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*The Censor, the Editor, and the Text: The Catholic Church
and the Shaping of the Jewish Canon in the Sixteenth Century*
(review)

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RAZ-KRAKOTZKIN, Amnon. *The Censor, the Editor, and the Text: The Catholic Church and the Shaping of the Jewish Canon in the Sixteenth Century*, translated by Jackie FELDMAN. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. ISBN: 13 978-0812240115. Pp. 320. \$69.95.

Whenever books are burned men also in the end are burned.

– Heinrich Heine

Heine's words have been repeated in numerous instances of censorship that precede human misery. According to the older histories of the sixteenth century, this notion applies well to this time when church censorship arose as a strong force. Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin begins his study of Church-sponsored censorship with Pope Julius III's 1553 decree to burn all copies of the Talmud in Rome. However, unlike numerous Jewish historians before him, Raz-Krakotzkin does not use the book burning as the starting off point of a discussion of the physical destruction of the Jewish people. Instead, he places the burning of the Talmud within the context of the Church's campaign to protect Christians from heretical ideas and was part of a larger campaign in which numerous books, Jewish and non-Jewish, were destroyed.

By broadening the lens through which anti-Jewish measures were instituted by the Church, Raz-Krakotzkin is able to contextualize them not as overt anti-Semitism—as some older interpretations have held—but part of a larger phenomenon embodied within the counter-Reformation. Raz-Krakotzkin argues that the censorship of Hebrew books grew not out of an anti-Jewish polemic but rather as part of adapting the texts so that they were safe for Christian consumption. He notes that “censorship was initiated precisely because Christians were reading Jewish literature” (2). According to Raz-Krakotzkin, the censorship of Jewish texts was part of a “larger process of the institutionalization of censorship” (2). Embracing this broader lens, it is possible to see the removal of specific lines from Hebrew literature as part of the same censorship which excised the forbidden lines of text read by Domenico “Menocchio” Scandella, a sixteenth-century miller rescued from obscurity by Carlo Ginzburg's study *The Cheese and the Worms*.

While not denying the role of the censor in suppressing anti-Christian sentiment in Jewish texts or the missionary motives in their editing, Raz-Krakotzkin argues that censorship implies a tolerance (albeit with restrictions) for Jewish literature. He supports this by stating that although at the time the Talmud was banned and Hebrew literature was censored, “the implementation of censorship also provided explicit permission for Jews to

publish" (3). Raz-Krakotzkin points out that the more simplistic approach of condemning censors as repressing Jewish culture and literary tradition does not take into account the cultural revival taking place at the same time as the censorship: "I do not intend to establish a direct link between censorship and cultural revival but, rather, I reject the perception of the period as one of cultural deterioration" (5).

Some readers might question some of Raz-Krakotzkin's examples of cultural revival. He notes, for example, that both the Zohar and Shulchan Aruch were published in Italy during the same time. However, they were not *written* in Italian lands where the censorship in question was taking place but rather in Palestine. Nevertheless, Raz-Krakotzkin's basic premise that Jewish texts were produced as part of a dialogue with Christians remains valid. His better evidence lies in later chapters where he details what precisely was excised from Jewish works. The list of prohibited items to be published reveals a great deal about perceptions of Jewish texts by the censors. They support Raz-Krakotzkin's argument that excised materials were removed because of their insult to Christians rather than a specific anti-Jewish agenda.

In *The Censor, the Editor, and the Text*, Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin utilizes the censorship of Jewish text to demonstrate that Jewish life during the sixteenth century was allowed to co-exist by Church hierarchy in a controlled manner. From this perspective, Raz-Krakotzkin is part of a larger school of early modern Jewish historians who have argued against the older perception of the medieval Jewish period as one of repression rather than of tolerance within certain restrictions. Raz-Krakotzkin mentions a few proponents of this revisionist perception of Jews in the medieval world, including Robert Bonfil of Hebrew University in Jerusalem and Benjamin Ravid of Brandeis University. Bonfil and Ravid have, for example, both demonstrated that the Italian ghetto was not merely a place to which the Christian world restricted the Jews but was also a space where Jew and Christian interacted and Jewish life flourished. For Raz-Krakotzkin, just as the Jews of the ghetto were engaged in conversation with their Christian neighbors, so too Jewish literature was engaged in a type of conversation with the Christian censors. In both cases, the result was modern Jewry, a people resulting from their dialogue as well as their polemics with Christian Europe.

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