

Roni Weinstein. *Juvenile Sexuality, Kabbalah, and Catholic Reformation in Italy: Tiferet Bahurim by Pinhas Barukh ben Pelatiah Monselice*.

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Proceeding from where his earlier volume on the wedding traditions of Italian Jews left off (*Marriage Rituals Italian Style* [2004]), Roni Weinstein's latest study turns to the pre-marriage formation of young Italian Jewish men. Although focused on *Tiferet Bahurim* (*TB*), a previously unpublished guide to sex and marriage written by the seventeenth-century Ferrarese sage Pinhas Barukh ben Pelatiah Monselice, Weinstein's book is much more than an analysis and annotated edition of one neglected Hebrew text. Placing the *TB* in all of its relevant contexts, *Juvenile Sexuality, Kabbalah, and Catholic Reformation in Italy* constitutes a total history of attitudes towards young adulthood and sexuality among early modern Italian Jews, noting how these attitudes build upon (and at times revise) longstanding Jewish approaches and are at the same time keyed into developments characteristic of the Counter-Reformation. Indeed, Weinstein's major argument about the *TB* is that it can only be fully understood and appreciated when analyzed in terms of both its halakhic (Jewish legalistic) and Kabbalistic framework, as well as its resonances with the Baroque Catholic culture of seventeenth-century Italy (300). This book's great strength is alas at the same time its major weakness: Weinstein's truly impressive mastery of the primary sources often takes the reader far afield from his ostensible focus and makes for some disjointed reading. What the author describes as a micro-history à la Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (287), in fact often reads more like a rather broad survey that only periodically penetrates to the micro-

Among the vast array of topics addressed in this book are the specific family, social, and scholarly context of *TB*'s author, including the significance of the Ferrara

setting, the history of Jewish treatments of sexuality prior to early modernity (Weinstein notes the marginality of sexuality in this earlier Jewish literature; comparison with contemporary Christian and Muslim approaches would have been welcome here, as one wonders if the Jewish case was really any or substantially different), the history of the *Musar* (ethical) category of Jewish literature, the innovative approach to genre that *TB* itself represents, and the penetration of Kabbalah throughout Jewish culture in the early modern period and how this helped change the way Jewish observance of the mitzvot (or ritual commandments) was understood. There has been a great deal of discussion in scholarly literature concerning the popular dissemination of Kabbalah at this time, but this book does a thorough job of demonstrating what that really meant on the ground. Nonetheless, there are grounds for quibbling with some of its claims. Weinstein argues, for example, that for the *TB*, “the kabbalistic motivation for the obligation to honor the mother precedes the Halakhic argument and carries more significant validity” (281). Kabbalah clearly offered its practitioners a compelling framework with which to understand traditional Jewish legislation, but does this make it *more* important than the halakha? Alternatively, one could present the Kabbalah as furnishing the most active justification at the time for obligations that were in any case binding.

Weinstein comments as well on the ritualization of sexual activity — important currents in the Kabbalah argued for the sabbath eve as the appropriate time for intercourse. Thus, “rather than as an activity expressing personal feeling and/or catharsis for human eroticism, sexuality is perceived as a further layer of ritual activity theurgically affecting the supernal worlds” (280). This theurgic neutralization of eros is presumably quite new, but when, one wishes to ask, was sexuality in Jewish legal terms ever perceived as a “catharsis for human eroticism?” Perhaps it would be more correct to state that the ritual regulation of sexuality attains in this period a new degree of detail and cosmic significance.

One puzzle Weinstein addresses in particular is why *TB* was never published, despite clear indications that its author intended it as a printed book. His solution: the explicit treatment of sexual topics in the end proved too radical for its time, prompting an act of self-censorship. While possible, this resolution is not entirely convincing. Weinstein himself notes the imprimatur of a contemporary rabbi arguing in favor of the *TB*'s dissemination. And how is the claim of the book's unsuitability for print to be reconciled with Weinstein's argument that it is very much a creature of its time? In any case, there appears to be no specific evidence indicating why in fact the book was left unpublished. Thus, while Weinstein is free to speculate on this score, he should not pass this speculation off as historical fact, as he does in the book's final sentence, where he notes the reasons “behind the decision to shelve the book, or at least to prevent its distribution in print” (300).

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