

BOOK REVIEW

Pinchas Roth, *In This Land: Jewish Life and Legal Culture in Late Medieval Provence* (Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2021), 178 pp.

Reviewed by
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In This Land tells the fascinating story of the social and intellectual fabric of rabbinic scholars who lived in medieval southern France, a time and place that was a patchwork of diverse and intertwined political and ethnic entities. The book sheds much light on the struggle of the Jewish immigrants from England and France, after the expulsions of 1290 and 1306, to maintain their unique communal identity as a tight-knit French-Jewish minority. This was made all the more challenging as the refugees saw themselves as occupying a higher standing than the indigenous Jews who absorbed them.

Research on the role of medieval Jewish culture in the formation of Jewish identity has traditionally focused on the two main European Jewish centers—Ashkenaz and Sefarad, corresponding roughly to the Rhineland and northern France, on one side, and Jewry of the Iberian peninsula on the other. Author Pinchas Roth, associate professor in the Department of Talmud and Oral Law at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, is one of few contemporary scholars who have taken it upon themselves to introduce English-speaking readers to the history of the Provençal Jewish community. This third, lesser-known but highly intriguing community represents a treasure of southern French rabbinic scholarship. Provence was not identical to either Ashkenaz or Sefarad, but was influenced by both, as Roth clarifies in the chapters of his book. As a specialist in the history of halakha in the medieval West, and with numerous publications on this topic in important academic platforms in the field, he offers us through the present book a coherent, synthetic product of years of research and development. Using local responsa as primary sources, *In This Land* examines the social and cultural history embedded in the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century halakhic texts. Among these, it is worth noting *Teshuvot Hakhme Provinzia*, which features many responsa by Mordecai Kimhi and his son, Isaac, including the hitherto unpublished responsa by the latter, several responsa by Isaac ben Jacob HaKohen of Manosque, a dossier of documents against proponents of philosophic inquiry known as *Minhat Kena'ot* by Abba Mari ben Moses, and finally the responsa by Solomon ben Abraham ibn Aderet (Rashba).

The book focuses on urban life in medieval Provence, with a glimpse at medieval rural Jewish life about which we know so little. We learn of

the changes the Jewish communities of Provence experienced in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as well as the social and cultural tensions that shaped their identity. Roth not only builds a clear narrative using responsa literature as building blocks, but also allows the reader to step back and reflect on how these sources came to be, the broader medieval audience they reached, and the economic and cultural environment in which they were created. Although small Jewish communities are often under-researched, Roth argues that such communities, as those presented here, played an undeniable role in the formation of Jewish identity. This contention is proven by introducing the reader to the rich responsa literature produced on Provençal soil and the many aspects of Jewish culture we learn from it. Many historical factors are also taken into account, as the literary heritage presented did not emerge in a vacuum but was rather interwoven with and responded to surrounding cultures.

In the first chapter, Roth defines the term “halakhic culture” and examines the social and intellectual context in medieval Provence. Here the title of the book becomes clear, for “in this land,” roughly corresponding to the region from Narbonne to Marseille, was used by medieval rabbinic scholars to define the intellectual boundaries of their jurisdiction in a geographic area lacking political stability (17). The first chapter lays out the roots of Provençal scholarship from the mid-twelfth century, who served as an influence over those rabbis, and the various genres they represented in their writings. Roth explains how Maimonides’ writings and Arabic translations of philosophic texts contributed to the development of the intellectual milieu in southern France, making the region a “hotbed of centuries of rationalism” (25). These rationalists represented a new class of Jewish scholarship, respected for its scientific and philosophical knowledge. They served to some extent as a control group that could question and criticize rabbinic judgments, such as a ruling prohibiting the use of medical astrologic talismans (86–90).

The second chapter takes us on a roller-coaster of the legal performances in the Jewish courts of Provence. Elaborating on the inner nuances of a medieval Provençal judge, R. Mordecai Kimhi, Roth introduces us to the dramatic twists of this public arena and vividly portrays the ways in which each of the participants in the courtroom—“plaintiffs and defendants, witnesses and judges, spectators and outside officials”—used their actions to achieve the best outcome, aware that far more was at stake than the actual legal claim (34). Roth provides a compelling illustration of the far-reaching implications of legal claims, particularly for women, by focusing on allegations of adultery, polygamy, and other

issues related to marriage and divorce. Roth takes his readers to the “backstage” of legal performance by clearly explaining the many layers that make up a specific lawsuit and its responses. This chapter also addresses how the field of Jewish law was influenced by the profound changes in European legal culture, particularly the arrival and adoption of Roman law in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which led to newly established law schools in Montpellier, Avignon, and Toulouse and produced a series of learned men who now served as judges, notaries, and lawyers available to both Jews and Christians (45–47). Roth describes the ways in which Jews made use of these changes and how this discourse slowly assimilated into and influenced the Jewish legal sphere. Roth emphasizes that “in late medieval Provence, the Jew arrived not with a story but with a legal argument,” declaring that Jewish courts were merely “a reflection of Jewish culture” (48).

Chapters three through five present select rabbinic figures who were active in Provence during the first half of the fourteenth century. Through carefully analyzing the linguistic terms used in the rulings of Isaac Kimhi, Roth addresses the fascinating question of local identity and regional rivalry between the French immigrants (arriving after the 1306 expulsion) and the indigenous Jews. Roth discusses the unique content of the legal questions sent to Kimhi, mirroring the major issues Provençal Jews faced at the turn of the fourteenth century. Regarding the tension between rationalist philosophy and traditional religion, Kimhi sharpened his pen and used medieval scientific terminology to prove his own command of contemporaneous scientific literature (50). He was able to demonstrate his strength in both halakha as well as in science and philosophy, exhibiting how he, as a traditional Provençal rabbi, was able to synthesize and master both worlds.

Through the debate over the recitation of *Kol Nidrei* on the eve of Yom Kippur (retroactively nullifying vows and solemn oaths), Roth also discusses the efforts of the Provençal rabbi to defend his Iberian (“Sephardi”) and Provençal customs and traditions, which were being undermined by the halakhic innovations imported by the immigrants from northern France. Yet Roth demonstrates Kimhi’s tolerance of religious differences and acceptance of ethnic differentiation between northern French and Provençal Jewry, pointing out that Kimhi’s sensitivity and awareness, which allowed each to “follow their distinct Jewish customs, without causing offence to each other” (64), must be considered a result of the extensive influx of French Jewry and the ensuing ethnic tensions between the two communities. Unlike in the case of Kimhi, chapter four,

“Northern French Jews in Provence,” tackles the rivalry, high tension, and disrespect between some French immigrants and their rabbinic leaders on one side, and the Provençal locals on the other. This paints a rather gloomy portrait of the uneven “patchwork family” that was the result of the forced mass displacement of northern French Jewry and their migration to Provence, “where they shared the space with existing local communities” (67). Despite some bitter arguments and the rare pronouncement of excommunicatory bans, the halakhic responsa discussed in this chapter show that the two communities married among each other, prayed together, and occupied the same living space.

Facing the cultural and religious currents of their time and place, the core chapters of this book emphasize life itself, in all its rich and controversial colors. The intellectual and religious creativity that flourished “in this land” in the first half of the fourteenth century could be easily overlooked and undermined, hiding in the shadows of the expulsion from France and the Black Death. In this regard, the book provides another major contribution by placing a strong focus on the activity and participation of communities and laypeople in the legal discourse and process, showcasing that the wide culture was influenced by and involved in what Roth calls “halakhic culture.”

The author includes two useful maps of southern France and the surrounding region, as well as a map of the cities, towns, and rivers mentioned in the sources upon which this book draws (ix–x). This is especially helpful for the reader who is less familiar with the medieval names and political divisions of the period and helps to better understand the extent of the interactions between rabbis in the different legal cases under discussion. The author concludes with an appendix containing nine previously unpublished manuscript sources that are examined in the book, mostly authored by Isaac Kimhi, Abba Mari ben Moses of Lunel, and Jacob ben Moses of Bagnols. This appendix is extremely helpful and easy to follow, as the sources are arranged chronologically according to their appearance in the chapter, and each includes a bibliographical note, a clear English description of the context and the individuals discussed in the responsum, and a detailed critical edition of the Hebrew or Aramaic text.

Like a gifted chemist who knows the qualities of the material at his fingertips and is skilled at deconstructing the substances to appreciate the qualities and attributes of each component and the product as a whole, Roth’s mastery of philology allow him to penetrate the inner logic of halakha. His keen sensitivity is used to reconstruct a history of the scholars, their scholarship, and their recipients, in order to craft a new and

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clear narrative of Jewish cultural life in late medieval Provence—one that shines through the legal material. But Roth's even greater achievement is that he has taken upon himself the invaluable challenge of explaining, simplifying, and conveying the often arcane works of rabbinic Jewish law in a book intended for a wide but learned readership that may likely be less familiar with this material. And indeed, medievalists, Talmud scholars, and the learned intellectual reader, will be profoundly intrigued by this deeply researched and very well-written work.

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