

# At the Intersection of Cultures:

## The Historical Legacy of Italian Jewry

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*Zamir is grateful to Prof. Ruderman for allowing us to condense and paraphrase his scholarly article. For those who would like to see this excellent article in its original form, please visit [www.zamir.org/Notes](http://www.zamir.org/Notes)*

Among the precious artifacts included in the Jewish Museum's exhibition on Italian-Jewish life is a work of singular importance. It is a lexicon of rabbinic literature called the *Arukh*, written by Nathan ben Jehiel of Rome (1035–c. 1110) at the beginning of the 12th century. Why so modest a work, a mere dictionary of words and phrases, should elicit special attention requires some elucidation.

Nathan headed the Talmudic academy of Rome, a post he held with his two brothers and one that had earlier been held by his father, who died in 1070. Nathan apparently belonged to the well-known Anau (Anav) family, an ancient clan that, according to its tradition, descended from one of four aristocratic families that Titus brought from Jerusalem to Rome after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. That his family were no mere newcomers to the glorious city of the popes but claimed an ancestry that even predated the emergence of Rome as the center of Western Christendom was not an insignificant fact for either Nathan's coreligionists or his other Italian neighbors. For Jews it underscored their longstanding and uninterrupted residence in the first important beachhead of Jewish settlement in Europe in the aftermath of Jerusalem's defeat at the hands of Rome. For non-Jews it suggested that the longevity of Jewish residency in Italy for some one thousand years should not be taken for granted, for it entitled them to a place of honor in the political and cultural life of their community.

Nathan's *Arukh* was a work of prodigious scholarship, a glossary of encyclopedic proportions. The author presented both the meaning and etymology of difficult or unusual terms found in the Talmud and Midrashim, drawing on his impressive knowledge of Hebrew, Aramaic, Latin, Greek, Persian, and Arabic. Nathan's most significant achievement was his amalgamation of the individual exegetical and legal traditions of his day: first and foremost, that of the Babylonian Talmud and the legal decisions of the gaonate of Baghdad. He also incorporated the Palestinian Targum, Tosefta, Midrashim, and Talmud; the rabbinic commentary of Hananel ben Hushi'el of Kairouan (d. 1055–56), who had quoted extensively from the Palestinian Talmud and compared it with its Babylonian counterpart; and finally, the emerging rabbinic scholarship of northern

Europe, especially Germany and Provence, in particular the commentaries of Rabbenu Gershom (960–1028) and “the scholars of Mainz.” Nathan even occasionally consulted the latest books on mathematics and medicine.

In correlating and fusing all of these diverse traditions and sources in the pages of his massive compendium, Nathan initiated a creative process that was to become the most consistent and characteristic feature of Italian-Jewish scholarship for centuries to come. It is no coincidence that one of the

most significant products of Italian-Jewish culture in the early modern era was also a Talmudic encyclopedia, the *Pahad Yitzhak* of Isaac Lampronti (1679–1756) of Ferrara, written in the eighteenth century. In their efforts to integrate and mediate disparate traditions, to reconcile and accommodate conflicting legal opinions and religious ideals, in short, to tolerate, to cultivate, and even to be enlivened by diversity, a long line of Italian-Jewish writers from Nathan to Isaac adopted the genre of the encyclopedia. Accordingly one might argue that Nathan’s literary undertaking came to represent the most typical and unique signature of Italian-Jewish culture.

One additional facet of the *Arukh* should be mentioned: its publication date. A good indication of its enduring popularity and usefulness to students of Talmudic and Jewish civilization was the fact that it was one of the first books to be printed by a Hebrew press, fittingly in the same city in which it was written, between 1469 and 1472. From the fifteenth century on, the work enjoyed wide circulation through numerous editions. Furthermore a number of authors saw fit to enlarge and emend the original work. For example, Menahem de Lonzano (1550–c. 1624) and Benjamin Mussafia (1606–1675) both published important expansions of the *Arukh*. Through Nathan’s writing, particularly in its printed versions, the study of rabbinic texts, of comparative philology, customs, and legal traditions has been stimulated in communities outside Italy until the present day.

Through the assumed ancestry of its author, the *Arukh* testifies to the longevity of Italian Jewry’s residency on the European continent. Moreover, as a mediator and harmonizer of disparate and even conflicting traditions and values, it embodies the characteristic mode of Italian-Jewish civilization, at least until the threshold of the modern era. And finally, it underscores the importance of Italy as a nerve center, as a conduit, and as a critical disseminator of knowledge to Jewish communities throughout the continent and beyond. In exemplifying these three major themes of Jewish cultural history in Italy, Nathan’s *Arukh* offers a fitting introduction to the subject of this essay.

### **The Modest Beginnings of Italian- Jewish Culture in the Roman Empire**

In the absence of much concrete documentation of Jewish life in ancient Italy, only the bare outlines are discernible. As early as the Hasmonean era in the 2nd century B.C.E., Jewish delegations from Palestine visited Rome, and perhaps some individuals remained

to settle there. A more substantial presence of Jews in Rome and southern Italy is visible in the middle decades of the next century, consisting primarily of slaves deposited in Rome and probably also of merchants from the East. Jews flourished under the protection of Julius Caesar and Augustus, who allowed them to practice their ancestral laws. Despite occasional disruptions and murmurings of certain intellectuals and public figures, Jewish life was

generally unmolested during the first Christian centuries. A large number of Jewish prisoners were deported to Rome after the failure of the revolt in Judaea. The majestic Arch of Titus in Rome still bears the sculpted record of Roman triumph and Jewish humiliation. Despite the continued insurrections of Jews throughout the empire, culminating in the defeat of Bar Kochba in Palestine in 135 C.E., the emperors generally treated their Jewish subjects in Italy benevolently. Even with the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the empire by the 4th century, the passage of discriminatory legislation in the name of Theodosius and Justinian in the 5th and 6th centuries, and periodic expressions of public hostility by individual church leaders, Jewish life in Italy apparently remained surprisingly stable, to the extent that it is known. In Rome itself many Jews were engaged in humble occupations and hardly attained prominence economically or socially.

There is even less to say about the status of Jewish cultural and intellectual activity in ancient Italy. With the exception of the Jewish historian Josephus, who settled in Rome after the revolt, and the mention of a Palestinian rabbi, Mattiah ben Heresh, who lived in Rome in the 2nd century, one is struck by the sheer absence of literary activity and intellectual life among Italian Jews before the 9th century C.E. With the lack of writings, there remain only synagogue ruins and tombstone inscriptions offering testimony of Jewish settlement in Ostia, Naples, Salerno, Bari, Otranto, Taranto, Venosa, Reggio, and elsewhere, but little more. More telling is the language of the inscriptions: either Greek or Latin, interspersed occasionally with simple Hebrew words (shalom, shalom al Yisrael, etc.), and decorated with pagan symbols or a simple figure of a menorah, testifying to a low level of Hebraic literacy and a high degree of assimilation.

### **In the Orbit of Byzantine Influence: Jewish Culture in Southern Italy in the 9th and 10th Centuries**

The Hebrew revival of the 9th century reveals the end product of a long political and cultural development that is shrouded in considerable obscurity. The steady disintegration of the western Roman Empire, the barbarian incursions into Italy, and the gradual isolation of western Europe as a result of the Muslim hegemony in the East all play a part in this transition. The fate of this miniscule Jewish minority in Italy could not have been unaffected by these larger upheavals. Certainly the apparent arrival of North African Jews in Italy as a result of the Muslim raids into Italy may have constituted one important factor in the subsequent rise in Hebrew literacy.

Whatever the precise cause of this mutation, the small communities of Jews living in southern Italy under Byzantine rule in the ninth century were of a different character than those who had earlier left their cryptic messages on tombstones in Rome, Venosa, and elsewhere. Their economic life had not radically changed, to the extent that it can be reconstructed. They were artisans and merchants, dyers and silk weavers, and even landowning farmers. In the sphere of culture and intellectual creativity, however, they were profoundly different. Literary sources opaquely describe the existence of institutions of rabbinic learning in Rome and Lucca, in Bari, Otranto, Venosa, and Oria. After a complete absence of Hebrew writings for centuries, Italian Jewry suddenly and dramatically rediscovered its link with the language of scripture and the rabbis.

What is striking about the Hebrew revival of the 9th and 10th centuries is not only its seeming “creation out of nothing” but also its variegated and colorful nature. While Italian rabbis were presumably engaged in the teaching of Torah in a manner similar to their counterparts in the centers of Israel, Baghdad, and North Africa, they left little trace of their scholarship prior to the lexicon of Nathan of Rome. What remains instead is a small but innovative literary output in such diverse fields as ancient and local family history, liturgical poetry, medicine and science, and even a faint echo of early Jewish mystical traditions.

Only a small number of works survive, but they reveal in their totality the existence of a highly complex society, receptive to the strains and influences of powerful Jewish centers outside Italy and stimulated by cultural contacts with the non-Jewish world. At the crossroads between Palestinian and Babylonian rabbinic spheres of domination, between Eastern and Western Christendom, and between Christianity and Islam, these fledgling Jewish communities could hardly be immune to intense cultural stimulation, confusion, and even conflict.

Among the most important literary products of this age was *Sefer Josipphon*, a historical narrative composed in Hebrew describing the later biblical period and that of the Second Temple. The work is usually dated to 953 C.E. and is attributed to an anonymous author living in southern Italy who utilized a Latin manuscript based on Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Jewish War*, called the *Hegessippus*. Among the interpolations found in the narrative is a description of ancient Italy and the founding of Rome as well as a listing of the boundaries of the world more appropriate for the tenth century than for antiquity. While celebrating the glorious history of ancient Israel, the work appears to betray little or no rabbinic cultural influence, especially that emanating from the Talmudic centers of Baghdad and North Africa. Throughout the Middle Ages *Sefer Josipphon* enjoyed enormous popularity. Its earliest printed edition appeared in Mantua around 1480, testifying to the continued fascination with this book among Italian-Jewish circles.

A historical work of a different sort is that of the 11th-century chronicler Ahimaaz ben Paltiel, generally called *Megillat Ahimaaz*. The author, a resident of Capua and Oria in

southern Italy, compiled in rhymed Hebrew prose a genealogy of his family from the 9th century on. The author's ancestors, such as Amittai, Silano, and Shephatiah, known through the liturgical poems they also composed, lived colorful and active lives and engaged in magic and wonder-working miracles. Given the author's penchant for telling fabulous tales of his family heroes, the work has often been discounted as an unreliable historical source and perceived as an unsophisticated product of the early medieval historical imagination. More recently the imaginative stories of Ahimaaz have been deemed significant in revealing vividly the transition from the Palestinian sphere of influence to the Babylonian. Treating especially the story of the scholar Abu Aaron of Baghdad, who arrived in Italy, one recent scholar has attempted to focus on the Palestinian cultural substrate that existed in Italy prior to the introduction of the Babylonian influence, and then to show how the latter ultimately engaged and overtook the former in Italy and eventually throughout Europe."

The Palestinian layer of Italian-Jewish culture is particularly prominent in the religious poetry composed during this period. The early liturgical creations of Silano and Amittai, for example, dwell on the memory of Israel's glorious past and are heavily indebted to the Palestinian *piyyut* form and to midrashic materials centering in the land of Israel. Yet they also reflect their own ambiance in their use of Latin, Greek, Italian, and even Arabic words. From the 10th century on, the writing of poetry extended beyond southern Italy to Rome and to Lucca in the north. In Rome Solomon ha-Bavli in the late 10th century composed a number of major poems that entered the hymnology of the Ashkenazic service. In Lucca members of the famous Kalonymus family also actively pursued the writing of liturgical poems for the synagogue."

The most extraordinary Jewish intellectual figure of southern Italy in the tenth century was surely Shabbetai Donnolo, the pharmacist, physician, and commentator on the ancient mystical text the *Sefer Yezirah*. Well versed in rabbinic literature, in Greek and Latin medical and scientific writings, conversant in colloquial Italian, and even an occasional poet of Hebrew verse, Donnolo fully embodied the multifaceted character of Italian-Jewish culture long before its efflorescence in the Renaissance period. Donnolo's *Sefer ha-Mirkabot* (The Book of Remedies), a treatise on pharmacology, and his commentary constitute his principal extant works. In interpreting the mystical cosmology of the *Sefer Yezirah* within the context of the scientific knowledge of his day, Donnolo prefigured a major preoccupation of later Italian-Jewish thinkers in correlating and harmonizing potentially competing and conflicting epistemologies.

Donnolo's fascination with a text of mystical speculation underscores the importance of Italy as a point of origin and dissemination of Jewish mysticism and pietism throughout Europe. According to a tradition preserved by the later Ashkenazic pietists, the Kalonymus family, who left Lucca for Mainz in the 9th century, was supposedly well versed in esoteric lore. In German pietistic circles Abu Aaron, considered to be the principal representative of Babylonian rabbinic learning in *Megillat Ahimaaz*, was also

held to be simultaneously a master of secret names and a progenitor of early Jewish mysticism. The contradictory images of this sage of Baghdad illustrate, at the very least, how conflicting ideologies and values competed for legitimization in the fertile soil of early medieval Italy.

The importance of Italy as a conduit of ancient Jewish mysticism to northern Europe constitutes only a part of the larger cultural role this Jewish community was to play in the creation of other European centers of Jewish culture. The Kalonymus family was also well known for its rabbinic scholarship and for its leadership role in the Rhine communities in a later period. The ultimate product of the dialectical encounter between Palestinian and Babylonian traditions in Italy was thus eventually transmitted to the north. And if a twelfth-century account of the ransoming of four rabbinic captives to North Africa and Spain can be seen to reflect the reality of a power shift of Jewish authority from the East to the West, its casual mention of Bari as the port of embarkation of the rabbis suggests an Italian cultural role in the transmission of Jewish culture to the West as well. Whatever the case, the substantial repercussions of the creative processes of self-definition emerging within the tiny Italian communities of the ninth and tenth centuries were to be felt far beyond Italy and for centuries to come.

### **A Shift Northward: The Late Middle Ages**

The Jewish community of Rome, notwithstanding periodic setbacks, continued to flourish throughout the Middle Ages and constitutes the one continuous thread in Jewish settlement in Europe from antiquity to the modern era. By the time of Rabbi Nathan ben Jehiel of Rome, in the late 11th and early 12th centuries, Jewish intellectual life was certainly thriving. Benjamin of Tudela reported on a sizable Jewish community there later in the 12th century, and despite certain setbacks in the 13th century, Jewish residence remained constant.

The real change in Jewish settlement took place in the northern communities. Before the 13th century only a handful of Jews were allowed to live north of Rome. The northern Italian communities had initially prohibited Jewish merchants and artisans from settling in their neighborhoods out of a fear of economic competition. This situation was gradually altered in the 13th and 14th centuries by the simultaneous rise to prominence of Jewish money-lending, spurred by the church's campaign against Christian usury, and by the burgeoning populations and economies of the northern Italian communes, which created an increasing need for capital. With the gradual decline of Jewish life in the south, and the eventual removal of Jews from trade and the textile industry, increasing numbers of Jews emigrated from the area and invested in pawn-broking banks in cities throughout northern and central Italy.

Subject to the vagaries of an agrarian economy and constantly in need of cash to support their standing militia and public projects, the petty city-states of northern and central Italy were predisposed to invite individual Jewish bankers to settle in their communities.

Usually such Jews were offered a *condotta* (charter) by the civic authorities for a limited number of years with the possibility of extensions of residency. The arrival of relatively affluent Jews in cities such as Ancona, Urbino, Perugia, Forli, Padua, Bologna, Milan, and Ferrara eventually paved the way for the entrance of their coreligionists. Jewish moneylenders thus became the economic mainstay of the small Jewish settlements sprouting up north of Rome and the chief source of communal leadership. When their economic power and position were

threatened, the welfare of every member of the Jewish community was adversely affected.

Not surprisingly the major luminaries of Jewish culture— rabbinic scholars, poets, physicians, astrologers, or philosophers (quite often the same individual) usually aligned themselves with these families. Their intellectual activities were supported by those privileged patrons of higher culture in a manner not unlike that of their counterparts in the Christian world of letters. This system of Jewish patronage, which continued to expand during the Renaissance, could not help but broaden the range of cultural interests pursued by an intellectual class directly dependent on the personal whim and will of economic magnates and their families.

The new demographic and economic order influenced Jewish cultural life in two other ways. In the first place the primary immigration of Jews to northern and central Italy was initially an internal one from the south. Despite the cultural differences they surely encountered, the majority of the new Jewish residents were still Italian-speaking. They traced their origins to imperial Rome or to other ancient communities in the south, and in some ways they saw themselves as Italian as much as Jewish. The opportunities for social, economic, and cultural interaction with their Christian neighbors were enhanced given the relative ease in which they adjusted to their new surroundings. With the later immigration of Jews from France, Germany, and Spain from the fourteenth century on, the alien character of the Jewish minority was more pronounced. Nevertheless the Italian indigenous element was still the dominant one, and it continued to set the tone for dialogue with the majority culture.

In the second place the relatively small size of the political states and their Jewish neighborhoods also facilitated maximum interaction between Jews and Christians. Individual Jews lived in close proximity not only to their Christian neighbors but also to the local duke or public officials. Under such circumstances Jews naturally felt an integral part of their surroundings to a greater degree than in most other communities in Christian Europe. In sum the stimulus of the Christian cultural environment was profoundly felt by individual Jews because of the personal position of Jewish bankers, because most Jews spoke and read Italian, and because of their constant and unavoidably close contacts with their Christian neighbors.

Yet it would be wrong to infer from the above that Italian Jews were not often violated

spiritually and physically by the Christian majority. Jewish existence was still precarious in the central and northern communities: moneylenders were constantly subjected to vilification and physical harm, and conversionist activities often threatened to undermine Jewish morale, even under the special conditions of the new surroundings. Nevertheless it should be emphasized that in this most intense period of Christian assault against Judaism throughout most of western Europe, the Jews of northern and central Italy fared better than most of their coreligionists elsewhere.

In considering the cultural creativity of Italian Jews in the 13th and 14th centuries, one is struck by its vitality and diversity and its profound interaction with the outside world.

From at least the time of Nathan ben Yehiel, rabbinic learning in Italy flourished, producing a number of well known exegetes and codifiers. Under the stimulus of first the Norman, then the Hohenstaufen, and finally the Angevin kings of the south, a number of individual Jewish savants were specifically employed in translating the important philosophic and scientific works of the Muslim world from Arabic to Hebrew and sometimes directly into Latin. This critical work of cultural intermediation not only left its mark on Latin culture from the twelfth century on; it also stimulated Jewish intellectual life through its encounter with Arabic philosophy and science.

The scholars who had undertaken translations were clearly engaged in a larger cultural process far weightier than the mere technical function for which they had been commissioned. Their renderings into Hebrew and Latin were an integral part of a more intense *translatio scientiae* engendered by the encounter of Arabic culture with the West. Jewish scholars in Italy were hardly immune to this deeper “translation” process. Jacob Anatoli, for example, imbibed the new philosophic spirit in his own homiletic work called *Malmad ha-Talmidim* (A Goad to Scholars). He often quoted Aristotle, Plato, Averroës, and even his contemporary Michael Scot; he defended Maimonides and argued for an allegorical-philosophical understanding of the biblical text.

The most illustrious member of this group of philosophical exegetes was certainly Immanuel ben Solomon of Rome (c. 1260–c. 1328), who wrote commentaries on most of the books of the Bible. Although born in Rome, he was part of the northern migration of the 13th and 14th centuries, living in such communities as Perugia, Gubbio, Ancona, and Verona while probably serving as a tutor in the home of wealthy banking families. His most important work was the *Mahberot* (Compositions), a large collection of poems structured within a loose narrative framework. His style and imagery are reminiscent of Spanish-Jewish precedents, but the Italian influence of the sonnets of Petrarch and Dante on Immanuel’s poems is unmistakable, and so is their licentious spirit. The last composition in his long work, entitled *Tofet and Eden*, is an account of an imaginary journey to heaven and hell closely modeled on Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. The heaven of Immanuel, however, is a Judaized one teeming with patriarchs, rabbis, contemporary Jews, and righteous Gentiles. Immanuel apparently never knew Dante, but he did



correspond with the poets Bosone da Gubbio and Cinco da Pistola and was highly appreciated by them both. Immanuel was undoubtedly the most original of the Italian-Jewish writers of his day and the most brilliant representative of the fusion of Latin, Italian, and Jewish cultures. Clearly affiliated with the philosophical world of the southern Jewish translators and exegetes, Manuel da Gubbio, as he was known in the Christian world, introduced a new literary genre to Hebrew writing and accordingly moved Jewish culture in Italy in altogether novel directions.

In short, the culture of Italian Jews in the 13th and 14th centuries reflected profound changes in their environment: the stimulus of the enlightened monarchs of the south in promoting the translation of Arabic culture in the Latin West, the eventual deterioration of Jewish life in those regions, the

steady movement to and settlement of the north, the rise of Jewish loan banking, the stimulation of new forms of Latin and Italian literature, and the impact of philosophic and mystical currents from Spain and Provence. Jewish intellectual life remained multifaceted and energized by these new developments. Individual writers excelled in rabbinics, philosophy, medicine and science, poetry, homiletics, and kabbalah. And all of this creative activity was in some ways a mere prelude to the cultural efflorescence of the Renaissance.

### **Jewish Culture in Renaissance Italy**

By the 15th century Jewish loan bankers were a noticeable element in the major urban centers of northern and central Italy and in many of the smaller towns as well. In a few instances Jewish families such as the Da Pisa or Norsa had succeeded in amassing a considerable fortune and had established a rather intricate network of loan banks in several communities. Jewish loan banking was well entrenched in such cities as Florence, Siena, Ferrara, Mantua, Pesaro, Reggio, Modena, Padua, and Bologna.

With the gradual increase of Jewish residents in these cities, encouraged by economic opportunities engendered by the loan bankers, recurrent signs of organized Jewish communal activity became more visible by the 15th century. One notes the appearance of cemeteries, synagogues, community schools, and later, voluntary associations to maintain basic social services for the community. In this same era immigrants from Germany and southern France joined the original native Italian element in settling these regions. The expulsion of the Jews of Spain resulted in a new influx of Sephardic Jews, who arrived in Italy as early as 1493. They were later joined by a steady stream of Marrano immigrants throughout the 16th century, fleeing the Iberian peninsula in search of more tolerant surroundings. The new Italian communities became more international in flavor, and understandably the process of political and social self-definition and differentiation that these increasingly complex communities underwent was sometimes accompanied by considerable stress, internal conflict, and even bitter struggles over religious and political authority.

The infusion of larger numbers of Jews into these regions evoked hostile reactions from elements of the local populace as well. The concentrated and conspicuous presence of Jewish moneylenders was particularly offensive to churchmen, especially members of the Franciscan order. The most vigorous attacks against Jewish usury in the 15th century came from such preachers as Bernardino of Siena and Antonino of Florence, who openly deplored the economic basis of the Jewish community and its supposed cancerous effect upon the local Christian populace. Such campaigns often had painful consequences for Jewish victims: riots, physical harassment, even loss of life. In some cases Jews were expelled from various cities, although these measures were often temporary. Sometimes the results of such provocations were more disastrous. Bernardino of Feltre's charge of ritual murder in the city of Trent in 1475 had serious repercussions for Jews not only in that city but throughout northern Italy.

If there was a safety valve from such disasters, it was to be found in the fragmented political nature of the Italian city-states. The Jewish victims of persecution often sought refuge in neighboring communities and on occasion even succeeded in returning to their original neighborhoods when the hostilities had subsided. An outburst in one locality, however, could easily trigger a similar explosion in another contiguous with it. The friars' inflammatory sermons, accompanied by severe public pressure against the local Jewish citizenry, usually traveled from town to town with the same predictable results. Yet such disruptions, no matter how harmful, lacked the finality and drastic consequences associated with antisemitism elsewhere in Western Europe. Because of the localized and circumscribed nature of the outbursts, Jewish life in Italy was never fully suppressed and continued to flourish through the modern era.

Incessant hostility was also counterbalanced by the relatively benign relations that existed between certain Jewish and Christian intellectuals in Italy at the height of the Renaissance and long after. The new cultural intimacy could not dissipate the recurrent animosities between Jews and Christians, but it did allow some Jews greater access to Christian society than before, and accordingly their impact on certain sectors of the majority culture was more profound. This intense interaction between intellectuals of different faiths would have significant impact on the cultural concerns of both communities.

An illuminating example of the dialogue between Renaissance and Jewish culture is the case of Judah Messer Leon, a Jewish physician, rabbinic scholar, and master of Aristotelian philosophy, who lived in a number of cities in north-central Italy in the second half of the 15th century. Sometime before 1480 Messer Leon composed a Hebrew book entitled *Nofet Zufim* (The Book of the Honeycomb's Flow), in which he introduced to his Jewish readers a new genre of rhetorical writing, placing himself squarely in the center of a new and ultimately dominant expression of Renaissance culture, that of Italian humanism. As early as the 14th century, with the revival and imitation of classical antiquity, the humanists had reclaimed rhetoric as a significant and independent part of

the new *studia humanitatis*, which also included grammar, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. As a reaction to the more technical philosophical interests of Aristotelian scholars, the humanists revived the ideal of the ancient Latinists Cicero and Quintilian, believing that the integration of rhetoric with philosophy would shape a new breed of educated persons endowed with both wisdom and eloquence.

Messer Leon's rhetorical compendium likewise projected to its Hebrew readers the ideal of a good and righteous man, gifted in the oratorical art, who thus combined his knowledge and noble character to produce a new and effective leadership for the Jewish community. Furthermore, in grafting the Ciceronian ideal onto Judaism, Messer Leon boldly attempted to portray his new image of leadership as an intrinsic part of Jewish tradition in the first place. He designated his new Jewish leader the *khakham kolel* (a direct Hebrew translation of the expression *homo universalis*), a person obliged to lead his community by virtue of a unique

combination of broad and substantive learning together with good character. As Messer Leon Judaized the civic orator, so too did he treat the entire field of rhetoric. The model of classical oratory initially was conceived not in Greece or Rome but in ancient Israel itself, so he claimed. If indeed the entire Hebrew Bible, especially its prophetic orations, was the font and exemplar of the rhetorical art, it followed not only that rhetoric was a subject worthy for Jews but also that it was incumbent upon them to appreciate and to master a discipline that had been theirs in the first place. Moreover, the idea that rhetoric had been perfected first by the Hebrews offered to Jews of the 15th century a satisfying reassurance regarding the intrinsic worth of their own cultural legacy.

Even more decisive than the impact of humanism on Italian-Jewish culture was that of the encounter of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), the famous Florentine philosopher, and his colleagues with a number of contemporary Jews. Out of a mutually stimulating interaction between Pico and his Jewish associates and a prolonged study of Jewish texts emerged one of the most unusual and exotic currents in the intellectual history of the Renaissance, the Christian kabbalah. In a relatively unprecedented manner a select but influential group of Christian scholars actively desired to understand the Jewish religion and its sacred texts in order to penetrate their own spiritual roots more deeply. Such a major reevaluation of contemporary Jewish culture by Christians would leave a noticeable mark on both Christian and Jewish self-understanding in this and later periods.

Pico and his intellectual circle were drawn to Jewish study partially out of a sincere devotion to missionary activity, as were earlier Christians before them, especially in Spain. But Pico's attraction to Jewish texts in general and to the kabbalah in particular had more to do with the philosophical and theological currents among his Florentine contemporaries. From Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), the leading Neo-platonist in Florence, Pico derived the vital concept of ancient theology, the notion that a single truth

pervades all periods and all cultures, and that among the ancient writers — pagan, Jewish, or Christian, a unity and harmony of religious insight can be discerned. By universalizing all religious knowledge, Ficino and Pico fashioned a more open and tolerant Christian theology. In searching for truth in cultural and religious settings distant from their own, they ultimately came to appreciate the centrality and priority of Hebraic wisdom in Western civilization.

The interaction between the new Christian Hebraists such as Pico and Italian Jews was significant in offering Jews a novel challenge to their own national existence. It introduced the image of a universal culture transcending both Christianity and Judaism in their present forms. Renaissance culture, of course, was still pervaded by traditional religious values; it was neither as secular nor as rational as some earlier historians had conceived it to be. Nor was Jewish communal life, its longstanding educational and social institutions, and its strong commitment to the traditional study of rabbinic texts, on the whole, radically different from what had existed in previous eras. And as we have seen, some

Christians still attacked Jews, publicly ridiculed their faith, and sought to convert them. But perhaps in one respect the dialogue between Judaism and Christianity was different in the Renaissance era. In sensing a greater urgency to justify their own particularity before an intellectual community increasingly ecumenical in spirit if not in practice, a certain number of Jews were offered a preview of the intellectual and spiritual challenges their descendants would face with growing regularity and intensity in the centuries to come.

### **The Age of the Ghetto**

The relatively tolerant climate Italy had offered its small Jewish community during the Renaissance was short-lived. As a result of the oppressive policy of Pope Paul IV (1476–1559) and his successors, the Italian-Jewish communities of the papal states as well as the rest of Italy experienced a radical deterioration of their legal status and physical state. Italian Jews suddenly faced a major offensive against their community and its religious heritage, culminating in the public burning of the Talmud in 1553 and in restrictive legislation leading to increased impoverishment, ghettoization, and expulsion. Jews had been expelled from the areas under the jurisdiction of Naples in 1541. In 1569 they were removed from the papal states, with the major exceptions of Ancona and Rome. Those who sought refuge in Tuscany, Venice, or Milan faced oppressive conditions as well. The only tolerable haven was in the territory controlled by the Gonzaga of Mantua or that of the Estensi of Ferrara.

The most conspicuous phenomenon associated with these changes was the erection of the ghetto itself. The word was probably first used to describe an island of Venice supposedly once the site of a foundry (*getto*), selected in 1516 as the compulsory residential quarter for Jews. The real impetus for the proliferation of the ghetto

throughout Italy, however, came only in 1555, when Pope Paul IV ordered that all Jews living within the papal states be confined to one street or to a few adjacent ones, and that the new quarter should have no more than one entrance and one exit. The Jews of Rome were the first to relocate to a compulsory quarter, and numerous other Italian communities soon followed Rome's example: Florence and Siena in 1571, Verona in 1600, Mirandola in 1602, Padua in 1603, Mantua in 1612, Rovigo in 1613, Ferrara in 1624, and so on, continuing until the end of the 18th century.

The period of the ghetto, extending well into the beginning of the 19th century, has usually been described as a radical break with a more tolerable past, an era of economic and political decline, and of the growing cultural isolation of Italian Jewry. No doubt Jews confined to a heavily congested area surrounded by a wall shutting them off from the rest of the city, except for entrances bolted at night, were subjected to considerably more misery, impoverishment, and humiliation than before. And clearly the result of ghettoization was the erosion of ongoing liaisons between Christians and Jews, including intellectual ones. But the social and cultural results of this new confinement were indeed more paradoxical than one might initially assume.

Jewish cultural priorities did in fact shift considerably by the

second half of the 16th century; a kind of "turning in," an internalization of Jewish culture, did emerge among certain sectors of Italian Jews. But it is unclear whether the imposition of the ghetto was its primary cause. Even before the 1550s, a growing insecurity and spiritual crisis over the inadequacy of philosophical speculation was felt among some Jews. And by the end of the century a pervasive Jewish mysticism, with its emphasis on practical acts of piety, came to challenge and supplant the crumbling edifice of Jewish scholasticism of the previous age. Also, with the erection of the ghetto, there was a dramatic proliferation of pious confraternities (*hevrot*) in every major Italian town, providing Jewish men and women an opportunity to engage in charity, the care of the sick and the growing number of indigent Jews, as well as the burial of the dead. No doubt these voluntary associations were partially stimulated by similar Christian sodalities, but they were also an expression of internal Jewish needs, both economic and religious. They provided an outlet for enhanced public prayer, even innovations in times and texts of liturgy, and intense spiritual fellowship. They were particularly receptive settings for the new pietistic and mystical trends emanating from Israel into Italy.

At the same time, within the ghetto walls themselves, Jewish intellectual life displayed a remarkable openness to external culture. Ironically, Jewish writers and official communal scribes expressed themselves more frequently in Italian than they had done during the Renaissance. Jewish intellectuals, to an even greater extent than before, studied Latin and Italian literature (a few even Greek), rhetoric, history, music, and art; read and wrote poetry in Hebrew and Italian; and especially mastered medicine and the sciences. Conventional Jewish history textbooks usually offer the erudite Azariah de' Rossi (c.

1511–1578) or the prodigious Leone Modena as the most typical exemplars of Renaissance Jewish culture. The first penned the most significant work of Jewish historiography among Italian Jews called the *Me'or Einayim* (Enlightenment to the Eyes), a critical historical evaluation of Talmudic chronology correlated with non-Jewish sources of late antiquity, in 1575. The second was a prolific writer, a gifted preacher, and skillful polemicist who served the Venetian Jewish community in the early seventeenth century. Yet both pursued their “Renaissance” interests in a post-Renaissance age, or more precisely within the cultural world of the counter-Reformation and emerging ghetto environment. Similarly, Salamone Rossi (c. 1570–c. 1630) composed his famous “Renaissance” madrigals within the confines of the Mantuan ghetto.

The limitations of ghetto life do not appear to have inhibited numerous Jews from attending Italian medical schools, especially in Padua, in unprecedented numbers in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. In fact, during the ghetto era more rabbis and communal leaders than ever before possessed medical educations, were literate in a variety of scientific literatures in addition to rabbinics, were conversant with Italian literature and music, and enjoyed writing and reading poetry. Despite the apparent intentions of the planners of the ghetto, its ultimate products were hardly isolationists. On the contrary, the enclosure in a restricted space might even have accentuated the desire of many Jewish intellectuals to engage more intensely in the

enticing cultural world just beyond the suffocating walls of their enclosed neighborhoods.

The ghetto ironically became the setting for an explosive diffusion of Jewish culture of all varieties—rabbinic, kabbalistic, moralistic, scientific, and literary—through the agency of the printing press. Despite the threat of church censorship, the Italian-Jewish communities of the late 16th to 18th centuries, especially Venice, became publishing capitals of the Jewish world. Indeed many of the first great publishers of Hebrew books were Christians, and because of the pressing need for literary competence in typesetting and proofreading, their collaborators were usually Jews. The publishing houses were yet another example of how the church’s attempt to impoverish Jewish life and erect a barrier between Jews and the outside world had manifestly failed.

In sum, long before the coming of emancipation, the Risorgimento, and the demolishing of the ghetto walls by the mid-19th century, the Jews of Italy were prepared for the transition out of the ghetto. While faithfully entrenched in the Jewish traditions of their past, they had long accepted worldly culture as a natural part of that heritage and were constantly engaged in harmonizing the old with the new and in reconciling the disparate elements of a richly complex Jewish cultural environment.

## **Epilogue**

Having surveyed some 1800 years of Jewish life in Italy, we finally are obliged to reflect on the lines of continuity in this vast cultural legacy and on its significance for Jewish

and general history. We have found three recurrent themes: the longevity of Jewish residence and culture in Italy, the role this community played in the mediation and correlation of Jewish and non Jewish cultures, and its function as a channel of ideas and values to other Jewish communities.

In absorbing diverse Jewish and non-Jewish cultural forms and creatively molding them into constantly novel configurations, in patiently tolerating diversity and discord, in channeling ideas and values from one place to another as a clearinghouse of merchandise, and in allowing individuality to blossom within a framework of communal consensus, Italian Jewry was expressing its own vitality, its own creativity. From the perspective of the post-modern world in which we live, one of diverse cultural lifestyles and values where no single ideology reigns supreme but where bitter acrimony and extremism hold sway, the image of Italian Jewry seems refreshingly appealing. Perhaps in its quiet sanity and dignified restraint, in its mutual respect and tolerance for competing and dissenting parties, and in its harmonizing and integrative capacities, can be located not only the essential legacy of Italian-Jewish civilization but also its enduring significance for contemporary culture.

*Notes from Zamir, Spring 2003*