In 1548, or possibly 1549, the Jewish physician Amatus Lusitanus met with an unnamed friend in a bookshop, probably in Ancona, where together they discovered the polemical work of Franciscan Friar Petrus Colonna Galatinus, De arcanis catholicae veritatis contra obstinatissimam Judaeorum nostrae tempestatis perfidiam. It had been printed in 1518, by the Jewish publisher Gershom Soncino, in Orthona. While the two friends were admiring the editorial elegance of the work, and the erudition of its author; a further visitor joined the group: the thirty-five-year-old scholar Azariah de’ Rossi, who, according to Lusitanus's report, was a very profound expert in Hebrew and Latin letters. Lusitanus wrote: “He entered as the third in our party and gave his view, especially concerning the two Jesuits that appear in this work, in defense of the famous Reuchlin, who at the time was in prison; he defended him from calumnies and endeavored to vindicate him.”

The discerning reader will be wondering whether it is appropriate to conclude the present volume by introducing this curious episode of a meeting in a bookshop in Ancona. However, the role of printed books in the Renaissance was central. They were the medium that permitted the easy and effective propagation of ideas—through pamphlets, new editions, and even prayer books. Over time they would entirely replace handwritten manuscripts, rendering obsolete the ars scriptoria. The print “revolution” was without any doubt comparable, in its time, to the expansion of the Internet in the modern world—although, to be sure, Gutenberg’s technique did not have the same explosive and implosive impact on all strata of society as the World Wide Web has.


had. There is, however, something else about the episode in the bookshop that makes it quite singular: it involves three Jews\(^3\) discussing a work of anti-Jewish polemics and admiring its editorial value and the erudition of its author. It is an intriguing picture, which would, as a narrative, sound incredible, if placed anywhere but in a Renaissance bookstore. Moreover, the event to which Lusitanus alludes—albeit with some imprecision\(^4\)—is the famous and ignominious controversy over the use of Jewish sources by Johannes Reuchlin. The attack on Reuchlin was initiated by Jacob van Hoogstraten, who accused the German scholar of heresy for his “Judaizing” writings and theses.\(^5\) The fascinating element is our story is the indirect praise it implies for a leading Christian intellectual—to whom even Gershom Scholem later felt indebted, referring to himself as “Reuchlin redivivus.” In sum, this single episode contains within it all the ingredients that went into making the Renaissance a new intellectual age: the Jewish-Christian debate, the interest and curiosity of intellectual Christianity for Judaism, and the timid Jewish reaction to humanist culture with its openness to the challenges of the new epoch. I would dare to say: the new age was an age of curiosity and intellectual exchange.

The Renaissance was also the turning point in the development of various aspects of Jewish thought and philosophy, as I have tried to demonstrate in this book. It is no surprise to find confirmation in the sources that Jewish philosophy, as such, actually begins in the humanist period, just as discussion of the Christian origins of philosophy begins

\(^3\) I suppose that the friend of Lusitanus (“one of my best friends”) was also a Jew. Concerning him Lusitanus wrote: “...whose fate it is to be living now in Rome in most unfortunate conditions.” Lusitanus alludes here perhaps to the “new conditions” of Roman Jewry under the pontificate of Paulus IV and his bull of July 12, 1555, the Cum nimis absurdum, which instituted the ghetto of Rome.

\(^4\) In 1518, there were no Jesuits to be mentioned in the work of Galatinus published in that year; the order was not approved by the pope until 1540. Colonna Galatinus was a Franciscan, while Jacob van Hoogstraaten was a Dominican and an opponent of Reuchlin.