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# Three Reviewers and the Academic Style of the *Jewish Quarterly Review* at Midcentury

## **Abstract**

A hundred years is a remarkable lifetime for any journal, especially a scholarly one in English focusing exclusively on Jewish civilization. During this impressive time span a dramatic and radical shift in the character and place of academic Jewish studies in the United States and throughout the world took place. *JQR* is surely a primary historical source for charting the history of higher Jewish learning in North America and its ultimate entrance and integration into the university.

## **Keywords**

Ellis Rivkin, Isaiah Sonne, Solomon Zeitlin

## **Disciplines**

History | Jewish Studies

## Three Reviewers and the Academic Style of the *Jewish Quarterly Review* at Midcentury

DAVID B. RUDERMAN

A HUNDRED YEARS is a remarkable lifetime for any journal, especially a scholarly one in English focusing exclusively on Jewish civilization. During this impressive time span a dramatic and radical shift in the character and place of academic Jewish studies in the United States and throughout the world took place. *JQR* is surely a primary historical source for charting the history of higher Jewish learning in North America and its ultimate entrance and integration into the university.

A century of publication is of course impossible to encapsulate in a short reflective essay. Instead, I searched for a meaningful snapshot in which to capture something of the flavor and character of *JQR* at the midpoint of its long career. *JQR*, true to its title, was the springboard for numerous reviews of books and academic projects, both narrowly focused and of a more general nature. In perusing the pages of *JQR* at midcentury, I was quickly attracted to several reviews of scholars who were my direct intellectual ancestors and who had personally influenced my own thinking in the course of my studies. I was also attentive to how some of the classic works and authors, at least classic from the perspective of our own times, were treated in the pages of the journal. I suppose most readers of reviews first notice the highly derisive ones which point out flaws in methodology, use of sources, and presentation. While we hate to admit it, some of us secretly enjoy reading this form of public ridicule, especially if we think the book is deserving of such criticism. We surely are shocked by the negative tone, sympathize with the author of the book under review, and are thankful that the daggers of the critic are not pointed at us. But at the same time, we are drawn to this brutal disparagement of a scholar and his professional product perhaps to satisfy our own prurient feeling and to take comfort in the thought that someone besides ourselves is the target of such intemperate backstabbing.

For my modest contribution to celebrating the wonderful career of

*JQR*, I have chosen three reviewers, all writing at midcentury and all known to me through their books and articles. How representative they are of the *longue durée* of the journal I do not know, but they certainly offer us something of an open window into the world of Jewish studies at the time they were written and to the specific role of *JQR* as an academic journal. Of the three, two of them, Isaiah Sonne and Ellis Rivkin, wrote in areas close to my own discipline. The third, a most dominating figure in the history of *JQR*, Solomon Zeitlin, worked in areas I know little about, but he had the self-confidence—should we say temerity?—to write on books and authors clearly outside his own field of specialization and closer to mine, and to one critical review I was especially attentive.

What characterized the world of Jewish studies inhabited by the three was its modest, even parochial, nature. Institutionally, Jewish studies was still practiced, in the main, at Jewish institutions of higher learning, primarily rabbinical seminaries such as the Hebrew Union College or the Jewish Theological Seminary, as well as Hebrew colleges such as those in New York City, Chicago, and Boston, and at the one unique secular institution of graduate study, Dropsie College. There was little sense that Jewish studies might aspire to reach beyond these ethnic and religious boundaries into the mainstream of academic life practiced in the university, despite the presence of a few exceptional scholars such as Salo W. Baron at Columbia and Harry Wolfson at Harvard. In this circumscribed environment of the seminary or Jewish college, the conversation was limited to a few academics and readers of their books and articles, and it was also highly personal since it was often the case that a reviewer well knew the author of the book on which he was writing. If, in fact, there was another audience to which the reviews were addressed, it was that community of scholars living and working in the land of Israel. Their conspicuous and increasingly influential writings could hardly be ignored by their academic counterparts sitting in the diasporas of Cincinnati and Philadelphia.

Solomon Zeitlin (1892–1976)—at the time the coeditor of *JQR* with Abraham Neuman—published a long essay titled “Jewish Learning in America” in the forty-fifth anniversary edition of *JQR*, appearing in 1955, in which he offered his own reflections, hopes, and frustrations on the state of the field.<sup>1</sup> This might offer us a useful opening by which to enter

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1. On Zeitlin, see Sidney Hoenig, “Zeitlin, Solomon,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* (2nd ed.; Detroit, 2007), 21:497; idem, *Solomon Zeitlin: Scholar Laureate: An Annotated Bibliography 1915–1970 with Appreciations of His Writings* (New York, 1971). The essay of Zeitlin to which I refer is “Jewish Learning in America,” *JQR* 45.4 (1955): 582–616.

the world of American Jewish studies circa 1950. Zeitlin, in a rather grandiose and highly idiosyncratic manner, presented American Jewish learning against the backdrop of that of other Jewish civilizations from ancient Palestine and Babylonia, to medieval Spain and northern Europe, to early modern Poland and finally to modern Russia and Germany. For Zeitlin, the foundations of Jewish learning in this country could be traced to Isaac Leeser, Sabato Morais, and Moses Dropsie, the pioneers, as he saw it, of advanced Judaic studies on this continent. Jewish learning was then stimulated at the turn of the century by such immigrants as Marcus Jastrow, Alexander Kohut, Benjamin Szold, and Isaac Meyer Wise. Zeitlin offered longer narratives about the scholarly contributions of the Hebrew Union College and the Jewish Theological Seminary, singling out Louis Ginzberg as “the dean of Jewish scholarship in America” and the author of a monumental work on the Palestinian Talmud, “the first and only serious rabbinical work published so far in this country.”<sup>2</sup> He also paused to mention cultural products of American Jewry such as the Jewish Publication Society of America, the *American Jewish Yearbook*, and the *Jewish Encyclopedia*.

Zeitlin unabashedly reserved the most honorable place of American Jewish learning to his own institution, Dropsie College, the only institution “to provide a place to study and examine objectively Jewish learning, not through colored glasses of partisanship, but in the true spirit of scholarship.”<sup>3</sup> In contrast to his high praise for Dropsie were his disparaging remarks about the American Academy for Jewish Research, founded in 1920. In a highly personalized manner, Zeitlin described the high hopes of the founding members, of which he was one, followed by his utter disappointment with its subsequent evolution: “The Academy no longer entertained the ideals of the organizers [after 1925]. It has ceased to function as an Academy for Jewish research. It has become a Society, a Club. I dare to say it has become a society associating itself with one particular institution [the Jewish Theological Seminary of America].”<sup>4</sup> In obvious contrast to the standards he promoted for his own *JQR*, Zeitlin could not fail to mention that some of the papers published in the *Proceedings* of the Academy were “below the standards of an Academy.”<sup>5</sup> He called for the full reorganization of this institution to fulfill the high ideals of its founders.

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2. Zeitlin, “Jewish Learning,” 597.

3. *Ibid.*, 600.

4. *Ibid.*, 603.

5. *Ibid.*

Zeitlin paid considerable attention to the Orthodox institutions of American Jewry from the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary to the many yeshivot of Lithuania and Poland transplanted to American soil. He offered interesting details about his personal visits to several of the most well-known and remarked how he sees yeshivah education, including that of the “ultra-Orthodox yeshivoh,” as more than a vestige or reminiscence of the past but as a vital part of a renaissance of Jewish learning in the United States. But he was also quick to reveal his own skepticism about this phenomenon and his own biases: “Although I was delighted to see that the American-born students have shown profound knowledge of the Talmud, I was filled with apprehension about their fanaticism and zeal, for they consider themselves the soldiers of God, holding that God is with them only; they are ready for a crusade.”<sup>6</sup> He was no less belittling of the non-Orthodox seminaries that “appear to have relegated rabbinic studies to a second place, stressing important secular endeavors which have greater appeal to the mass of Jews.”<sup>7</sup> The low intellectual standards of these institutions were only a part of “the decadence of learning and the lack of spiritual values . . . apparent in the modern, confused Jewish world,”<sup>8</sup> where Jewish books were penned by uneducated authors and national Jewish organizations published inferior and unworthy works. He also lamented the “menace” of anti-intellectualism posed by those who interpret Judaism as a mystical religion.<sup>9</sup>

Zeitlin concluded his assessment, however, on a more positive note. He took comfort in the emergence of a native rabbinate in this country, imported from neither a devastated Europe nor an emerging Israel, where, he declared, the status of Jewish scholarship was not high. He returned to underscore the singular role of Dropsie as “the only institution for fostering and advancing higher learning without an admixture of ideological doctrines.”<sup>10</sup> And he strongly believed that a center of Jewish learning can be created in this country, taking its place among the great centers of Jewish learning which flourished throughout Jewish history. In closing his essay, he stressed the need for Jewish philanthropy to promote more Jewish learning and focus less on the combating of anti-Semitism.

Despite the few hopeful signs Zeitlin portrayed in his 1955 overview of

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6. *Ibid.*, 609.

7. *Ibid.*, 611.

8. *Ibid.*, 612. He added in a footnote the Hebrew phrase *לא קרא ולא שנה* referring to the uneducated person.

9. *Ibid.*, 613.

10. *Ibid.*, 614.

Jewish learning in America, the general tone of his remarks was harshly negative. Jewish organizational life was superficial; the rabbinical seminaries were either too fanatical or lacking in rigorous rabbinic education; the American Academy for Jewish Research had become nothing more than a social club while only little Dropsie College could provide an environment for the objective and systematic study of Judaism. From Zeitlin's vantage point, there was no serious scholarship emerging from the centers of academic learning in Israel; he did not even acknowledge their presence and influence. Nor did he even conceive of the possibility that Jewish learning could take its curricular place as an integral part of the study of the humanities and social sciences within American universities. For Zeitlin, this development was not even a part of his wish list. Jewish learning, for good or for bad, was an activity practiced only by Jews and supported only by their own philanthropy. He never expected or imagined that these studies were of interest to any but a small company of colleagues and associates writing for the *Jewish Quarterly Review*. Given such narrow horizons and so limited an institutional base, the degree of familiarity among this closed circle of scholars known only to themselves was especially high; so was their hypercritical attitude toward each other's work.

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A colorful example of a critical reviewer writing in the pages of *JQR* was the formidable Isaiah Sonne (1887–1960). Born in Galicia, he taught in Florence and Rhodes before escaping Europe and arriving as an émigré scholar at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. There he resumed his academic career as professor and librarian.<sup>11</sup> Abraham Halkin, in assessing Sonne's academic career at his death, spoke candidly of the challenges Sonne faced throughout his career and their impact on his scholarly writing: "Owing to personal and external factors, he never knew the pleasures of peace and repose. This insecurity resulted in a degree of uncharitableness, in an extremely critical viewpoint, and in an aimless drifting in the fields of culture and scholarship."<sup>12</sup> Salo W. Baron, although acknowledging Sonne's inability to produce a major synthesis of Jewish history in his long career, was more charitable in pointing to his insatiable intellectual curiosity, his penchant for original and unorthodox

11. On Sonne, see Jerucham Tolkes, "Sonne, Isaiah," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (2nd ed.; 2007), 19:21; Isaac Ben-Zevi, ed., *Zikaron le-Yishayabu Zoneh* (Jerusalem, 1961).

12. Abraham S. Halkin, "Isaiah Sonne (1887–1960), the Historian," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 29 (1960–61): 9.

interpretations of sources ranging from antiquity to the eighteenth century and from ancient Israel to his beloved Italy, and his own commitment to “inserting” the Jewish historical experience into that of humanity as a whole.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps Sonne’s best-known review was that written on the classic history of Spanish Jewry by the eminent Jerusalem scholar Yizhak Baer. Sonne’s critique of Baer’s philosophy of history and his challenge to the author’s false dichotomy between mysticism and rationalism—between the “völkish” centripetal forces of self-preservation and the centrifugal elitist ones of cultural assimilation and apostasy—were also an assault on the Israeli historical establishment in general and its scholarship informed by Zionist ideology.<sup>14</sup>

Sonne’s critical stance regarding Jerusalem historians is also noticeable in a long review he wrote for *JQR* some years earlier on the new critical edition of *Sipur David Re’uveni*, the alleged diary of the sixteenth-century messianic adventurer David Re’uveni, edited with a long introduction and appendices by Aaron Zeev Aescoly.<sup>15</sup> The publication of this fascinating document in 1940 launched a new series published by the Palestinian Society of History and Ethnography called *Bibliotheca Historiographica Hebraica*, including a preface by Baer’s close colleague Ben Zion Dinur. As the inaugural volume in a new collection of texts emerging from the new center of Jewish learning in the land of Israel, it was meant to showcase the series’ high standards of scholarship as well as to highlight its intense interest in the history of Jewish messianism. Indeed, the same Aescoly was responsible for the well-known anthology of messianic texts published several years after his own untimely death.<sup>16</sup>

From the opening lines of his extensive review, Sonne conspicuously displayed his “disillusion” and contempt for the entire enterprise of Jewish scholarship in Palestine. He lamented Dinur’s rather vague program, as spelled out in his preface, veiled “in mystical-philosophical phraseology,” as he called it, reminiscent of the language he would later use to ridicule Baer’s understanding of the Jewish past. He reserved his most pointed criticism for the “exceedingly diffuse introduction” by Aescoly

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13. Salo W. Baron, “Isaiah Sonne, 1887–1960,” *Jewish Social Studies* 23 (1961): 130–32.

14. Isaiah Sonne, “On Baer and his Philosophy of Jewish History,” *Jewish Social Studies* 9 (1947): 61–80.

15. Isaiah Sonne, “*Bibliotheca Historiographica Hebraica*,” *JQR* 34.2 (1943): 243–59.

16. Aaron Ze’ev Aescoly, *Ha-Tenu’ot ha-meshihiyot be-Yisra’el* (Jerusalem, 1956; 2nd ed., 1993).



consisting of twelve chapters, constituting nearly three-fifths of the entire book. He took another swipe at the edition by gleefully pointing out that one of its sponsors, the same Yizhak Baer, had even disagreed with many of Aescoly's speculative conclusions but at least gave him credit for publishing a reliable scientific text. To this Sonne added: "I doubt whether Baer has really examined the text, and whether he would assume the responsibility for it."<sup>17</sup>

Sonne, of course, was an expert on Italian Hebrew paleography, had carefully examined the manuscripts of the diary, and was well equipped to challenge the assumption of both Aescoly and Baer that the new edition had improved on earlier editions of the text by Eduard Biberfeld and Adolph Neubauer. In a detailed excursus on the textual errors of the Aescoly edition, Sonne was able to call into question the reliability of the new edition, its heavy reliance on the previous edition of Neubauer, even copying the mistakes of this earlier work without consulting its essential table of additions and corrections at the end of the volume. While acknowledging that the version Aescoly had produced contained some ingenious suggestions and interpretations, he concluded that on the whole "the edition marks rather a decline rather than a progress"<sup>18</sup> in comparison to the previous editions. It was not merely the multitude of errors Sonne had discovered that led him to this bleak conclusion but also "a mental attitude" reflected in the errors, hovering on the surface of the text in search of far-fetched emendations without seriously penetrating the content or context of the work. Sonne dismissed Aescoly's proposal that the original language of the diary was Judeo-German and offered his own highly learned discourse on the linguistic peculiarities to which Aescoly had pointed, demonstrating how the same words could conceivably be derived from Italian, and that in many cases the Italian locutions offered a more plausible clue in locating the original language of the diary.

Sonne reserved his final objection for the pretentious 240-page introduction by the editor, an introduction which obscured the central themes and figures of the text, and whose notes confused various details—names and dates—in both Hebrew and Italian sources. Having demolished the volume in every respect, Sonne concluded that though the book may be clever and interesting, it is not what historians might expect from a "*Bibliotheca Historiographica Hebraica*," an ultimate put down of Aescoly's

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17. "Bibliotheca," 243–44. The citation is on 244, n. 2.

18. *Ibid.*, 251.

illustrious sponsors and their claims for a superior scholarship emanating from Jerusalem.<sup>19</sup>

Sonne's first love was Italian Jewry, and anyone who dared write on the subject, as Aescoly learned, could be subjected to Sonne's stinging barbs based on his vast knowledge of the subject and his high professional standards. But Sonne wrote articles, not books, and he was known only among the small community of researchers with whom he was in contact. This was not the case for Cecil Roth, the Oxford historian, who composed books, popular books written in an eloquent and accessible prose, that reached a considerably larger readership. From the publication of his earliest book on the history of Venetian Jewry, Roth built a reputation in the English-speaking world for his broad historical surveys, books with few notes and learned references (in contrast to his many journal articles) that successfully engaged nonacademic readers with their entertaining narratives and their penchant for the unusual and extraordinary. When Sonne reviewed Roth's *History of the Jews of Italy* in the pages of *JQR*, it was reasonable to assume that the reviewer might use the opportunity to challenge the reputation of his competitor.<sup>20</sup> But more than an exercise motivated by jealousy or self-promotion, Sonne actually addressed some very serious issues of Italian Jewish historiography still quite relevant to our own day.

Sonne was quite generous to Roth in the opening of his review, praising him for his vast erudition and fine literary taste: "His presentation of historical events and processes is always vivid and engaging; he never descends into pedantry."<sup>21</sup> His objections to the book focused more on the basic assumptions of Roth's narrative, what Sonne called his "heteronomous approach to Jewish history." By this he meant Roth's obsession with focusing on the contributions of the Jews to Christian and Western civilization. With such distortion, Sonne provocatively claimed, Roth had "come perilously near the mode of thinking of Jewish theologians who consider Jewish history, even the very existence of the Jewish people, as a mere instrument for the promotion of Christianity."<sup>22</sup>

Sonne's primary example of Roth's "heteronomous" approach was his chapter on the ghetto. For Roth, the degeneration of the Italian Jewish

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19. *Ibid.*, 257–59. On the so-called Jerusalem school of which Baer and Dinur were leading representatives, see David N. Myers, *Reinventing the Jewish Past: European Jewish Intellectuals and the Zionist Return to History* (New York, 1995).

20. Isaiah Sonne, "The History of the Jews of Italy," *JQR* 38.4 (1948): 469–72.

21. *Ibid.*, 469.

22. *Ibid.*

community in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was due to the ghetto. When they mingled with Christians during the Renaissance, their broad cultural horizons were expanded and their life was “a microcosm of Italian life in general.” Through their enforced segregation, their intellectual life declined because they were so dependent on the Christian world. Sonne objected to this characterization of ghetto Jewry. In spite of their segregation, Sonne maintained, the culture of Italian Jews “did not cease to be a constituent element of Italian culture in general, just as it was in the period of the Renaissance.” If Jews in the ghetto era were limited intellectually, this was a wider reflection of the intellectual world of their Christian contemporaries, not a fault of their own cultural resources.<sup>23</sup>

Sonne’s sensitivity to Roth’s emphasis on Jewish “contributions” reflects in an interesting way more recent historical thinking.<sup>24</sup> His understanding of the ghetto, in contrast to that of Roth, anticipated the later revisionist approach of Robert Bonfil in his own writing on the ghetto, which offers a direct challenge to the portrait of Roth.<sup>25</sup> Sonne continued to hammer Roth on several less important details which suggested to him the questionable nature of this book as “scientific” history. Roth himself responded in a later issue to some of these minor issues while Sonne had the last word in a rather silly and meaningless exchange.<sup>26</sup> But Sonne did capture in this penetrating review the more significant limitations in Roth’s approach, and these still resonate among contemporary scholars in their studies of Italian Jewish history.

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Sonne was not the only historian to raise concerns over Roth’s popular and vividly presented historical narratives. Ellis Rivkin (1918–2010) was considerably younger than Zeitlin and Sonne when he penned his own reviews of Cecil Roth in *JQR*. Armed with a doctorate in history from the

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23. *Ibid.*, 470–71. The citation is on 471.

24. For an excellent recent discussion of this approach in Jewish historiography, see the essays collected in Jeremy Cohen and Richard I. Cohen, eds., *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization: Reassessing an Idea* (Oxford, 2008).

25. See Robert Bonfil, *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy* (Berkeley, Calif., 1994), and see my own views on both Roth and Bonfil in David B. Ruderman, “Cecil Roth, Historian of Italian Jewry: A Reassessment,” in *The Jewish Past Revisited: Reflections on Modern Jewish Historians*, ed. D. N. Myers and D. B. Ruderman (New Haven, Conn., 1998), 128–42.

26. Cecil Roth, “A Reply to a Reviewer,” *JQR* 39.2 (1948): 217; Isaiah Sonne, “A Word of Clarification (To Dr. Roth’s Note in the “*JQR*,” XXXIX, 217),” *JQR* 39.3 (1949): 327.

Johns Hopkins University, he approached the study of Jewish sources both in antiquity and in early modern Europe from a broad historical perspective and with an appreciation of the larger economic and social forces propelling the Jewish historical experience.<sup>27</sup> His contact with *JQR* and Dropsie surely came from his teaching stint at Graetz College in Philadelphia prior to assuming a permanent position in Cincinnati at the Hebrew Union College, where he coincidentally would join his older colleague Isaiah Sonne.

Eight years before publishing an article in which he openly challenged the reliability of inquisitional sources in reconstructing the cultural and religious lives of the conversos,<sup>28</sup> and in his last year as an instructor at Graetz College before moving on to HUC, Rivkin wrote two reviews of Cecil Roth's twin biographies of Doña Gracia Mendes, the well-known converso merchant and benefactor, and her nephew Don Joseph the Duke of Naxos.<sup>29</sup> Rivkin, like Sonne, initially praised Roth's contribution to the writing of Jewish history but then expressed his profound disappointment over the quality of Roth's depiction of Doña Gracia. It is a biography written by a devotee, he claimed, not by an objective historian, as these lines written by Roth himself testify: "[the author] fails to find any stain, however, trivial, on the nobility of her character, or any detail, however insignificant, calculated to modify the contemporary judgment. No other woman in Jewish history has been surrounded with such devotion and affection. No other woman in Jewish history, it seems, has deserved it more."<sup>30</sup> For Rivkin, a biographer was obliged to portray Doña Gracia as realistically as possible, not merely as a philanthropist and humanitarian but as the head of a sprawling commercial and banking empire. Roth never gained access to the correspondence and business papers of the firm or to archival documents of her extensive political contacts. But it was not merely the lack of documentation that diminished Roth's presentation but also his naiveté in failing to ask the right questions about this resourceful entrepreneur: "The biographer must realize that a merchant prince in those days required the use of intelligence,

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27. On Rivkin, see Martin Cohen, "Rivkin, Ellis," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (2nd ed.; 2007), 17:349. Rivkin develops his historiographical views in his *The Shaping of Jewish History: A Radical New Interpretation* (New York, 1971).

28. Ellis Rivkin, "The Utilization of Non-Jewish Sources for the Reconstruction of Jewish History," *JQR* 48.2 (1957): 183–203.

29. Ellis Rivkin, "The House of Nasi: Doña Gracia," *JQR* 39.3 (1949): 309–15; idem, "The House of Nasi: The Duke of Naxos," *JQR* 40.2 (1949): 205–7.

30. "The House of Nasi: Doña Gracia," 309.

firmness, adroitness, connivance, dissemblance, and audacity." The failure of Roth to present "the real flesh and blood Doña Gracia—the imperious, dictatorial, hard-headed woman of affairs that she was—stemmed directly from his uncritical use of the sources."<sup>31</sup> Rivkin observed that scanty evidence existed to establish a complete portrait of this powerful magnate but he also pointed to Roth's limited perspective in interpreting the sources that were at his disposal. A case in point was the Ancona boycott, which Roth portrayed as a battle between the unselfish forces of light of Doña Gracia and her allies and the sinister and egotistical forces of darkness of her opponent, Joseph Soncino, and his allies. For Rivkin both sides were motivated by economic concerns including Doña Gracia, who was primarily driven by her business interests rather than her religious or ethnic loyalties.<sup>32</sup>

Roth felt the necessity to side with Doña Gracia on the issue of the Ancona boycott, Rivkin boldly declared, not because of the evidence but because of his need to tell a moral tale: that the tragedy of European Jewry was a consequence of inaction. In this judgment, Roth was not only subjective; he was naive in thinking that Jews are always the masters of their own fate: "Indeed, it is difficult to see how the actions of Jews, unaided, can ever decide their fate as long as they are a comparatively small part of a complicated social structure. Irrespective of one's wishes, or of the claims of justice, their fate is determined by forces over which they have little control."<sup>33</sup>

Rivkin's review of Roth's biography of Don Joseph Nasi was no more complimentary. He accused Roth of inflating meager source material into an entire volume, leading to unnecessary repetitions and to the inclusion of extraneous material unrelated to his subject. As it in the case of Doña Gracia, Rivkin accused Roth of overlooking "the implications of Don Joseph the merchant banker, the astute politician, the wily courtier" in favor of focusing one-dimensionally on his Jewish background. Rather than view the duke of Naxos as a vacillating, whimsical, and flamboyant type of person, Rivkin argued that his anti-Venetian policy and his neutrality with Spain should have been "rooted in the realities of sixteenth century economics and politics." Don Joseph should not be construed as

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31. *Ibid.*, 310–11.

32. *Ibid.*, 311–14.

33. *Ibid.*, 314. For a good illustration of Rivkin's "structural analysis" in understanding the invisible forces determining Jewish history, see Ellis Rivkin, "The Saadia-David Ben Zakkai Controversy, A Structural Analysis," in *Studies and Essays in Honor of Abraham A. Neuman*, ed. M. Ben-Horin, B. D. Weinryb, and S. Zeitlin (Leiden, 1962), 388–423.

a proto-Zionist “anxious to solve the problem of Jewish homelessness.” Rather “he was a clear-headed merchant and an astute politician who saw in Tiberias the possibility for the development of new industry and more wealth.”<sup>34</sup>

Rivkin’s preference to interpret Don Joseph within the framework of mercantilist politics ultimately revealed his own understanding of history and those allegedly invisible forces of economics and politics that determined individual choice and action. Roth’s evaluation portrayed Don Joseph as merely an “incongruous personality” whose every action was arbitrary and unpredictable. But the task of the historian for Rivkin was to evaluate Don Joseph’s career in light of business and political interests in the sixteenth century. Don Joseph’s actions can be explained rationally based on his political and economic options “and are not dependent on the imagination of the biographer.” Roth’s sentimental and romantic portrait, “charged through and through as it is with emotional commitments to present-day solutions of the Jewish problem,” was ultimately inadequate for Rivkin in constructing a meaningful account of the past.<sup>35</sup> As in the case of Sonne’s reviews, the young Rivkin had utilized his critical comments to raise fundamental questions in understanding Jewish history. For both Sonne and Rivkin, each in his own way, the issue was how to overcome sloppy scholarship, apologetics, and sentimentality, in the interest of an objective and unsentimental view of the past, one based on the latest insights and tools of contemporary historical scholarship. Sonne would not have been fully comfortable with Rivkin’s deterministic view of causation. But he shared Rivkin’s ideal for a history liberated from contemporary ideology, Zionist or otherwise.<sup>36</sup> Their reviews reveal their deep impatience with historians who could not meet their rigorous intellectual expectations and standards.

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In returning to Solomon Zeitlin to conclude this essay, I wish to reiterate that I do not intend to discuss his primary fields of expertise. It is only sufficient to mention his considerable rabbinic and theological training in

34. “The House of Nasi: The Duke of Naxos,” 206.

35. *Ibid.*, 207.

36. Compare Rivkin’s review of A. Menes and A. Steinberg, eds., *The Jewish People: Past and Present* (New York, 1946), in *JQR* 40.1 (1949): 123–24: “Committed to a Jewish nationalist program in the present, Menes and Steinberg cannot avoid finding support for it in the past. They impose their subjective interpretation on the past and measure it by their own standards. Nation, national autonomy, and state are used with an almost talismanic reverence . . . National chauvinism and historic reality are indeed poor bedfellows!”

Russia and France before completing his second doctorate at Dropsie (the first was at the École Rabbinique in Paris), his extensive books and essays on Judaism in the Second Temple period, and his controversial views on the dating of the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>37</sup> As editor of *JQR*, he assumed the prerogative of writing numerous reviews and essays on a wide variety of subjects whenever he felt the need, which was quite frequently. A wonderful example of his bombastic style in writing reviews is his critical essay on Gershom Scholem's original Hebrew version of his magnum opus on Shabbetai Zevi, first published in 1957. The title of this essay already betrayed the author's tendentious take on the subject: "The Sabbatians and the Plague of Mysticism." In a field Zeitlin knew little about, he began appropriately by acknowledging Scholem's commanding presence in this field and his masterful control of the primary literature regarding the Sabbatean movement. But despite Scholem's claim "to avoid partisanship and theological bias," Zeitlin found him guilty of both in his understanding of Shabbetai Zevi.<sup>38</sup>

Zeitlin was particularly skeptical about Scholem's contention that Lurianic Kabbalah was the main cause for generating the Sabbatean movement. For Zeitlin, this was bad historical method. A historian should account for such a complex historical phenomenon by noting multiple causes such as the impact of the Thirty Years War, chiliastic tendencies in the Christian world, the psychological responses of the Marranos to the messiahship of Shabbetai Zevi, the impact of the Chmielnicki massacres of the Jews in Poland, economic divisions between rich and poor, and even the possible relationship between the Puritan movement and the circles surrounding the alleged Jewish messiah. For Zeitlin, Scholem's exclusive focus on the internal link of Luria to Shabbetai Zevi ignored what he called "the historical backgrounds" of the movement.<sup>39</sup>

By raising this primary issue of how to explain the genesis of this messianic movement, Zeitlin anticipated by many years the kind of criticisms leveled by several scholars against Scholem's reconstruction, particularly those written after his death. I refer specifically to the reevaluation of the relationship between the Chmielnicki pogroms and Sabbateanism by Yaakov Barnai as well as his emphasis on the agency of the Marranos in the emergence and spread of Sabbateanism.<sup>40</sup> Zeitlin also anticipated

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37. See n. 1 above.

38. Solomon Zeitlin, "The Sabbatians and the Plague of Mysticism," *JQR* 49.2 (1958): 145–55, especially 146.

39. *Ibid.*, 146–48.

40. Yaakov Barnai, "Christian Hebraism and the Portuguese Marranos: The Emergence of Sabbateanism in Smyrna," *Jewish History* 7 (1993): 119–26; *idem*, *Shabta'ut: hebetim hevratiyim* (Jerusalem, 2000).

Moshe Idel's strong challenge to the alleged linkages between Lurianic Kabbalah and the spread of the Sabbatean movement or Matt Goldish's attempt to contextualize Sabbateanism within the heated passions of Christian millenarianism in the seventeenth century.<sup>41</sup> Zeitlin's early reservations about the magisterial edifice Scholem had built clearly parallel Sonne's adumbrations of Bonfil's critique of Cecil Roth and of the conventional view of the ghetto to which I referred earlier.

But despite Zeitlin's more sober historical reservations, he could not help himself from divulging his personal uneasiness with the whole bizarre episode of Shabbetai Zevi and his own alarm in sensing that Scholem identified too closely with his subject. These feelings were triggered by Scholem's characterization of Nathan of Gaza, Shabbetai Zevi's primary associate, as a genius and by appending to his name the titles "rabbi" and "prophet." At this point, Zeitlin released a barrage of criticism that transparently exposed his own personal definition of what he considered Judaism to be, one that naturally excluded the faith of the Sabbateans:

Prof. Scholem in his theological explanation of the apostasy of Sabbatai Zevi and his adulation of Nathan whom he calls *rabbi* and *prophet* reveals that he did not write a non-partisan book on Sabbatai Zevi but a tendentious one, that he followed the theology of the Sabbateans. One has the right to assume that his leaning inclines towards the Sabbatean movement . . . Being engrossed in the study of the Sabbatians, Professor Scholem did not see Judaism as it truly is. He did not see the forest on account of the trees.<sup>42</sup>

In accusing Scholem of identifying too readily with the faith of the Sabbateans, whom Zeitlin considered outside the mainstream of Judaism, he was prefiguring the more extensive critique leveled at Scholem by Baruch Kurzweil some eight years later.<sup>43</sup> Zeitlin saw the failure of Sabbateanism

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41. Moshe Idel, "One from a Town, Two from a Clan, the Diffusion of Lurianic Kabbala and Sabbateanism: A Re-evaluation." *Jewish History* 7 (1993): 79–104; Matt Goldish, *The Sabbatean Prophets* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004); Matt Goldish and Richard Popkin, eds. *Jewish Messianism in the Early Modern World* (Dordrecht, 2001).

42. "The Sabbatians and the Plague of Mysticism," 153.

43. See David Myers, "The Scholem-Kurzweil Debate and Modern Jewish Historiography," *Modern Judaism* 6 (1986): 261–86; Noam Zadoff, "In the Garden Beds of Nihilism: The Controversy between Baruch Kurzweil and Gershom Scholem on the Study of Sabbatianism" (Hebrew), *Kabbalah* 16 (2006/7): 299–360.



through the prism of contemporary challenges facing American Judaism. In the seventeenth century, Zeitlin claimed, the rabbis failed their constituents either because of fear or lack of courage in standing up to the dangerous Sabbatean movement, and “thus the Jews lost their faith in the rabbis as their spiritual leaders.” And so Zeitlin concluded: “The mysticism of today like the mysticism of the Sabbatians is based primarily on obscurantism and is against knowledge . . . mysticism in its new garb presents as great a danger and threat to true Judaism as mysticism in the old garb. Judaism is based on knowledge and learning. Judaism without knowledge is a body without a soul which cannot endure by mere verbal injections.”<sup>44</sup>

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In bringing to a close this short excursion through the reviews of several self-assured and outspoken scholars writing for *JQR*, I hope I have conveyed something of the flavor of their professional lives and intellectual convictions. The world of Jewish studies in North America in the 1940s and 1950s was indeed narrow, provincial, and insular. Those who were its primary actors had little influence on the wider world of academic learning or on the larger Jewish community beyond their small coterie of students at small Jewish institutions in Philadelphia or Cincinnati. While their impact was limited, they acted as if they were performing on a wide stage and as if the stakes regarding what they wrote about and what they critiqued were noticeably high. Their words were biting and their minds were thoroughly engaged as they pointed their loaded guns at each other. As early as the 1940s, one senses the strong competitive energies between scholars in Palestine/Israel and in the American diaspora. Whether they identified with Zionism or not, the reviewers we have examined took pleasure in pointing out the inadequacies of scholarship emerging from the land of Israel and of the defects of a history tinged with national chauvinism. Few in that day, either in America or Palestine, could have imagined that the discourse about Jewish texts and contexts would

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44. “The Sabbatians and the Plague of Mysticism,” 154–55. For two other examples of Zeitlin’s severe and disparaging challenges to major scholars of his era, see his review of Salo W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, in *JQR* 43.1 (1952): 97–110; and his review of Louis Finkelstein, ed., *The Jews: Their History, Culture and Religion* (New York, 1949), in *JQR* 41.2 (1950): 225–41. In the first, Zeitlin claimed that Baron was not up to the task of writing a history of the talmudic period; in the second, titled “Goodwill and Scholarship,” he upbraided Finkelstein and his contributors for writing apologetics rather than critical scholarship, reminiscent of similar accusations leveled by Sonne and Rivkin above.

migrate so dramatically from the narrow halls of Dropsie and HUC to the wider corridors of Harvard, Yale, and Penn, and to hundreds of other universities around the world.

Despite the parochial nature of their exchanges and their own personal biases and jealousies, which are often on display in the pages of the journal, the reviewers I have examined had interesting things to say about each other's work. They aspired to be serious scholars and good historians, and they took great pride in their craft, which they perceived to be a significant contribution to human knowledge. While they were still situated outside the hallowed walls of the great universities, they were surely attuned to new questions and new approaches emanating from these institutions; even from a distance, they were imbibing the professional ethos and standards of scholars well established in other fields of learning. Only a decade or two later, their students and younger colleagues would gain new opportunities in the American university which they did not have, but for which they had paved the way.