic development at the expense of external factors. Is the major problem of understanding Jewish culture in this period one of redressing the balance between internal and external factors or is it rather one of placing excessive weight on the wrong external factors? All Jewish cultural development, at least to some extent, is a reaction to external culture. The Jewish cultural historian must therefore disentangle the complex and subtle ways in which a majority culture influences its Jewish minority, without ignoring the unique qualities of Jewish tradition and its own characteristic pace of absorbing and adapting to such influences.

Bonfil is correct, for example, in locating a spiritual crisis in Italian Jewish culture long before the Counter-Reformation. But how can he determine that this crisis was fundamentally internal? Jewish culture rather than a reflection of a larger spiritual phenomenon symptomatic of Italian culture in general? And why, for example, are Jewish voluntary associations and moral literature any more expressions of internal Jewish needs than clear imitations of patterns of Christian culture quite visible in late-16th-century Italy? And what of Bonfil's general thesis — the reassessment of cultural-national pride on the part of Italian Jews — is this not as much a reaction to the external environment as a part of the internal dynamics of Jewish cultural development?

Bonfil's deemphasis of external influences also leads him to the forcible conclusion that unlike the humanist curriculum with its radical break from the medieval past, that of the Jews throughout the Renaissance period remained essentially unchanged. One might agree with Bonfil that the sources of Jewish education in this period are relatively less novel than their Christian counterparts. Yet Bonfil's absolute denial of any change and discontinuity in Jewish education seems unwarranted. Though less revealing than Christian humanist sources, the Jewish educational sources do reflect certain changes in curricula and in pedagogic goals. More significant, however, is the evidence of the products of Italian Jewish education itself. If educational approaches were essentially the same as before how might we explain the extraordinary eruption of a De Rossi, a Moscato or others? Of course, Jews in earlier...
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centuries were well versed in non-Jewish culture, yet the characteristic ease with which a small but conspicuous group of Italian Jews moved freely in the intellectual world of their contemporaries might at least suggest some revision of Bonfil’s firm negation of educational novelty.

Perhaps another deficiency of Bonfil’s cultural picture is its lack of emphasis on the hermetic and neo-platonic streams within 15th and 16th-century Jewish culture and their fusion with kabbalah. This is due to a great extent to the parameters of Bonfil’s book. He focuses primarily on Jewish cultural trends reflected in the writings of rabbis. A wider investigation of the impact of Florentine neo-platonism on Jewish culture as reflected especially in the writings of Johanan Alemanno and later 16th-century thinkers might alter somewhat Bonfil’s description of the shift from philosophy to faith. Perhaps the shift he describes is not so linear and clearcut but might also include certain meanderings along the way, particularly the direction of Pico’s syncretism at the end of the 15th-century and also include certain meanderings along the way, particularly the direction of Pico’s syncretism at the end of the 15th-century and throughout the 16th-century? And is it not possible that Bonfil underestimates the creative potential of kabbalah as a further receptacle for the influence of non-Jewish cultural forms on Judaism — e.g., magic, ancient theology, etc. — particularly as found in the ecletic thought of a number of 16th-century Jewish writers.

All this in no way minimizes the splendid contribution Bonfil’s book has made. On the contrary, it is a tribute to a major work which should become a standard interpretation of an important period in Jewish history. The broad strokes painted by Bonfil may be constantly refined, expanded and clarified, but no doubt the book will remain a major frame of reference for all future research. Because of its importance, The Rabbinate in Renaissance Italy should be translated into a western language so that it might be made available to a larger number of scholars.

NOTES

1. Among the many problems of these works, especially that of Cecil Roth, was their looseness in defining the chronological limits of the Renaissance period for Jews in Italy. Cf. Bonfil, *The Rabbinate in Italy*, p. 180; n. 52.


9. See most recently Moshe Idel’s paper entitled: “The Magical and Neo-Platonic Interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance” presented at the International Colloquium on Jewish Thought in the 16th Century at Harvard University, January 7-9, 1980.