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The Unexpected in Early Modern Jewish Life

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“THERE IS A DANGER that the history of coffee lead us astray. The anecdotal, the picturesque, and the unreliable play an enormous part in it.” In his celebrated essay on coffee, coffeehouses, and early modern Jewish nocturnal rituals, Elliott Horowitz quoted these words by Fernand Braudel as “a warning and an invitation.”¹ Elliott’s pioneering work on what he dubbed “the social history of piety” indeed opened vistas on the unexpected in early modern Jewish life, though his prodigious erudition and rigorous scholarship always kept him away from the purely anecdotal.

The connection between the spread of coffee and the diffusion of kabbalistic vigils outside of Palestine,² the evolving practices on the eve of a boy’s circumcision in Italy and Ashkenazic lands,³ the meaning of a bearded or beardless chin in the eighteenth century,⁴ questions about unorthodox female bathing customs in the Mediterranean area,⁵ or ostensibly reckless Jewish behavior on Purim,⁶ were never reduced to merely picturesque reconstructions of unusual Jewish mores but served him rather as keys to unlock broader cultural shifts, including issues of peri-

1. Elliott Horowitz, “Coffee, Coffeehouses, and the Nocturnal Rituals of Early Modern Jewry,” *AJS Review* 14 (1989): 21.

2. Horowitz, “Coffee, Coffeehouses,” 21.

3. Horowitz, “The Eve of the Circumcision: A Chapter in the History of Jewish Nightlife,” *Journal of Social History* 23 (1989): 45–69.

4. Horowitz, “The Early Eighteenth Century Confronts the Beard: Kabbalah and Jewish Self-Fashioning,” *Jewish History* 8 (1994): 95–115.

5. Horowitz, “Towards a Social History of Jewish Popular Religion: Obadiah of Bertinoro on the Jews of Palermo,” *Journal of Religious History* 17 (1992): 138–51.

6. Horowitz, “The Rite to be Reckless: On the Perpetration and Interpretation of Purim Violence,” *Poetics Today* 15 (1994): 9–54.

odization and the profound differences between Mediterranean, Western, and Eastern Jewries. A master of the historical-anthropological examination popularized by Natalie Zemon Davis and Carlo Ginzburg, Elliott's most influential, diachronically and geographically capacious essays date from a period in which Jewish historians instead often delved into specific investigations of single locales. His classical commitment to the transregional and the comparative, inspired by masters such as Jacob Katz, both preceded and anticipated the current renewed historiographical turn to the Jewish "global."

He combined a prodigious appetite for the records left by observers internal and external to the Jewish world—rabbinic sources such as manuals and responsa, communal documents such as sumptuary laws and deliberations, the accounts of Jewish and gentile travelers, works by converts or Christian Hebraists—with a penchant for wide-ranging associations across Europe and the Ottoman lands. Horowitz's attention to paradoxes and contradictions—the "embarrassing flaws" of Jewish communal life—helped him trace the reorientation of practices over time in the realms of popular culture and popular religion, in order to show "how the Jewish religion was lived by its adherents."⁷ In turn, his reconstruction of mundane ceremonies and changing rituals illuminated large-scale shifts between medieval and early modern Jewish mentalities and the dazzling diversity of the early modern Jewish world.

His work's *longue durée* approach, moreover, aided in detecting specifically early modern cultural shifts, such as the emergence of new concerns about social control in the late seventeenth century, a "narrowing of options, cultural as well as religious,"⁸ which would eventually crystallize over the course of the eighteenth. Elliott's 1989 essay on the eve of the circumcision was in many ways emblematic of his methodology and concerns about the normative and the deviant, with its emphasis on Jewish leaders' attempts to sacralize traditionally profane behaviors in the wake of the Catholic Reform.⁹ Still, his focus was never limited to the late medieval and early modern world but was also informed and problematized by the ways in which later scholars approached their source material: "The history of cultural practices and the history of efforts to reconstruct and understand them (or alternatively, to suppress their

7. Horowitz, "Towards a Social History of Jewish Popular Religion," 150.

8. Horowitz, "Families and Their Fortunes: The Jews of Early Modern Italy," in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. D. Biale (New York, 2002), 619.

9. Horowitz, "The Eve of the Circumcision."

memory) cannot be sundered," he pithily put it in his earliest piece on one of the themes dearest to him, and to which he devoted an influential monograph¹⁰—the perpetration, perception, and misperception of Jewish violence.¹¹

But another recurring thematic thread running throughout Elliott's work, ushered in by his early studies on pious confraternities, was a pointed interest in youth sociality and sociability, particularly in early modern Italy, and an accompanying focus on the world of young men and boys (and, though less so, young women) and its perception on the part of Jewish adults. Although Horowitz's name will always be associated with his expertise on violence and his innovative essays on pious rituals, he was also among the first scholars to turn to the complex world of early modern Jewish youth, a subject still relatively underexplored when he started writing about it in the 1980s and 1990s. It is to this long-standing and in many ways pioneering concern that I want to devote a few more words in this forum dedicated to his memory.

One of Horowitz's first published articles was devoted to Havurat Zerizim, a seventeenth-century Jewish youth confraternity in Asti, a small town in the region of Piedmont.¹² His exploration of the confraternity's statutes attempted to recover the perspectives of its young members, paying attention to those spaces of autonomy they managed to carve out, showing how a *hevrah* such as this served as the most important space for sociability for unmarried young men from the town and surrounding areas during a time when northern Italian Jewish life was marked by plague and a war, mobility and instability.

At the same time, Elliott also highlighted, here and in other studies, the severe limits of youthful agency. It was primarily the local adults who actively orchestrated venues for youth sociability, in line with wider late medieval and early modern Italian trends. Removing young men from the "chaos and spontaneity of the street"¹³ was a long-standing priority of

10. Horowitz, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* (Princeton, N.J., 2006).

11. Horowitz, "The Rite to be Reckless," 13–14.

12. Horowitz, "A Jewish Youth Confraternity in Seventeenth-Century Italy," *Italia: Studi e ricerche sulla storia, la cultura e la letteratura degli ebrei d'Italia* 5 (1985): 36–97.

13. Richard Trexler, "Ritual in Florence: Adolescence and Salvation in the Renaissance," in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. C. Trinkaus and H. Oberman (Leiden, 1974), 210, cited in Horowitz, "A Jewish Youth Confraternity," 39.

Jewish and Christian authorities in their dealings with bachelors, already evident in medieval sources, and a leitmotif in the communal deliberations and sumptuary laws that Horowitz so often mined.¹⁴

Yet another trove of sources that he engaged to shed light on the life of young people was Hebrew letters. The rich collections of sixteenth-century epistolary models from Italy published by Yaakov Boksenboim in the 1980s provided Elliott an entry into the relationship between students and teachers and fathers and sons, which he approached with a fine eye for both conflicts and intimacy. In a brilliant, lesser-known essay Horowitz explored the yeshivah established in the home of powerful banker Ishmael Rieti in Siena, recovering the confraternal spirit of this institution and others like it—such as the proposed “college” of Jewish studies envisioned by David Provenzali and his son Abraham in Mantua in 1564¹⁵—where a close group of young men, sometimes separated from their parents, boarded and studied together in the home of a patron under the guidance of a slightly older, married young man, who lived with them while in turn separated from his own family.¹⁶

Such companionate relationships between youth of different ages living together under the same roof, another result of the impulses to closely monitor and control boys and bachelors, seem to have been a defining feature of the experiences of young Jewish men in early modern Italy, one alternatively overlapping or competing with bonds of kinship in the context of a highly mobile society.¹⁷ Elliott’s emphasis on companionate brotherhood resonates strikingly for later venues of Jewish learning, such as the preparatory school for Jewish physicians established in the home of Solomon Conegliano in Padua that Tuvia Cohen attended at the beginning of the eighteenth century.¹⁸ The common arrangements that brought

14. Horowitz, “The Worlds of Jewish Youth in Europe, 1300–1800,” in *A History of Young People in the West*, vol. 1, *Ancient and Medieval Rites of Passage*, ed. G. Levi and J.-C. Schmitt, trans. C. Naish (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), 83–119.

15. For an overview and contextualization, see Gianfranco Miletto, “The Teaching Program of David ben Abraham and his Son Abraham Provenzali in Its Historical-Cultural Context,” in *Cultural Intermediaries: Jewish Intellectuals in Early Modern Italy*, ed. D. B. Ruderman and G. Veltri (Philadelphia, 2004), 127–48.

16. Horowitz, “*Yeshiva* and *Hevra*: Educational Control and Confraternal Organization in Sixteenth-Century Italy,” in *Shlomo Simonsohn Jubilee Volume: Studies on the History of the Jews in the Medieval and Renaissance Period*, ed. D. Carpi and S. Simonsohn (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 1993), 123–47.

17. See also Roni Weinstein, *Marriage Rituals Italian Style: A Historical Anthropological Perspective on Early Modern Italian Jews* (Leiden, 2004), 321–26.

18. David Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* (New Haven, Conn., 1995), 111–12.

young Jewish apprentices from the lower classes in the homes of masters they served until they started families of their own,¹⁹ and the practice widespread among Jewish merchants to lodge a son with a business associate so he could complete his mercantile training,²⁰ represented facets of the same phenomenon.

Practices of surveillance over boys and bachelors did not always, however, prevent them from engaging in what Elliott dubbed a “coarse youth culture.”²¹ Here we come back to the theme of the peculiar, the paradoxical, and the scandalous. The relationship between young people and public space—the street, the marketplace—appears deeply fraught in prescriptive sources from the late medieval and early modern period: these open, unsupervised spaces, where both Jews and Christians roamed, were perceived as inherently dangerous for young men. Their love of promenading around on Shabbat and other Jewish holidays was rebuked, generation after generation, by their elders, afraid they could be exposed to “evil sins” (usually, forbidden encounters with women). And yet, as he argued, “paradoxically the young appears to have had sometimes an almost ritualized connection”²² with the street and the piazza, which could become the stage for manifestations of violent honor fights, such as the infamous killing of Leone Modena’s son Zebulun in the ghetto of Venice,²³ playful displays of youthful masculinity, or forms of ritualized role reversals at Purim or Lag ba-Omer.

Few early modernists, with the notable exceptions of Roni Weinstein’s explorations of Italian society and Julia Lieberman’s studies of the Western Sephardic world, have followed in Horowitz’s footsteps when it comes to the study of Jewish youth, but the anthropological curiosity at the heart of his methodology resounds well beyond this particular topic. The attempt to unearth the voices of young people of all social classes by paying attention to the unorthodox and the ritualized alike reflects Elliott’s larger approach to popular culture: a focus on the unexpected twists in the sources that can give the historian access to marginal and yet illuminating perspectives—such as those of women abstaining from

19. Horowitz, “The Worlds of Jewish Youth,” 105–6; Weinstein, *Marriage Rituals*, 321.

20. Francesca Bregoli, “‘Your Father’s Interests’: The Business of Kinship in a Trans-Mediterranean Jewish Merchant Family, 1776–1790,” *JQR* 108.2 (2018): 194–224.

21. Horowitz, “The Worlds of Jewish Youth,” 118.

22. Horowitz, “The Worlds of Jewish Youth,” 97.

23. *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi: Leon Modena’s Life of Judah*, trans. and ed. M. R. Cohen (Princeton, N.J., 1988), 118–20.

ritual immersion for the sake of greater modesty,²⁴ those of all too fashionable men who could not help but shave their beards even on the intermediate days of Passover and Sukkot,²⁵ or those of kabbalists who embraced the unpopular midnight vigil trend thanks to the stimulant properties of coffee.²⁶ For his efforts to recover larger truths from little-heard voices, Elliott Horowitz's own voice was a most original one in early modern Jewish history.

24. Horowitz, "Towards a Social History of Jewish Popular Religion," 146.

25. Horowitz, "The Early Eighteenth Century Confronts the Beard," 101.

26. Horowitz, "Coffee, Coffeehouses, and the Nocturnal Rituals," 33–34.