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David B. Ruderman

University of Pennsylvania, ruderman@sas.upenn.edu

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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

Reuven Bonfil, *The Rabbinate in Renaissance Italy* [*Ha-rabanut be-Italyah bi-tekuvat ha-renasans*]. Jerusalem, Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1979. 327 pp. (Hebrew)

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.¹ 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 rabbinate with limited financial security, diminished social status and

constricted 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 Colorni, Bonfil demonstrates the actual weakness of Jewish communal authority throughout the entire period.² 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 them, 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 itself 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 examines the shift in cultural priorities among Italian Jews from a perspective of “the dynamics of internal Jewish problems and organic continuity.” 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 philosophic answers among 16th-century Jewish thinkers, the dissemination of midrashic literature among Italian Jews, a rise of interest in Judah ha-Levi’s commentaries, and in ethical writing, 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-rationalistic traditionalism but rather a heightened Jewish national feeling among Italian Jews brought to a close the intellectual and spiritual rapprochement between Jews and Christians in the Renaissance.

There is so much that is praiseworthy about Bonfil’s achievement. The reader of the book is immediately struck by the multitude of detail, and the richness and diversity of source material utilized by the author (a large sampling of which is published at the end of the book with annotation). This is not the work of a recent doctoral student; it is the attainment of a seasoned historian with an impressive familiarity with his sources. It is also the product of a scholar with a broad knowledge of the intellectual and social context of Christian Italy who is capable of applying his knowledge to a greater understanding of the Jewish community. (Note, for example, his discussion of civil and canon law in Italy, his comparison of rabbinical ordination with the doctorate, the parallel roles of rabbis and humanists, the classical rhetorical forms of rabbinic responsa and sermons.) Equally impressive is his ability to incorporate intellectual, social, legal and institutional history into a unified portrait of the rabbinate. He moves freely from a discussion of salary scales, to inventories of book lists to an analysis of Sforzo’s philosophic treatise. It is indeed refreshing to read an historical work with such integrative and synthetic powers, especially when written in a crisp, lively style. And none of this makes the author insensitive to his own biases or the limitations of his own sources. On the contrary, the work is interspersed with judicious comments about the tentativeness of some of his conclusions, the need to define terms carefully, and the limited perspective of particular sources.

If there is anything to criticize about Bonfil’s work, it may lie in the conceptual scheme which underlies the book, particularly its last chapter. For Bonfil, the Italian Jewish community is a link in the chain of manifestations of social national consciousness of medieval Jewry.³ In the context of Italian political disunity and a growing Christian interest in Jewish culture in Renaissance Italy, this Jewish consciousness is considerably magnified. In fact, Bonfil has earlier defined the Renaissance period in Jewish history on the basis of this sole prevailing sentiment.⁴ Bonfil’s view clearly emerges out of his

justifiable critique of the earlier approaches mentioned above, yet it strikes me as somewhat arbitrary. On the one hand, if national consciousness is a potent factor of diaspora Jewish life in earlier periods, can we correctly use it to delimit the special peculiarities of Italian Jewish culture in the Renaissance?⁵ On the other hand, because of the problematic nature of defining the Renaissance in general, and the present incomplete state of research in Italian Jewish cultural history in particular, are we indeed ready for such a sweeping definition of what the Renaissance period meant for Jews?

Moreover, Bonfil’s inner directed approach to Jewish cultural change appears somewhat ambiguous to me. No doubt Bonfil is justified in criticizing the facile assumptions of earlier historians regarding Renaissance culture, Jewish tradition and the superficial 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 represented fundamentally an internal development of Jewish culture rather than a reflection of a larger spiritual predicament 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?⁶ And what of Bonfil’s general thesis — the reassertion 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 forceful 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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 erudition 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.⁹ 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 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 eclectic 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.
2. See Vittore Colorni, *Legge Ebraica e Leggi Locali*, Milan, 1945.
3. Bonfil, *The Rabbinate*, p. 9 and see as well pp. 180 ff.
4. Robert Bonfil, "Expressions of the Uniqueness of the Jewish People during the Period of the Renaissance" (Hebrew), *Sinai* 76 (1975): 36–46.
5. See for example, for an earlier period, H. H. Ben Sasson, "Jewish Reflections on Nationhood in the Twelfth Century," (Hebrew), *Perakim* 2 (1969–74): 145–218.
6. Cf. David Ruderman, "The Founding of a Gemilut Hasadim Society in Ferrara in 1515," *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 1 (1976): 233–67 which discusses the lack of Christian influence on the Ferrarese association. Yet the question of Christian influence on Jewish confraternities in general still deserves more serious attention. Compare, for example, Bonfil's observation about placing small children in Jewish voluntary associations (*Rabbinate*, p. 203) with Richard Trexler, "Ritual in Flor-

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culture contact than the "Jewish contribution to civilization" approach for it allows us to examine what both Jews and Christians derived from their shared social and cultural context. Thus, features of Langton's commentaries, beyond the clear parallel interpretations, show parallel concerns. Langton's attempts to reconcile genealogical and other discrepancies between *Chronicles* and *Kings* — triumphantly crying "solutio" when he feels he has hit upon it — are strongly reminiscent of those of David Kimhi who continually invokes his bi-, tri-, or polynomial theorems to show that one person or place had several names. Langton's extensive concern with grammatical points, sometimes a bit overdetailed, reminds one on the other hand of Moses Kimhi. Of course, some interpretations of Langton are so close to those of the Jewish commentaries that knowledge of them, direct or indirect, cannot be gainsaid. On the other hand, there are interpretations attributed to Jews or "Hebrews" which have not been located in Jewish sources and it intrigues one to know what is behind these references (see, e.g., p. 135, note on I Chron. 25:5).

Dr. Saltman's notes are so informative that they form a super-commentary rather than a mere *apparatus fontium*. Not content to list vague and murky "cf."s, he elucidates and evaluates his references and Langton's comments with a lively and often amusing style. He comments on "Dicit ergo combusserunt ea illo modo loquendi quo dicitur quod iste combustus est, quia domus sua combusta est" with "Similar to the expression 'I was bombed out,' current in World War II" (on I Chron. 10:12). In his notes on I Chron. 5, he points out: "At this point Langton begins to warm up" or at II Chron. 22:1: "The odd name out is Azarias." In this vein, he demonstrates Langton's use of sources and shifts in emphasis and approach. He may fly in the face of the tradition that claims that a work must be stilted and stuffy in order to be scholarly, but more power to him. Textual editing may strike some as dreary work, but textual editors need not be dreary people.



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- ence: Adolescence and Salvation in the Renaissance" in Charles Trinkaus and H. A. Oberman, eds., *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion* (Leiden, 1974), pp. 200–64. For an example of blatant Christian influence on late 16th-century Jewish moral tracts, see Siegmund Maybaum, *Abraham Jagel's Katechismus Lekach-tob*, Berlin, 1892.
 7. Bonfil, *The Rabbinate*, pp. 17ff.
 8. Cf. Simhah Assaf, *Mekorot Le-Toledot Ha-Hinukh Be'Yisrael*. (Tel Aviv, 1954), vols. 2 and 4. For an entirely novel Jewish curriculum of the period, see Moshe Idel, "The Curriculum of Yohanan Alemanno," *Tarbiz* 48 (1980) (Hebrew), forthcoming.
 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.