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David B. Ruderman

University of Pennsylvania, RUDERMAN@SAS.UPENN.EDU

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Recommended Citation (OVERRIDE)

Ruderman, D.B. (1998). Cecil Roth, Historian of Italian Jewry: A Reassessment. In Myers, D. & Ruderman, D.B. (Eds.), *The Jewish Past Revisited: Reflections on Modern Jewish Historians*, (pp. 128-142). New Haven: Yale University Press.

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Cecil Roth, Historian of Italian Jewry: A Reassessment

Abstract

I have a confession to make. I have long been a fan of Cecil Roth (1899-1970) and his histories of Italian Jewry. My copy of Roth's *The Jews in the Renaissance*, published in 1959, was one of the first books in Jewish history I acquired as a youth, years before I became interested in the profession of history. This relatively worn copy still adorns my shelf and dates quite accurately my fascination with this engaging popularizer of the Jewish historical experience from my high school years.

Disciplines

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

CONTRIBUTORS

ANTHONY GRAFTON is Dodge Professor of History, Princeton University

MARTHA HIMMELFARB is Associate Professor of Religion, Princeton University

ELLIOTT HOROWITZ is Senior Lecturer in Jewish History, Bar Ilan University

MOSHE IDEL is Max Cooper Professor of Jewish Thought, Hebrew University

SARA JAPHET is Professor of Bible, Hebrew University

GIDEON LIBSON is Professor of Comparative Law, Hebrew University Law School

DAVID N. MYERS is Associate Professor of History and Director of the Center for Jewish Studies, University of California, Los Angeles

DEREK J. PENSLAR is Associate Professor of History, Indiana University

DAVID B. RUDERMAN is Joseph Meyerhoff Professor of Modern Jewish History and Director of the Center for Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania

ISRAEL JACOB YUVAL is Senior Lecturer in Jewish History, Hebrew University

EDITED BY DAVID N. MYERS

AND DAVID B. RUDERMAN

*The Jewish Past Revisited:
Reflections on Modern Jewish
Historians*

Yale University Press/New Haven & London

SIX

*Cecil Roth, Historian of Italian Jewry:
A Reassessment*

DAVID B. RUDERMAN

I have a confession to make. I have long been a fan of Cecil Roth (1899–1970) and his histories of Italian Jewry. My copy of Roth's *The Jews in the Renaissance*, published in 1959, was one of the first books in Jewish history I acquired as a youth, years before I became interested in the profession of history. This relatively worn copy still adorns my shelf and dates quite accurately my fascination with this engaging popularizer of the Jewish historical experience from my high school years.

I was drawn to the book even more when I began to study the Italian Renaissance in college. Roth was enjoyable to read because he possessed a remarkable eye for the unusual and the colorful, or as he himself notes unabashedly in his introduction: "If I have preferred the picturesque to the drab, and devoted space to the curious as well as to the important, I do not feel that an apology is needed."¹ But he also intrigued me for another reason. In my naively adolescent search for a meaningful balance between my

Jewish and American selves, I could not help but stand awestruck by Roth's incredible pronouncement about my beloved Renaissance:

In Renaissance Italy, we have the unique phenomenon of that successful synthesis which is the unfulfilled hope of many today. The Jews who translated Averroes achieved distinction as physicians, compiled astronomical treatises, wrote plays, directed the theater, composed music and so on, were in almost every case not merely loyal Jews, but actively intellectual Jews, conversant with Hebrew, studying its literature and devoted to talmudic scholarship. The papal physicians who dabbled in Italian letters and were engaged in scientific investigation acted also as rabbis of their communities; the playwright-impresario was at the same time a Hebrew poet who founded a synagogue; the same individual plays a role of major importance in the history of Hebrew and of Italian printing; the financiers who mingled with the Medicean circle in Florence were students, patrons, and sometimes workers in the field of Italian literature. It was perhaps the only period of history, with the exception of that of Arab predominance . . . when absorption into the civilization of the environment had no corrosive effect on Jewish intellectual life.²

Roth had no qualms about viewing the past from the perspective of the present, in searching for paradigms of cooperation and dialogue between Jews and Christians in an era still smarting from the horrific breakdown of positive interaction engendered by the Nazi Holocaust. No doubt the *Shoah* punctured the naive optimism with which he wrote about Jewish life in Italy in the pre-war years, as he readily admitted in the introduction to his collection of essays entitled *Personalities and Events in Jewish History*, published even earlier in 1953. Yet, even then he took pride in claiming to initiate "the wider reaction against what has been termed 'the lachrymose interpretation of Jewish history,'" a reaction generally associated with the historiographical position of Salo W. Baron.³ And he was also thoroughly unrepentant in insisting that he was "still right at the time that [he] wrote" despite the fact that these essays about the past "were written in a different age from the present."⁴

At his death in 1970, Roth had left a lasting mark on Jewish scholarship

with an immense literary output of some 600 works; a distinguished tenure as reader in Jewish Studies at Oxford, which he held for some 25 years; and the culminating distinction of serving as the editor-in-chief of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, which appeared only a year after he died. With the exception of an embarrassing episode at Bar Ilan University — where he was accused unjustly of heresy because of a statement in his popular history regarding the historicity of Moses, a statement that forced him to resign — Roth was largely acclaimed both for the prodigiousness of his scholarship and for its accessibility among a large community of readers. Roth wrote for a general reading public with a lively and elegant style in his popular surveys of Jewish history, eschewing extensive documentation. As he himself acknowledged in his presidential address before the Jewish Historical Society of England, he wrote to entertain, to discover “the historical byways hitherto unexpected or unexplored, the revealing of unknown characters and personalities — heroes, scholars, saints, charlatans, adventurers, scoundrels.” In short, he wrote Jewish history because it was fun.⁵

Roth's reputation has been tarnished significantly in recent years, at least regarding his histories of Italian Jewry, by the sharp critique of the Israeli historian Robert Bonfil. While Bonfil had voiced reservations about the approach of Roth and others to the study of Italian Jewry as early as 1975, his most pointed attack appeared in an English article published in 1984.⁶ In this essay, Bonfil criticized the slavish use of cultural patterns constructed for general history by Jewish historians to describe an analogous situation for the Jewish minority. He objected in particular to Roth's and others' utilization of Jacob Burckhardt's obsolete vision of the Renaissance in describing Italian Jewish history of the period. For Burckhardt and for Roth, according to Bonfil, the Renaissance for Christians and Jews represented a harmonious synthesis between contrasting elements. Captivated by Burckhardt's charming vision, Roth interpreted Jewish history exclusively in terms of participation in the general culture. Like Graetz before him, Roth considered Jewish life worthwhile only if it contributed positively to human progress, so claimed Bonfil, and given the high level of participation in the general culture by certain Jewish elites during the Renaissance, this period was especially attractive. Bonfil assumed conversely that defending one's Jewishness in this period, that is, resisting a full participation in the general

cultural life, must have meant for Roth “antirationalism, fundamentalism and obscurantism.”⁷

What especially incensed Bonfil about Roth's emphasis was a quotation from Roth's *The History of the Jews of Italy* (1946) about the periodic but localized persecutions of Jews in Italy. Given the importance Bonfil attaches to this statement, I shall quote it fully:

“For it must be remembered that the Italian's temperament is no less volatile than versatile. As recent years have demonstrated, he can easily be stirred up to a frenzy by an orator who plays on his sentiment. But these moments of passion cannot last for long, and when they are passed he reverts to his easygoing, indolent, friendly self. Sometimes, a bloody riot might be caused by the inflammatory flow of rhetoric from the pulpit. But after the wave of feeling had ebbed, and the series of sermons was ended, and the friar had moved on to another city, the frenzy would die down as suddenly as it had risen. The Jew repaired his broken windows, and the needy plebeian again began to bring along his valuables in the hope of raising money, and there would be laughter and singing and perhaps drinking in the streets, and somber ecclesiastics would once again begin to mutter at the excessive cordiality, and it would again be true that in no part of the world did such a feeling of friendliness prevail as in Italy between the people and the Jews.”⁸

And here is Bonfil's highly charged response to this passage:

“One may wonder what Joseph ha-Cohen [The Jewish chronicler living in 16th-century Italy] would have said about such a picture! Persecutions, blood-libels, expulsions, the perennial precariousness of living on the terms of a *condotta* — all this was nothing more than a small cloud in a vast blue sky stretching over the heads of jolly people laughing and singing and drinking in the streets! Yet more than the scheme itself, what is particularly disturbing is the ideological bias underlying it . . . in the assumption that the maintenance of national and cultural uniqueness at all times and in all places connotes a readiness to reduce the points of contact with the surrounding culture. The assumption seems to me totally inadmissible. It leads necessarily to the

conclusion that Jewish vitality throughout twenty centuries represents no more than a cultural involution, largely inspired by the non-Jewish world's determination to impose segregation upon Jews, as well as by the supposedly obscurantist Jewish sector, finding itself sometimes unconsciously but often quite consciously on the same side as the hostile non-Jewish segregationists. This notion, whether implied or expressed, is unacceptable and urgently calls for revision."⁹

Bonfil offers one more telling example of the alleged tendentiousness of Roth's historical interpretation of Jewish life in the Renaissance. Following Burckhardt, Roth devoted several pages to examples of the emancipation of women within the Italian Jewish community. He was careful to qualify any all-too-sweeping generalization but he adds, and Bonfil underscores this remark, that "it was inevitable that this structure of society should be reflected in Jewish life as well." Among the many illustrations Roth offered, including the manuscripts written by women, their high social standing, their political influence, their poetry, and more, is the authority of some women to perform ritual slaughtering. Bonfil singles this example out for ridicule while ignoring the rest. For Bonfil, the phenomenon of women slaughterers has nothing to do with the emancipation of women but rather with economic necessity due to the geographic dispersion of Jews in the Renaissance.¹⁰

Bonfil once more dismisses the notion of a Jewish Italian Renaissance that reflects, as he puts it, deep intellectual and social mingling between Jews and gentiles, and minimizes their Jewishness and striving for "some kind of ecumenical cosmopolitan assimilationism." He concludes: "Expulsions were not cheerful picnics because the expelling princes were sensitive to music. . . . Jewish life was not a carousel of servile imitation; it was a perennial struggle for survival. Therefore historical presentation of that struggle means 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."¹¹

Before addressing Bonfil's severe criticism of Roth's reconstruction of

Italian Jewish life, we might pause to consider the already noticeable impact of Bonfil's revisionism on contemporary scholarship. While Roth's position had been accepted wholeheartedly by scholars prior to Bonfil, he has been summarily dismissed by several writing afterwards, as if Bonfil's position was so self-evident and Roth's so blatantly wrong-headed to them that any further discussion of their seemingly polar positions was useless.¹² A case in point is the comprehensive historiographical overview of Italian Jewish culture in the Renaissance of Hava Tirosh-Rothschild published conveniently in 1990 in a journal edited by Robert Bonfil, which takes issue with the "harmonistic" position of Roth and clearly absorbs and approves of Bonfil's new position.¹³

This is not the place to address Bonfil's influential and important revisions of Italian Jewish history.¹⁴ Nor is my objective a full-fledged defense or advocacy of Roth's earlier reconstruction. Cecil Roth, like all historians, viewed the past through the perspective of his own existential being and his own cultural biases. Contemporary scholarship has made major advances since his works have appeared, thanks to the writing of Robert Bonfil and others, and I am not advocating that we return uncritically to his partial and often imprecise historical reconstructions of Italian Jewish life or to the assumptions upon which these were based. But I do think that Cecil Roth has been treated unfairly in Bonfil's assault on his scholarly project, and that others have uncritically and too reflexively jumped on Bonfil's bandwagon without scrutinizing more carefully his unbalanced and selective reading of Roth. The following is not so much a critique of Bonfil's own position but rather an attempt to look again at Roth for what he actually says rather than through the partially distorted lens of Bonfil's overreading, or, shall we say, misreading of his narrative.

Let us begin by looking again at the two citations of Roth held up by Bonfil for particular scorn as exemplifying Roth's "ideological bias . . . that urgently calls for revision." What was Roth actually stating and was his meaning accurately captured in Bonfil's reaction to his words? To appreciate the context of Roth's remark regarding the temporary and sporadic nature of Italian persecutions of Jews, one must consider Roth's remarks on the preceding page. Here, Roth openly addresses the paradox in Italian society of an "undercurrent of sincere and sometimes fanatical religiosity"

co-existing with "that marvelous surge of artistic and intellectual revival known as the Renaissance." Roth readily admits that accompanying the Renaissance spirit was "a no less characteristic mood of piety. . . . If one aspect constantly benefited the Jews and welcomed their participation . . . the other, which hovered in the background, was a constant menace. The balance was so delicate that their status moved between the two extremes with a rapidity which is always extraordinary and sometimes confusing . . . religious passions worked on economic greed, and smoldering prejudice burst out into violent flame."¹⁵

It is at this point that Roth introduces a qualifier: "This however, never blazed for long nor did it extend over a large area, Italy thus maintaining its record as the only European country which, until our own day, never knew a general persecution of the Jews."¹⁶ Then the aforementioned quote appears with its allusion both to the more remote Renaissance and the more recent Fascist past. Orators, whether Bernardino of Siena or Benito Mussolini, had periodically incited the masses to attack Jews but the frenzy eventually died down and the cordiality between Jews and non-Jews eventually returned for, "it would again be true that in no part of the world did such a feeling of friendliness prevail as in Italy between the people and the Jews."¹⁷

What so irritated Bonfil about this passage and what ideological bias lurks beneath its surface? Roth makes a perfectly balanced argument that Italy was never immune from hostilities and anti-Jewish agitation; nevertheless, when they occurred, they were of limited duration and of limited geographical scope. Unlike the rest of Western Europe, there were no long-term and complete expulsions. And even where Jews had been brutalized, normal localized conditions were relatively tranquil. It is true that Roth's faith in Italian tolerance remained curiously unshaken even when writing only two years after the Nazi disaster. But was Roth's comment outrageously so off target as to elicit the sarcasm of Bonfil's biting remarks? Bonfil's rhetorical echo of Roth is a remarkable literary exercise in misrepresentation: "Immortality was not aesthetic because it was manifested during the Renaissance: expulsions were not cheerful picnics because the expelling princes were sensitive to music. . . . Jewish life was not a carousel of servile imitation, it was a perennial struggle for survival."¹⁸ Roth's reference to music in the

streets was meant to convey the sense of calm and normalcy that returned to the Jewish quarter soon after an outburst of hostility. The music did not refer to that of the expelling princes or to their aesthetic sense of art. Bonfil's language is rhetorically effective but distorts and exaggerates Roth's less extravagant claim. And what does this statement about the limited nature of Italian antisemitism have to do with the assumption "that the maintenance of national and cultural uniqueness connotes a readiness to reduce the points of contact with the surrounding culture," an assumption totally inadmissible to Bonfil but nowhere visible in the above quotation?¹⁹

Bonfil's discussion of Roth's reference to women slaughterers is also problematic. Roth's one brief comment on the matter is made after several pages of examples of Jewish women who enjoyed an exceptional status within Jewish society, such as Benvenida Abravanel, Gracia Nasi, various women poets, scribes, doctors, and others. Bonfil ignores all this evidence about a considerable degree of women's social mobility and focuses instead on a passing comment of no great consequence to Roth's overall argument. For Bonfil, Roth's reference to women becoming slaughterers assumes "an aspiration aimed at weakening Orthodox Jewish schemes by introducing novelty for the sake of modernity within an overall imitative mode."²⁰ Bonfil's explanation of the economic necessity of using these women is unrelated to their emancipation but rather focuses on the community's striving to maintain traditional orthodoxy and Jewish uniqueness against the challenge of geographic dispersion. Bonfil's interpretation of the phenomenon of female slaughterers is as hypothetical as that of Roth. The issue is neither a matter of liberality nor orthodoxy, of imitating external values or attenuating Jewish loyalties, an agenda made more pronounced in Bonfil's critique than in Roth's fleeting reference. Indeed, it is possible that neither explanation obviates the other: it may be that the economic necessity of observing kashrut went hand-in-hand with a more liberal view of the ritual role of women in Jewish life. Bonfil's elaborate critique is overdone and in no way negates Roth's overall point that some women in Italian Jewish society, primarily in elite circles, were relatively less constrained by societal norms than in other Jewish communities.

Turning from Bonfil's reading of these two specific passages to the overall assumptions informing his general critique of Roth, I would note three

general misconceptions in Bonfil's reading that require modification before a fairer and more balanced picture of Roth's historiographical project can emerge. First, that Roth can legitimately be treated together with Heinrich Graetz, Moses Avigdor Shulvass, or even Isaac Barzilay, based on the assumption that all of them adopted an identical position both with respect to traditional Jewish society and to its interaction with the Renaissance. Second, that Roth arbitrarily maintained a fixed notion of the supposed openness and harmonistic creativity of the Renaissance period in contrast to the involution and sterility of the imposed ghetto period that followed. And third, that Roth distorted Jewish history by focusing exclusively on the dialogue between the Jewish minority and the Christian majority at the expense of "internal Jewish wrestling with maintaining the validity of Jewish cultural uniqueness." When this distortion is removed, so it would appear from Bonfil's remarks, Jewish life would no longer be seen as "a carousel of servile imitation" but rather "a perennial struggle for survival."

This is not the place to offer a careful and thorough explication of the differences among the scholars whom Bonfil treats as a common group in his essay: Graetz, Roth, Shulvass, and Barzilay. For Bonfil, they all identified with the Renaissance for its enlightened progress and open-mindedness and they idealized it for the opportunities it offered Jews to mingle with Christians in a new spirit of cosmopolitanism. But this is not all they believed, according to Bonfil. For Jews who wished to maintain their distinct Jewish identity, it was necessary to reduce contact with the outside world, to become segregationists and fundamentalists. To the extent that these historians painted the Renaissance in positive tones, they portrayed internal Jewish culture negatively. Sharing a perspective of traditional Judaism that was predominantly Ashkenazic, often narrow, and relatively intolerant of cultural change or pluralism, these more secularly inclined scholars overly romanticized the Renaissance while undervaluing the nature of Jewish traditional culture.

Whatever the accuracy of Bonfil's sweeping generalizations regarding this group of historians as a whole, he oversimplifies Cecil Roth's position by placing him squarely at the center of this group. Roth indeed loved Italy and the Renaissance passionately and even in its darkest moments of oppression and hostility to Jews, "Italy was still Italy, and Italians were still Italians,

with all the native kindness of their people."²¹ Even in the age of Mussolini, we have already noted, Roth's faith in the ultimate goodness of the Italian people was never broken, despite his resignation during the war years from the prestigious academies of Florence and Venice of which he was a proud member.

But Roth was hardly a typical Ashkenazic Jew and certainly not one with irreverence towards rabbinic culture or Orthodox Judaism. In fact, he was a special kind of traditional Jew, "an excruciatingly English Jew," as Chaim Raphael astutely described him.²² So quintessentially English was Roth, Raphael adds, that he carried "unmistakable overtones of the young man who would wander off to Europe in the eighteenth century on the Grand tour, returning laden with antiques and other marvels from Italy and Greece."²³ But this passion in no way diminished his loyalty to traditional Judaism. Indeed, Raphael describes him as a Dalston Orthodox Jew, a worshipper in one of the United Synagogues, the Jewish equivalent of the Church of England, "where Judaism meant a love of tradition but with an open mind to everything else."²⁴ While Roth lacked intense exposure to the yeshivah world, there was no antagonism in him towards Orthodoxy, no lack of appreciation of Jewish tradition, and no maskilic inferiority complex regarding Judaism in relation to other cultures. On the contrary, he was a proud Jew who could not countenance the antisemitic attacks on Jewish culture in the 1930s and took the personally heroic step of publishing his highly influential *The Jewish Contribution to Western Civilization* in the dark hour of 1938, a powerful statement of Jewish esteem and advocacy on the part of an historian who loved Italy but loved Jews more. It is true that Roth was more fascinated by Jewish dancing teachers and gamblers than rabbis and halakhic writing, but this was more a matter of personal style than ideological bias. If he was too naively enthusiastic about the magical ambiance of his beloved Italy, it did not come at the expense of a deprecatory view of Jewish tradition and rabbinic Judaism.

Bonfil was undoubtedly right in noting Roth's overemphasis on the openness and harmony of the Renaissance in contrast to the closure and cultural involution of the ghetto period. Bonfil's revisionist perspective on the cultural significance of the ghetto period represents one of his major contributions to contemporary historiography.²⁵ But was Roth as single-minded

and inflexible about this conception as Bonfil would have us believe? If one looks carefully through Roth's writing, one discovers a more nuanced view of the supposed polarity between Jewish life in the positive Renaissance period in contrast to the negative ghetto experience.²⁶ In this respect, Roth's *A History of the Jews of Italy* offers a more sober and balanced portrait than Roth's less reliable and over-enthusiastic volume on Jewish life in the Renaissance, a later spin-off of his earlier writing. Of particular interest is Roth's moving and sympathetic portrayal of ghetto life, his sense that beyond the misery and squalor was the powerful sense of communal solidarity and traditional culture that the ghetto evoked. Roth could also appreciate the artistic spirit of the ghetto, the intimacy of social contacts between Jews and Christians, and the organic connection between the ghetto and the rest of Italian life: "They drank together, experimented together, gambled together, traveled together, sometimes even flirted together. . . . Christians often visited the synagogues and listened appreciatively to the sermons. . . . It could hardly be otherwise; for the ghetto was a segment no less of the Italian than the Jewish world; and no degree of regimentation could eradicate the common humanity of the two sections of the same people."

I come finally to the last of Bonfil's assumptions about Roth's work which I have labeled a misconception: his claim that Roth distorted the historical past by over-emphasizing the Jewish response to the external environment at the expense of an "internal Jewish wrestling" with the problem of cultural uniqueness. Roth's flaw was not only in anchoring his view of Jewish culture in the overly idealized positions of Jacob Burckhardt on the Renaissance; it was, rather, in interpreting Jewish history exclusively in terms of participation in the general framework of Renaissance culture. To Bonfil, this perspective was surely a product of contemporary concerns, for Roth, like Graetz before him, considered Jewish life worthwhile to the extent that it contributed "to mankind's progress," that is was organically integrated "into general non-Jewish life."²⁷ Bonfil argued instead that Jewish identity should not be defined merely in terms of response to an external challenge nor should any expression of openness in Jewish life be interpreted as a "total bankruptcy of Jewish ideals when confronted with positive progressive ideas diffused in general non-Jewish society."²⁸ Jewish life, to paraphrase

Bonfil's emphatic conclusion once more, was not a carousel of servile imitation but a perennial struggle for survival.

There is no doubt that Bonfil's observations about Roth's historical project are correct in insisting on a more balanced and nuanced view of Jewish culture in the Renaissance. His recent book bearing a title almost identical with Roth's earlier volume creatively attempts to offer such a balanced picture. By thus referring to his judgment on Roth as a misconception, I risk the error of overstatement and misrepresentation. I suspect, however, that Bonfil's corrective of Roth masks an ideological posture as evident as, and perhaps more evident than that of Roth's. In the final analysis, the historian's choice to focus more on Jewish difference or commonality with other human beings is an existential one. Is one in fundamental error by giving more weight to the influence of the general culture on Jewish thought in relation to those internal forces of communal solidarity and traditional loyalty? How should one balance the centripetal versus the centrifugal forces bearing on the formation of cultural identity in the Renaissance or in any period of history? No doubt to reduce a cultural profile of the Jewish minority to mere "servile imitation" of the majority culture is distorting and flattens Jewish culture to a mere set of responses to the Other, either positive or negative. But the opposite extreme, that of viewing a minority civilization from a purely internalist perspective, as creating its own culture in its own terms, is also distorting. It is rather the negotiation of the inside with the outside that correctly constitutes the proper focus of the historian's gaze. Bonfil's brilliant inversion of Roth's picture of Jewish life in the Renaissance — in seeing the supposedly closed ghetto rather than the previously open Renaissance as the decisive period of Jewish cultural formation — would be misleading if it assumed that the culture of the ghetto was shaped by Jewish internal forces alone. Despite the attempt to seal the borders between the Jewish and Christian communities, the ghettos were paradoxically more susceptible to Christian influence than ever before, as Bonfil's reconstruction makes patently clear.

I suspect I betray my own ideological biases as well in finding less fault in Cecil Roth's passion to study those dimensions of Jewish culture closely related to general civilization, and often positively contributing to it. On the other hand, I would never imagine the need to write a work highlighting

the specific contributions of Jews to Western civilization as Roth did in 1938. But in 1938, such a book was required—both to remind the world that Jews were an integral part of the civilized culture that the Nazis were in the process of destroying, and to assure Jews of their own self worth. We share a different mind set than Roth's in being more secure about our own worth but less certain about the common decency of Western culture to tolerate and respect its minorities. One measure of the difference in perspective is to compare the tranquil and civilized Renaissance society that Jews appear to inhabit in Roth's narrative with the bloodied and tumultuous universe of Franciscan vituperations and pogroms in Bonfil's. The first extols the virtues of tolerance and benevolence of the Renaissance; the second makes a mockery of those values in claiming that they never applied to Jews. In the end, we are left to choose starkly between an overly optimistic or pessimistic view of the past, a view that informs our own preference whether to study Jewish culture from an internalist or an externalist perspective.

We now see Roth's reconstruction of Jewish-Christian synthesis in the Renaissance for what it was: partial, exceedingly naive and idyllic, incapable of capturing a much more complicated and contradictory reality. But we can also appreciate his effort for what it was: an attempt to situate the Jews within the matrix of Western civilization, to underscore their common humanity with others, and to document the lives of unremarkable Jews in such a way as to make them fascinating to historian and general reader alike. Roth was an historian lacking grand themes or a philosophical self-awareness of the implications of his intellectual project. He wrote to tell a good story because doing history was fun, and Jewish history was still suppressed and required a good telling. Our world is indeed quite different from his; our distortions of the past are of a different sort than those he imposed on the historical record. But despite our post-modern sensibilities and cynicism, and despite our fuller historical understanding, there remains in the end something honestly appealing and salutary about Roth's narratives of Jewish heroes, scholars, charlatans, adventurers, and scoundrels²⁹—a love of Jews and other human beings, and a firm faith, albeit unsubstantiated, in the creative future of all humanity. Naive, perhaps, but still at the very core of values that propel historians to scour the past in search of worthwhile stories they themselves feel required to tell.

NOTES

1. Cecil Roth, *The Jews in the Renaissance* (Philadelphia, 1959), xiii.
2. Roth, xii–xiii.
3. Cecil Roth, *Personalities and Events in Jewish History* (Philadelphia, 1953), vi. On Baron's conception, see Robert Liberles, *Salo Wittmayer Baron: Architect of Jewish History* (New York, 1995).
4. Roth, *Personalities and Events*, vi.
5. Chaim Raphael, "In Search of Cecil Roth," *Commentary* (September, 1970), 79. See also A. V. Goodman, R. Loewe, and V. D. Lipman, "Obituary Tributes at Anglo-American Jewish Historical Conference," *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 23 (1972), 102–107; Lloyd P. Gartner, "Cecil Roth: Historian of Anglo-Jewry," *Studies in the Cultural Life of the Jews of England*, eds. Dov Noy and Issachar Ben-Ami (Jerusalem, 1975), 69–86.
6. Robert Bonfil, "Expressions of the Uniqueness of the Jewish People in Italy in the Period of the Renaissance (Hebrew)," *Sinai* 76 (1975), 36–46; idem, "The Historian's Perception of the Jews in the Italian Renaissance: Towards a Reappraisal," *Revue des études juives* 143 (1984), 59–82. See most recently where the same criticism appears, *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy* (Berkeley, 1994), and see my review in *Renaissance Quarterly* 49 (1996), 850–853.
7. Bonfil, "Historian's Perception," 69.
8. Cecil Roth, *The History of the Jews of Italy* (Philadelphia, 1946), 156.
9. Bonfil, "Historian's Perception," 70–71. Bonfil returns to this same quote in his *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*, 8–9: "But was the sky of Italy so blue and so bright for the Renaissance Jew? Did he really hear in the air such joyful and seductive music, inviting him to enjoy 'laughter and singing and perhaps drinking in the streets' in an atmosphere of extreme cordiality that, according to Cecil Roth, would have shocked only the most fanatic? And what about the Jews who stayed home cultivating a tendency to cover their eyes and plug their ears so as not to see the blue sky and not to hear the marvelous music, closing themselves off in their own conservative particularism? The implications of these questions for today are immediately evident."
10. The citation is from Roth, *Renaissance*, 49, discussed by Bonfil, "The Historian's Perception," 71–74.
11. Bonfil, "Historian's Perception," 79–80. Bonfil's latest formulation of this position is in his recent book mentioned above in note 6. See also my specific reservations in my review cited there.
12. I might add that while Bonfil and others have seen my first book, *The World*

of a Renaissance Jew: *The Life and Thought of Abraham ben Mordecai Farissol* (Cincinnati, 1981), as written very much in the mold of Rothian assumptions, it might be more accurate to see it as a beginning of a break from Roth, explicitly expressing reservations with the notion of a harmonious Italian-Jewish synthesis in the Renaissance. See the next note below.

13. Hava Tirosh-Rothchild, "Jewish Culture in Renaissance Italy—a Methodological Survey," *Italia, Studi e ricerche sulla storia, la cultura et la letteratura degli ebrei d'Italia* 9 (1990), 63–96. Compare my own historiographical essay in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. David B. Ruderman (New York, 1992), introduction.

14. In addition to my review of Bonfil's new book (above, n.6), see my earlier review of the original Hebrew edition of his seminal *The Rabbinate in Renaissance Italy* (Jerusalem, 1979), published in the *Association for Jewish Studies Newsletter*, 26 March 1980, 9–11.

15. Roth, *History of the Jews of Italy*, 155.

16. *Ibid.*, 156.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Bonfil, "Historian's Perception," 80.

19. *Ibid.*, 70.

20. *Ibid.*, 75.

21. Roth, *History of the Jews of Italy*, 388.

22. Raphael, "In Search of Cecil Roth," 75

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, 76.

25. See especially his aforementioned *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy* and his earlier essay, "Change in the Cultural Patterns of a Jewish Society in Crisis: Italian Jewry at the Close of the Sixteenth Century," *Jewish History* 3 (1988), 11–30 [republished in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. David B. Ruderman (New York, 1992), 401–425].

26. Indeed, in one of his earlier essays, "European History and Jewish History: Do Their Epochs Coincide?" *Menorah Journal* 16 (1929), 293–306, Roth paints the Renaissance era as repressive and aggressively nationalistic, a dark age for Jews, hardly the harmonic paradise of his later writing.

27. Bonfil, "Historian's Perception," 66–67.

28. *Ibid.*, 82.

29. The language is borrowed from Roth's own address cited in note 5 above.

SEVEN

Jewish Life in the Middle Ages
and the Jewish Life of
Israel Abrahams

ELLIOTT HOROWITZ

I have lived, and in a sense still live, under the Pharisaic Law myself. I have felt its limitations, I have groaned under its lack of sensibility to all that we call aesthetic. I have resented its narrowness, its nationalism, on the one hand, and its claim to the Jew's undivided allegiance on the other. . . . But I have also known the law's manifold joys, its power of hallowing life, its sturdy inculcation of right, its sobriety of discipline, its laudable attempt to associate ritual with heart service, its admission that the spirit giveth life, its refusal to accept that the letter killeth. I have known men devoted to the minutest ritual details, yet simple, spiritual, saintly. Thus I have enough sympathy with the Law to do it justice, not enough sympathy to do it the injustice of unqualified flattery.

Israel Abrahams read these words in February 1899 before the Society of Historical Theology at Oxford. He was forty years old, and about to be