

Yaacob Dweck. *The Scandal of Kabbalah: Leon Modena, Jewish Mysticism, Early Modern Venice.*

Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011. 280 pp. \$35. ISBN: 978-0-691-14508-2.

The seven chapters of this meticulously researched and elegantly structured study are fronted by images of books and manuscripts central to the story it tells: the writing, context, reception, and eventual publication of the renowned Venetian rabbi and scholar Leon Modena's (1571–1648) *Ari Nohem* (*The Roaring Lion*). And not by chance. *The Scandal of Kabbalah* deploys cutting edge history of the book scholarship in its analysis of Modena's text, arguing that the *Ari Nohem* (*AN*) can only be understood when seen against the backdrop of Kabbalistic classics such as the *Zohar* and *Pardes Rimonim*, Maimonides's philosophic masterpiece the *Guide of the Perplexed*, as well as Modena's own copybook (which opens chapter 1). As such, Dweck's text showcases the great promise, as well as some of the potential pitfalls, of this increasingly influential approach to intellectual history.

The book's introduction situates the *AN* in the context of the history of Kabbalah criticism, the role of such criticism in the Jewish transition to modernity, the continued vitality of manuscripts in the age of print (*AN* was first published only in 1840), and the iconoclastic personality of its author. It is here that we first encounter one of Dweck's most profound insights, namely that "in the very period that Kabbalah had shifted from closed to open knowledge, criticism of Kabbalah had become esoteric" (14).

After addressing Modena's writing practices, especially his collaboration with amanuensis and grandson Isaac Levi (chapter 1), Dweck showcases his reception of foundational medieval texts (chapters 2–3). In a triumph of historical criticism, Modena disproved the *Zohar's* antiquity, instead dating it to the late thirteenth century. He also sought to rescue Maimonides, for Dweck the ultimate source of

Modena's critique of mysticism, from interpreters who recast him as a Kabbalist. Thereafter, the focus turns (chapters 4–5) to two central early modern developments: the mystical revival in Safed, Palestine, and Christian appropriation of Kabbalah. Modena resisted the increasing influence of Safedian Kabbalah in Venice, sarcastically undercutting the “cult of personality” (27) surrounding its hero, Isaac Luria. Regarding his scorn of Christian Kabbalah, Dweck eloquently captures the irony of Modena's “[adoption of] a protectionist and proprietary attitude toward a form of knowledge and set of practices he had spent considerable energy criticizing and had otherwise rejected” (152).

The remaining two chapters explore the *AN*'s afterlife. Through impressive detective work, Dweck corrects the prevailing assumption that the work was ignored until the nineteenth century. Not only did it circulate in manuscript, even among non-Jews, it may also have motivated three early eighteenth-century defenses of Kabbalah against “philosophically inclined critics” (198). If Modena's book further inspired nineteenth-century scholars eager to resist Kabbalah and Hasidism and promote reform in Judaism (e.g., Abraham Geiger), Dweck's epilogue, “History of a Failure,” nonetheless underscores the *AN*'s inability to counter the wide dissemination of Kabbalah in its time or later. Dweck's intention here is not “to indict the book,” but rather “to restore a sense of contingency to the study of the early modern past” (235).

But does he do this? Dweck uses the *AN* to challenge modernity as a “single moment of rupture” (17), yet the admission of its inefficacy limits the scope of this claim. That here and there premodern individuals looked critically upon Kabbalah does not invalidate the historiographical notion of rupture per se nor does it offer a strong case for historical contingency. Dweck's promotion of the *AN* as challenging the great modern scholar Gershom Scholem's convenient oversight of predecessors such as Modena is similarly misleading. Modena defied Kabbalah in an age enamored of it, whereas Scholem celebrated its historical significance and symbolic beauty in a time and place that had largely forgotten it. Indeed, Dweck himself concedes, “Modena was not Scholem in Baroque Venice” (26). We might rather see Modena as the ultimate source of the condescension vis-à-vis Kabbalah that enabled Scholem to erect his “foundational narrative” (1).

Moments of tension or unclarity mar a generally clear and sharp narrative. Modena praised the *Zohar* “as a reservoir of homiletic insight” (11), citing it in his own sermons (63), yet opposed the use of Kabbalah in public sermons (24n76). Concerning Modena's interest in publishing the *AN*, Dweck stakes out a variety of positions (19, 32, 33) before finally acknowledging inconclusive evidence (54). An unfortunate slip reverses Scholem's evolving view concerning the *Zohar*'s composition, asserting that he initially ascribed it to Moses de Leon (234). But most glaring is the absence at the outset (or anywhere, for that matter) of a clear description of the *AN*'s structure and contents, which would have assisted the reader in processing Dweck's numerous insights. Amidst this “total history” (13) of the text, the *AN* itself gets a bit lost. This brings us to the history of the book itself, predicated as it is on the notion that the materiality of a book is as important as its

ideational character. Dweck's reconstruction of Modena's scribal practices in chapter 1 constitutes impressive scholarship, but I am skeptical that it really enhances our understanding of the *AN*'s significance. A simple translation of the work (unavailable in English) might well have served the reader better. These last quibbles aside, Dweck is to be commended for a sophisticated and readable study that greatly enhances our knowledge of the relationship between mysticism and philosophy, and print and manuscript, in early modern Jewish culture.

DANIEL STEIN KOKIN

The University of Greifswald