REVIEW
Robert Chazan
Reassessing Jewish Life in Medieval Europe
(New York: New York University Press, 2010)

Benjamin Fisher, Towson University

Was the Christian encounter with Jewish society in medieval Europe defined by the emergence of a "persecuting mentality," in which Jews and other subalterns were subjected to an aggressive policy of social and political exclusion, as framed by Robert Moore in his seminal book, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*?[1] Should the Jewish experience in medieval Christian Europe be viewed as a "lachrymose" narrative of oppression, expulsion, and marginalization (to use Salo Baron's phrase)? Or—as Jonathan Elukin has argued—does the image of a "persecuting society" give undo centrality to a small number of violent "disconnected outbursts" that constitute exceptions to the rule of peaceful coexistence of Jews and Christians?[2] The ways in which the ebb and flow of periods of violence and normality should be integrated into the broader depiction of Jewish-Christian relations in medieval and early modern times has been the subject of much scholarship in recent years, and it is to this weighty issue that Robert Chazan dedicates his efforts in *Reassessing Jewish Life in Medieval Europe*. Chazan seeks to distance himself from the so-called "lachrymose" school of Jewish history criticized by his teacher Baron, but stops short of accepting Elukin's opposite belief that Jewish-Christian relations were overwhelmingly characterized by peaceful coexistence (pp. xix-xx). Chazan deftly and judiciously charts a middle course that sidesteps the need to champion one perspective or the other by crafting an image of

[1] R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Authority and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250* (Oxford, 1987).

[2] Jonathan Elukin, *Living Together, Living Apart: Rethinking Jewish-Christian Relations in the Middle Ages* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 95-96.

Jewish society in western Christendom that captures the nuance and ambiguity of medieval Jewish-Christian relations between 1000-1500 and conveying it to an audience of general readers.

The book is divided into two parts. In Part I (chapters 1-4), Chazan insists that the popular perception of the medieval period in general, and Jewish-Christian relations in particular, has been colored (and distorted) by the legacies of Jewish and Christian "group narratives" (p. ix), and the agendas of the Protestant Reformation, Renaissance humanism, and post-Holocaust scholars, all of which, Chazan explains, found great advantage in misrepresenting medieval times as bleak and backward for ideological reasons. In contrast, Chazan's depiction of the Jewish experience in medieval Christian Europe emphasizes the negative and the positive, the dynamic and the destructive aspects of the Jewish-Christian encounter. In so doing, he hopes to refocus the monolithically negative perception of Jewish-Christian relations in medieval Europe.

In Part II (chapters 5-9), Chazan confronts the dissonance between contemporary assumptions regarding medieval Jewish society and the historical reality. Chazan addresses misconceptions about "pervasive demographic instability," Jewish economic exclusion and marginalization, Jewish political subjugation, and the omnipresent threat of Jewish-Christian violence (p. 86). The final chapter confronts equally incorrect idealization of medieval Judaism as being pristinely free from the influences of Christian beliefs, practices, interpretations, and traditions. It is within these chapters that Chazan's vision of medieval Jewish-Christian relations coalesces. Throughout the monograph, Chazan generally offers nuanced evaluations of the Jewish encounters with Christian society, creating a balanced portrait. He is very largely successful in his overall aim of dislodging the negative stereotypes surrounding Jewish-Christian relations in the popular imagination.

In chapter 5, Chazan surveys the expulsion of Jews from England in 1290 and from France in 1306 in great detail.

Additional expulsions took place in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in Spain, southern Europe, and Germanic territories. The pattern of expulsions in central and western Europe "reinforced" the eastward movement of medieval European Jewry (pp. 99-100). Far more important than expulsion, however, was the more common voluntary migration of Jews evaluating the pros and cons of different potential settlement locations. European Jewish society, he points out, has its very origins in voluntary migration from Muslim countries, and northern European Jewry in particular came into existence because of a confluence between the aims and aspirations of European rulers and Jews. Above all, the establishment of what would become the world's largest Jewish community—that of eastern Europe—is indebted to western and central European Jews who "were in the position of making decisions about relocation," weighing the "disadvantages of their circumstances in the Germanic lands...against the advantages offered in the developing areas of eastern Europe" (pp. 100-06).

At times, Chazan's goal of demonstrating the importance of voluntary migration leads him to underestimate the effects and the scale of forced population movements. The fifteenth-century expulsions from central and western Europe that Jonathan Israel describes as leading to the "virtual elimination"[3] of these Jewish communities are here described in vague terms as "limited expulsions" by "local authorities" (p. 100). This "forced demographic movement through the central areas of Europe—from Italy in the south northward into Germany," was merely a "reinforcement" to a broader eastern migration of medieval European Jewry (pp. 99-100). In general, however, Chazan's observations and arguments provide a very useful counterbalance to the perception of a Jewish society shaped overwhelmingly, if not totally, by expulsion and forced relocation.

[3] Jonathan Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism* (Oxford, 1985), 1-34.

In chapter 6, "Economic Activity," Chazan's readers encounter a view of the Jewish economic role in medieval Christian Europe that transcends the image of Shylock and the strictly negative image of Jewish economic specialization in early modern Europe. Concentration in money lending—while not without its costs—also had positive consequences. While it made Jews vulnerable to royal extortion and popular resentment, it also provided an important source of prosperity, security, and political influence to Jewish families and communities. Chazan persuasively illustrates the important role played by Jewish money lenders in the early formation of medieval European states and the prosperity and the secure place that they enjoyed—for a time—in these societies. In chapter 7, "Status," Chazan concisely presents the complexities of Jewish political status in medieval Europe. He surveys the competing ecclesiastic, royal, and baronial authorities who competed for control over local Jewish populations. While various authorities could impose restrictions that deeply harmed Jewish interests (such as prohibitions against geographic mobility and high interest levels), they also offered protection and security to their Jewish subjects. Chapter 8, "Relations with the Christian Populace," confronts one of the most pervasive images about medieval Jewish-Christian relations in contemporary culture: the idea that violence and assault constantly hovered over Jewish communities in medieval Europe like the sword of Damocles. Rather, Chazan argues, "alongside the outbreaks of violence were periods of tranquility, which enabled Jews to live normally" (p. 163). Furthermore, such episodes of violence as there were "represent the exception rather than the rule for medieval Jews" (p. 182). There is, again, sometimes a sense in which the effort to accentuate the positive alongside the negative leads to a downplaying of the latter. In an earlier chapter, for instance, the forced conversion of Portuguese Jews to Christianity is absent from a discussion of expulsion and violence in the Iberian Peninsula (pp. 97-99). On the whole, however, Chazan's portrayal of physical violence as a real phenomenon, but one that was normally constrained by ruling authorities within the state and church, is nuanced and convincing.

Chazan's efforts to counter misconceptions held regarding medieval Jewish history are balanced and judicious. By the end of the book, the reader has encountered a coherent synthesis of medieval Jewish history between 1000-1500 emphasizing the positive and negative aspects of the Jewish experience. The scholarly community will find much of the material familiar, as Chazan himself acknowledges on a number of occasions. The book that he has written will serve as an important educational resource for undergraduate students and a broader community of interested readers. Transmitting the findings of many scholars in an accessible and synthetic way, *Reassessing Jewish Life in Medieval Europe* makes a valuable and influential contribution.