

## **Jewish Scholarship and Philosophy in the Renaissance**

International conference of the Leopold-Zunz-Zentrum zur Erforschung des europäischen Judentums and the Wolfenbütteler Arbeitskreis für Renaissanceforschung  
17-19 September 2000 in Wolfenbüttel

This international conference, organized by the Leopold-Zunz-Zentrum zur Erforschung des europäischen Judentums (Giuseppe Veltri, Halle) and the Wolfenbütteler Arbeitskreis für Renaissanceforschung (Heribert Smolinsky, Freiburg; Friedrich Niewöhner, Wolfenbüttel), focussed on a topic to date largely neglected in European Jewish and Renaissance studies. The venue, a *bibliotheca illustris*, offered a stimulating background. With its huge collection of early modern printed books, the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel reflects the encyclopaedic scholarship of the Renaissance and Baroque periods. The mix of participants from Europe, Israel and the United States, consisting of both younger scholars and internationally outstanding experts in the Jewish cultural history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, provided a rare opportunity for lively and natural interchange and discussion.

In his welcome address, Giuseppe Veltri stated that the aim of the conference was to present biblio-graphical and intellectual portraits of Jewish scholars, with an aim to examining their perceptions of their own identity and delineating their influence on Judaism and Christianity. As Veltri put it, the main purpose was “to trace out a map of Jewish scholarly self-perception and the adoption of Jewish scholarly thought in the Christian Renaissance, where the *vir doctus* was the microcosm of the *templum mundi*, the mirror of divine knowledge”.

Opening lecture:

David B. Ruderman (Philadelphia): “Reflections on the Social and Cultural Role of the Jewish Intellectual in the Renaissance and Early Modern Europe (1450–1700)”

Introducing his lecture with the personal remark that this was his first trip to Germany, Ruderman noted the special meaning of speaking about Jewish intellectual tradition in one of Europe’s historic intellectual centres. He then highlighted several characteristics of the Jewish intellectual in the Renaissance era: first of all, the mobility of the scholar of this period, whose encounter with different surroundings deeply influenced the fluidity and reformulation of his thought. Underlining the special role of rabbis as cultural producers, Ruderman emphasized that the frequently drawn opposition between a traditional versus an external mindset is a false dichotomy and the wrong way to assess the shaping of cultural identity in this period. As an impact of the print revolution, the Jewish intellectual of that time developed a new awareness of multiple sources of knowledge, both within Judaism and beyond. The *hakham kolel*, as defined by Judah Messer Leon, had to find ways to master different kinds of sources and truths and to integrate them to the extent he was able.

Ruderman referred especially to the emergence of Christian Hebraists claiming expertise in Kabbalah. To an unprecedented degree, Christians were now able to master Jewish traditions without any recourse to Jews. Ruderman stressed the fact that since the Renaissance, Jewish learning has not been the sole possession of Jews alone. With a certain hint to the situation of post-Shoah Jewish Studies in Europe, he acknowledged that this “might appear to be a natural consequence of the ambience created by the secular university, yet from the perspective of traditional Jewish culture, it might appear abnormal and bizarre”.

During the two subsequent conference days, the lectures were grouped into thematical sessions.

Session 1: Jewish Scholarship and Humanist Culture

Adam Shear (Arlington): “Judah Moscato: A Jewish Humanist?”

The presentation offered a fresh reading of Judah Moscato's (c.1530–c.1593) commentary on Judah Halevi's *Sefer ha-kuzari*. As Adam Shear outlined, Moscato integrated a number of elements into the preface of his *Kol Yehuda* that may be seen as typical of humanist practice. For example, Moscato discussed the dating of Halevi's work as well as the historicity of the frame story of the *Kuzari*. Moreover, Moscato considered different readings of the text, comparing several manuscripts and printed editions. As in the case of Judah Messer Leon's *Sefer nofet tsufim*, Moscato's orientation towards the Renaissance is most significantly documented by his intense interest in rhetoric, using the *Kuzari* as a model of good rhetorical form. Bringing the classical rhetorical concepts of Cicero and Quintilian to bear on Jewish texts, Moscato aimed to prove the compatibility between the two traditions. By describing Moscato's commentary as an “encyclopaedization” of the *Kuzari*, Shear pointed to another Renaissance tendency of the *Kol Yehuda*. Nevertheless, Shear concluded, he would not characterize Moscato as “overwhelmed by Renaissance culture”.

Joanna Weinberg (London): “Azariah de' Rossi: Father of Scholars”

In her lecture, Weinberg delineated an intellectual portrait of Azariah de' Rossi (c.1511–c.1578) who was called by later *maskilim* a „father of scholars“. Quoting from his epitaph, whose inscription reflects Greek pagan epigrams and does not hint at the religion of the deceased at all, Weinberg pointed to the exceptional openness Rossi showed to the world around him. Nonetheless committed to his Judaism, he was conscious of living in two intellectual worlds and intentionally addressed different kinds of audiences. Weinberg exemplified this with Azariah's assessment of the Syriac version of the Gospels: against the background of the proclamation of the Vulgate as the official text (1546), he aspires to the highest level of truth by using the Syriac text to correct the Latin one. Criticizing in this context both Talmudic authorities and Augustine, Rossi enables different kinds of readers to identify with his remarks. When he discusses how the original Aramaic inscription of the INRI at the site of Jesus' crucifixion might have read, he even refers to images of the *titulus* in church paintings of the time, e.g., to Bellini. In this way we can see him entering churches and looking at paintings with a professional eye. As Weinberg stressed, Rossi's discussion of the Gospels extends beyond mere apologetics and is a proof of his outstanding role as a “seeker after truth”.

Session 2: Biography and Historiography

Fabrizio Lelli (Florence): “The Reappraisal of Biography and Autobiography in Johanan Alemanno's Writings”

According to Lelli, Johanan Alemanno was the first Jewish scholar to adopt the humanist revival of biographies and literary portraits of ancient historical figures in his own work. His commentary on the Song of the Songs, entitled *Heshek Shelomo* and dedicated to Pico della Mirandola, is shaped as a biography of the „classical“ Jewish King Solomon, the alleged author of the biblical book. In the manner typical of fifteenth-century life-writers, Alemanno made simultaneous use of motifs drawn from real (biblical) history and imaginary elements. History and praise were combined in a way similar to the ancient literary sub-genre of the effigies, which also inspired Renaissance artistic iconographies of real or legend-ary figures of the past. Thus, the biographic character poetically portrayed became an exemplum of virtue: as Lelli showed, Johanan described Solomon as a man who attained the ultimate human goal, attachment to God (*devekut*). In depicting the ancient Jewish king as the paradigm for any Jew wishing to become a universal wise man, a *hakham kolel*, Alemanno even revealed his autobiographic self-perception.

Martin Jacobs (Berlin): “Joseph ha-Kohen, Paolo Giovio and Sixteenth-Century Historiography”

Against the background of the scholarly debate over the degree to which Renaissance historiography influenced Jewish historical writing, the lecture focussed on Joseph ha-Kohen and his Franco-Turkish chronicle. Comparing the *Divre ha-yamim* (1554) to its Italian sources for Ottoman history, e.g., Paolo Giovio, Jacobs showed how Joseph ha-Kohen adopted some of the rhetorical patterns of sixteenth-century Christian historiography. He followed his sources in numerical data and other details, but denied their secular tendencies, reintroducing into the material a religious factor which was intentionally ignored by humanist historians. As Jacobs stressed, ha-Kohen was not the only Italian chronicler who rejected the humanist concept of history. So did the writers of the universal chronicles newly emerging in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. In the case of ha-Kohen, Jacobs explained the ambiguities in his historical writings as an expression of the ambivalent situation of a Jewish intellectual who, thanks to the invention of the printing press, had access to new sources of information, but lived under social conditions quite different from those of the famous humanist historians. His special problem of integrating Jewish and general history mirrors the fact that even in Renaissance Italy, Jews were not integrated within Christian society.

### Session 3: The *Vir Doctus* between Religions and Confessions

Harvey Hames (Beer-Sheva): "Elijah del Medigo: An Archetype of the Halakhic Man?"

Elijah del Medigo is frequently portrayed as an extreme rational Averroist, a proponent of the double-truth doctrine and an anti-kabbalist. According to Hames, however, a careful reading of Elijah's *Behinat ha-dat* (1496) suggests that the book does not endorse even one of these concepts. For Elijah, philosophy functioned as a key to the intellectual world of his time, but could never be the criterion for examining faith. Although *Behinat ha-dat* was written after the author's return to Crete (1490), the work should be interpreted in the light of Elijah's Italian years and his contacts with leading Christian intellectuals. The use made by Marcilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola of the Kabbalah in the service of Christianity led Elijah to re-examine his own religious beliefs. For Elijah, the affinity between Kabbalah and Neoplatonism clearly demonstrates its lack of potential for revealing the truth, and consequently cannot be used to prove the veracity of Christianity. At the end of his lecture, Hames drew intriguing parallels between Elijah's identification of the true person of faith and Joseph Soloveitchik's *Halakhic Man* (written in 1944). Soloveitchik, like Elijah, deals with problems posed by philosophy and recalling challenges of Christianity, and finds the true answers within the realms of Halakhah.

Eleazar Gutwirth (Tel Aviv): "Amatus Lusitanus and Converso Culture"

Emphasizing Iberian and Converso aspects in Amatus Lusitanus's (1511–1568) writings, Gutwirth pointed to how this scholar of Portuguese origin had perceived himself and shaped his identity. Amatus had studied in Salamanca, served as a physician in Ferrara, treated Pope Julius III several times and finally, as many other neophytes, escaped from Ancona to Salonika. His literary fame is due to his commentary on Dioscorides (1553) and his *Centuriae* (written between 1549 and 1561), in which Amatus collected 700 medical case studies and described their treatment and results. As Gutwirth made plausible, Amatus's work should be characterized as an amalgam of history, geography and medicine. Following the scholarly practice of his time, Amatus was concerned with the reliability of classical medical texts and distinguished between text, translation and commentaries. He does not care whether a text comes "from the Romans, Arabs or the Christians"; what matters to him is its quality. National characteristics are explained by Amatus as products of natural causes: in describing the treatment of Azariah de' Rossi, he attributes the so-called Jewish melancholy to a bad diet. His medical ethics and his adherence to Judaism are demonstrated in a special oath in the name of the Ten Commandments.

### Session 4: Philosophy and the Sciences

Sina Rauschenbach (Berlin): “Joseph Albo: Between Science and Belief”

The presentation dealt with Joseph Albo's *Sefer ha-ikkarim*, written a few decades before the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula. It described how Albo (c.1360 – still active in 1433) combined two apparently contradictory conceptions of Judaism, one scientific and the other dogmatic. Rauschenbach stressed the fact that the *Sefer ha-ikkarim* was targeted at a special audience, Jews who had become uncertain in their religious belief due to Christian repression, missionary activities and forced disputations. Against this background, the “scientific approach” proves to be not only an apology for Judaism, but a polemic against Christianity as well. While Judaism is depicted by Albo as the only logical conclusion from the premises required by any divine law, Christians and Muslims are obliged to question the divine character of their laws. As Rauschenbach showed, Albo's “scientific approach” is subordinated to the dogmatic one and finally turns out to be no more than a substitute for belief should that fail.

Alessandro Guetta (Paris): “Abraham Portaleone's Aspiration to be a Teacher”

Based on a comparison between two works by Abraham Portaleone (1542–1612), *De auro dialoghi tres* (1582) and *Shiltei ha-gibborim* (1612), Guetta's lecture reconstructed Portaleone's intellectual development. The earlier Latin dialogue dealt with the possible medicinal uses of gold and reflected in this context on good scientific method and the limitations of knowledge. Towards the end of his life, Portaleone harnessed his secular scholarship to the service of religious erudition and practice. In *Shiltei ha-gibborim*, he later described the architecture, furniture and rites of the Jerusalem Temple. The main question posed by Guetta was whether certain aspects of the younger Portaleone's scientific thinking found their way into his late work. According to Guetta, Portaleone's earlier experimentalist vision was then incorporated into an altogether different conceptual framework: in *Shiltei ha-gibborim*, Portaleone envisaged secular science as ancillary to sacred science. The result was “no harmonious integration of science and religion, nor was it a negation of modernity”.

Session 5: Attitudes to Philosophy

Giuseppe Veltri (Halle): “Leone Ebreo's Concept of a Jewish Philosophy”

Was Judah Leone ben Isaac Sommo (1527–1592), also known as Leone Ebreo, “the only real Jewish Renaissance philosopher”, or was his *Dialoghi d' amore* (1541) “a book of philosophy written by a Jew”? Proceeding from these quotations taken from the history of scholarship, Veltri opened his lecture on Leone's dialogues which celebrate the cosmic love between God, the universe and man. In contrast to previous scholarship, Veltri pointed out that the problem of Leone's position among Renaissance intellectuals is not the Jewishness of his speculations, but the literary and philosophical value of his writing. Leone's use of the symbolic images of the sun, the mirror, and the light in explaining the process of knowledge, starting from God down to the level of man, is deeply influenced by Marsilio Ficino. Leone's novelty consists in the claim that the doctrines of the triune nature of God as lover, beloved and love and the divine wisdom as a unique divinity, known in triune form, are originally Jewish. The exceptional echo enjoyed by Leone's work was due to its popular appeal, namely as a non-academic attempt to harmonize Plato with Aristotle, coupled with its entertaining character. According to Veltri, the *Dialoghi* should not be considered a tractate of philosophy but a “vulgarization of philosophical ideas” circulating at the time throughout the Renaissance world.

Gianfranco Miletto (Halle): “David ben Abraham Provenzale et son fils Abraham: Un projet pédagogique dans son contexte historique”

The presentation (in French) described the pedagogical concepts of Abraham Provenzale and his father David as preserved in the programme for the foundation of a Jewish “academy” in Mantua in

1564. The project aimed at the education of Jewish youth in both the Torah and secular sciences, so as to enable them to limit the period of time needed for their later studies at Christian universities. That would assist them in resisting accommodation to Christian habits. Provenzale's curriculum, paying special attention to the ethical, religious and cultural formation of the disciples, included studies in the written and oral law, Jewish philosophy, grammar, rhetoric and calligraphy, as well as in Latin, arithmetic, geometry, geography and astrology. As Miletto explained, this *studium generale* resembled contemporary educational concepts of the Counter-Reformation, especially the pedagogical system of the Jesuits. In the Jewish context, the need to reform the traditional *yeshiva*, its didactics and cultural contents, had already been voiced a few years prior to Provenzale by the Maharal of Prague. But it remained a desideratum; similar concepts were again formulated by Leopold Zunz in 1840 upon the opening of the Jewish Seminar in Berlin.

#### Session 6: Philosophy and Kabbalah

Daniel Abrams (Tel Aviv): "Hypostatic Wisdom and *Imitatio Dei*: Kabbalistic Interpretations of Attaining Wisdom Through the Renaissance"

Reviewing the history of traditions from biblical texts through late antique Jewish works until the Middle Ages, Abrams showed how wisdom (*hokhma*) was identified with the Torah; attaining its wisdom was defined as an erotic pursuit by men of the feminine. Nevertheless, early kabbalistic texts transformed the feminized wisdom of the Bible into the masculine second *Sefirah* which couples with the feminine third *Sefirah*, i.e., *binah* ("understanding"). As Abrams put it, the (male) kabbalist realizes the Bible's image of feminized wisdom through the theosophic symbol of the masculine *Sefirah* of *hokhma*, which in turn is known to him through its actualization in the feminine *binah*. Of course, the Jewish concepts of wisdom during the Renaissance were to some extent only an expansion of earlier conceptions. At the same time, a transformation of the concept of *hakham* took place, from someone who attaches himself to divine wisdom to a person who learns various disciplines of knowledge derivative of greater wisdom and the divine intellect. Moreover, it was not until the Renaissance, and the works of Johanan Alemanno in particular, that the kabbalist was identified as the human extension of divine wisdom.

Johann Maier (Weilheim): "The Significance of Philosophy for the Kabbalah of Moses Cordovero"

Due to its didactic style and systematic character, Moses Cordovero's *Sefer pardes rimmonim* (completed 1548), in which Cordovero (1522–1570) interpreted passages from Zoharic literature, became a widespread manual of kabbalistic theology. While the subject of Cordovero's handbook was mainly the kabbalistic literature of the Middle Ages, it preserved to a remarkable extent Jewish philosophical tradition during a period when secular learning was often looked upon as detrimental within Jewish intellectual life. According to Maier, it was only against the background of Lurianic symbolism that Cordovero appeared as an exceptionally lucid and rational kabbalistic writer. Cordovero acquired his philosophical terminology by his study of the classical Jewish theological and kabbalistic authors of the Middle Ages. Due to their influence, he absorbed certain concepts of the Aristotelian line as represented by Maimonides. According to Maier's interpretation of Cordovero, philosophy is nevertheless one of the "short" sciences, belonging to a realm ontologically below that of kabbalistic studies. For Cordovero, philosophers will conclude that there must be a first cause or mover, but they are unable to deal with the *Sefirot* and with the *Eyn-Sof*.

Moshe Idel (Jerusalem): "Safed in Italy. On Interpretations of *Tsimtsum* in Italian Kabbalah"

Describing the adaption of the earlier Safedian Kabbalah by Italian kabbalists of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries to the philosophical modes of thinking during the Renaissance, Idel traced the conceptional changes caused by the transition of a corpus from one cultural area to another. In this context, he stressed "the assimilation of one type of thought, the mythical visions of Luria, into an ambience impregnated by a Neoplatonic mode of thinking". Idel exemplified this

thesis using the concept of *tsimtsum* („contraction“), which was understood in Luria’s circle as a “real” event taking place within the highest divine realm, but interpreted in an allegorical manner by Italian kabbalists in keeping with the philosophical grids familiar to them. According to Idel, the awareness of the appropriation of Kabbalah by Christians caused a strong reaction in Lurianism, now emphasizing the particularistic and esoteric aspects of Kabbalah. It could be seen as a historical irony that Lurianic Kabbalah had such an impact on Christian Kabbalah, because the mythical material was reduced by Italian Jewish thinkers to unhistorical speculative truths.

In his final remarks, Idel addressed the longstanding debate concerning whether there was indeed a Jewish Renaissance at all. Idel distinguished between Jewish kabbalists writing between 1470 and 1550 and later ones. The former certainly contributed to the emergence of the speculative aspects of Italian Renaissance, while the late sixteenth-century Italian Jewish kabbalists were less original thinkers. Their contribution mainly consisted in bringing together divergent forms of knowledge. Nevertheless, this aspect is a characteristic of the Renaissance. Although Idel restricted this remark to kabbalistic writers, this differentiation certainly could also be applied to other Jewish scholars whose work was discussed during the conference.

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