

ITALIAN JEWRY IN THE RENAISSANCE

by MOSHE IDEL

ראובן בונפיל, הרבנות באיטליה בתקופת הרניסאנס; ירושלים: הוצאת מאגנס, תשל"ט, 327 עמ'.
Robert Bonfil, *The Rabbinate in Renaissance Italy* [Jerusalem: Magnes University Press, 1979].
327 p.

In comparison to other Jewish communities in the Diaspora, Italian Jewry experienced more extensive and consecutive periods of settlement. These reasonably comfortable conditions facilitated the economic establishment as well as the cultural development of the Italian Jewish community.

Many studies have been devoted to the subject of Italian Jewry; among them are monographs on individual communities (e.g., M.D. Cassuto on the Jews of Florence during the Renaissance, Cecil Roth on Venetian Jewry, and S. Simonsohn on the Jews in the Duchy of Mantua), period studies of Italian Jewish history (e.g., Cecil Roth on the Jews in Renaissance culture and Moses A. Shulwass on the Jews during the Renaissance period), and the like. However, there are but a few specialized topical studies of Italian-Jewish history. For example, there has yet to be written a comprehensive description of Judeo-Christian relations during the Renaissance. The general development of Italian Kabbalah awaits elucidation and analysis. In this sense, the subject of the rabbinate as an institution in Italy has fared well with the publication of Robert Bonfil's *The Rabbinate in Renaissance Italy*. In this comprehensive and exhaustive study, Bonfil

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משה אידל, "הרבנות באיטליה בתקופת הרנסאנס." מתוך פעמים; פרקי עיון במורשת ישראל במזרח, מס' (חורף תש"ם), עמ' 102–100.

centers his attention upon the period 1450–1600, years that were enlivened by two interesting developments in the communal and cultural life of Italian Jewry: Talmudic scholars of the Franco-German school migrated to northern Italy in particular, and invigorated the study of *ḥalakha* by their more formal, programmatic and disciplined approach, and there was an influx of exiled Spanish-Jewish scholars, who brought with them the kabbalistic literature which was then known to only a few in Italy.¹ In addition to these internal communal influences upon Italian-Jewish culture, there was a considerable penetration of Renaissance culture from without. This development affected Judeo-Christian dialogue on Jewish ideas and conceptions. Such a lively intermingling of strong intellectual cross currents was an impetus for the rabbinate's expansion which gained in prestige and influence so that Italian rabbis came to dominate communal life more and more. Various aspects of the development of the rabbinate as an institution serve as the central concern of Bonfil's book.

One of the first subjects treated in this study is *semikhah* (rabbinical ordination). Bonfil demonstrates the great similarity between the ceremony of rabbinical ordination in Renaissance Italy, and those ceremonies where the doctorate was awarded in Italian universities. Parallel citations of certificates of rabbinical ordination, and of doctoral degrees prove Bonfil's contention that in many cases Latin formulations underlie the Hebrew wording (see, for example, p. 227).

A lengthy chapter outlines the gradually increased importance of the role of the appointed communal rabbi in the latter half of the sixteenth century, as documented by the functions and salaries of those who served in this position. In the chapter devoted to "itinerant rabbis" — often private instructors in the homes of prominent, wealthy communal elders — Bonfil proves that this phenomenon paralleled the custom widespread among Christian humanists in Italy who enjoyed the patronage of the wealthy. Both Christians and Jews held the itinerant scholar in esteem, clearly having an unreservedly positive opinion of him (see p. 130). Bonfil differs with the view of Isaiah Sonne who emphasized the dependence of the itinerant rabbis on their patrons, and the inevitably negative consequences of such a relationship. Sonne's assumption of class tensions between appointed rabbis and their itinerant counterparts is disproven by Bonfil's evidence that the position of appointed rabbi developed relatively late during the period in question and, even then, was less formalized (p. 129).

1. At the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth centuries, most of the important Jewish scholars in Italy were of non-Italian origin. Among these were Joseph Colon, Elijah Delmedigo, Yohanan Alemanno, Elijah Bahur (Levita), Abraham Farissol, Yohanan Treves, Isaac and Judah Abravanel, Joseph Jabez, Joseph Ibn Shraga, Judah Ḥayyat, Yitzhak Mar Ḥayyim.

Bonfil's treatment of the intellectual and cultural world of Italian rabbinic scholarship is based upon an examination of the Jewish literature which was extant in Italy during the Renaissance. The author notes the relative weight of various scholarly genres, as well as their general contribution to the intellectual portrait of Italian Jewry during the Renaissance. In Bonfil's estimation, the influence of the Kabbalah increased constantly because of a decline in the study of scholastic philosophy, coupled with the "inner impulse" to emphasize a unique contribution of the Jewish people. Unlike Shulwass and other historians who regarded the pre-eminence of mysticism as evidence of a "hidden concurrence" with the forces of Catholic reaction, Bonfil finds internal causes for the popularity of the Kabbalah. This changed attitude to philosophy and esteem for the Kabbalah is exemplified by the work, *Minḥat Kenaot* (written by Rabbi Yeḥiel Nissim of Pisa) which was an attempt to offer the Kabbalah as a desirable alternative to philosophy (pp. 182–85). In Bonfil's opinion, the beginnings of Kabbalah's cultural pre-eminence may be traced to a generation before 1558, the year that the *Zohar* was printed in Italy — an event that represented the culmination of a prior trend (p. 181).

In my opinion, this interpretation, being a departure from that generally accepted in Kabbalah research, deserves careful examination. In the first half of the period in question, that is during the years 1450–1540, Italian Jewry produced no native kabbalist nor kabbalistic system of importance.² At the beginning of the period in question, the *Zohar* was known to only a few in Italy. Most knowledge of the Kabbalah was derived from the Torah commentary of R. Menaḥem Recanati. Any important kabbalistic compositions written in Italy at this time, were authored by Spanish Jews.³ Italian writers in this period continued to engage in an eclectic synthesis of Kabbalah and neo-platonic philosophy. There was much resistance by Italian Jews to the mythical character of Spanish Kabbalah, which tended to philosophical speculation, and in a more general manner concurred

2. Bonfil takes note of the fact (p. 179) that the *Zohar* was nearly unknown in Italy before its printing there. One may add several other facts to the evidence cited by Bonfil: a) Until the beginning of the sixteenth century, Judeo-Italian kabbalists did not have a sufficient knowledge of the *Zohar*. The comments made by R. Yitzḥak Mar Ḥayyim in his letter to R. Isaac of Pisa provide supporting evidence — "Since in this country you lack a proficient knowledge of the *Targum Yerushalmi* (i.e., the Aramaic language), I have decided to translate this (*to translate a passage from the Zohar*) word for word into Hebrew" [published by A.W. Greenup in the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, n.s. 21 (1931), p. 370]; b) In the proposed curriculum advocated by R. Yoḥanan Alemanno, several kabbalistic works are mentioned — but not the *Zohar*. See M. Idel, "The Study Program of Rabbi Yoḥanan Alemanno" (in Hebrew), *Tarbiṣ* 48 (1980), p. 329; c) Authors of Christian Kabbalah such as Pico della Mirandola and Johannes Reuchlin were unfamiliar with the *Zohar* per se.

3. I have in mind R. Judah Ḥayyat, R. Yitzḥak Mar Ḥayyim, and R. Joseph Ibn Shraga. It is noteworthy that Jewish apostates such as Flavius Mithridates and Paulus Riccius were better versed in Kabbalah than their Italian Jewish contemporaries such as Yeḥiel Nissim of Pisa.

with the view of R. Abraham Abulafia.⁴ Only after the mythical-symbolic character of Spanish Kabbalah became widely accepted in Italy did Kabbalah as a system influence the intellectual life of Italian Jewry. The printing of the *Zohar* signalled the triumph of Spanish Kabbalah, as did Italian receptiveness to the influence of the Safed school of Kabbalah which emphasized the *Zohar* in its discourses. Furthermore, it appears that only from the mid-sixteenth century did Italian Kabbalah become established as a concrete means of religious expression — and not merely as a metaphysical system. Even after the mid-sixteenth century, various attempts to combine philosophy and Kabbalah were made, as can be seen in the writings of R. Judah Moscato, R. Abraham Yagel, and R. Joseph Solomon Rofeh of Candia among others. Here we have an indication that the Kabbalah of Safed did not completely reverse the original attitude held by Italian erudites towards the Kabbalah, but rather moderated attempts to synthesize Kabbalah and philosophy.

An especially important contribution to an understanding of Italian-Jewish society and culture is to be found in the collection of annotated primary sources which are cited in the latter half of the book. These sources serve as the basis for the author's descriptive history as presented in the first part of the book. Such documents are but a part of the extensive material from manuscript and printed sources — both Hebrew and Italian — which the author gleaned from archives, publishing them for the first time in this work (see e.g., pp. 255–56, 278–81).

Bonfil's great proficiency in Hebrew and Italian sources, as well as his careful analysis and scholarly precision⁵ make for a penetrating study and discussion. This is a well balanced representation of social and intellectual history, motivated by internal developments while giving due recognition to the contribution of outside influences upon the cultural and communal life of Italian Jewry.

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4. Re. the influence of the work *Or HaSekhel* by R. Abraham Abulafia, see Bonfil, p. 179. It should be emphasized that Abulafia's writings were translated into Latin and Italian during this period. They were studied by both Pico della Mirandola and Cardinal Edigio di Viterbo. Concerning the opposition of Spanish kabbalists to the metaphysical systems current among Italian Jewry, conf., the introduction to *Minḥat Yehudah* by R. Judah Ḥayyat in *Sefer Ma'arekhet HaElohut* (printed in *Ma'arekhet HaElohut*, Mantua: 1558, fol. 3c). See as well the remarks of R. Yitzḥak Mar Ḥayyim in his letter published by Y. Nadav in *Tarbiz* 26 (1957), p. 458, and in the letter by R. Isaac of Pisa (conf., n. 2 above), pp. 370, 374. Re. later opposition to the connection between Kabbalah and philosophy, see Bonfil, p. 189f. Concerning the extensive evidence on the attitude of R. Asher Lemlein, who lived in northern Italy, to R. Abraham Abulafia's system, and the former's rejection of Spanish Kabbalah, see A. Kupfer, "The Visions of R. Asher ben R. Meir known as Lemlein Reutlingen" (in Hebrew) *Kobez Al Yad* 8 (1976), pp. 397, 407, 412, 417.

5. I wish to correct two minor printing errors in the book. Page 184, fn. 78 should read *Behinat HaDat* instead of *Behinat Olam*; page 188, fn. 102 refers to Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola — and not to his famous uncle, Count Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.