

The Jewish Ghetto of Venice

By: Gadi Luzzatto Voghera

INTRO:

Past and present intertwine on a stroll through a Jewish quarter with a colorful history and a still-vibrant cultural life.

BEGIN ARTICLE:

They say that Venice has several hidden doors, and if you find one of them, you should open it. Once you have passed over the threshold, you will find yourself magically transported to an entirely different place. Such is the case in Venice's Jewish ghetto, in the northwestern part of the city, where the visitor feels as if he has been beamed back to the days when it was crowded with Jews of Ashkenazi, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Levantine descent.

Already in 1366, the Venetian republic permitted Ashkenazi Jews who were working as moneylenders in Mestre, on the Venice mainland, to settle in Venice and continue to ply their trade. These families had come from the Rhine area after fleeing pogroms inflicted by Christians who accused them of maliciously spreading the Black Plague. The authorities in Venice soon became aware that the Jews were in need of community services. In 1386, they provided the small community with a parcel of land on the island of Lido, to be used as a Jewish cemetery.

In the early sixteenth century, the authorities and representatives of the Jewish community worked out a kind of contract that would regulate Jewish settlement in Venice. The contract, with the Venetian Senate, was signed in 1516 by Asher Meshullam (known by his Italian name, Anselmo del Banco, because he owned a bank in Padua where clients could pawn possessions in return for loans); it authorized the residence of Ashkenazi and Italian Jews in the city for a period of 10 years.

Meschullam and his fellow Jews had arrived in Venice in 1508 as a result of the war between Venice and the countries belonging to the League of Cambrai, which had united against Venice under the patronage of Pope Julius II. Many Jews who had been living in the Venetian-ruled region between Brescia and Padua fled to Venice. For the first time, there were several hundred Jews in the city, and to the Venetian authorities, they were a threatening, alien presence. The Jews were allocated a section that was called the Getto Nuovo ("New Metal Foundry") – prior to their arrival, this area was occupied by Venice's ironworkers, who processed the metal for the production of the republic's cannons. The vast majority of the Jewish community in Venice at the time was of Ashkenazi descent, and they pronounced ghetto with a "g" sound rather than the Venetian "j." As a result, their quarter came to be known as the "ghetto," a word that would take on dire connotations in later periods.

In return for receiving permission to settle in Venice, the Jews promised to obey various prohibitions and to keep up the payments imposed on their community.

The contract signed in 1516 obligated them to live only in the zone that had been allocated to them. They were permitted to open three banks that would grant loans at an interest rate of 15% per annum, they had to pay a housing tax, and when they left the ghetto they had to wear special attire with a distinctive badge stitched to their clothing. They were forbidden to leave the ghetto at night. On the other hand, they were allowed to slaughter animals in accordance with the Jewish dietary laws, to open synagogues, and to use their cemetery.

The treatment of the Jews by the Venetian authorities was no different from the treatment of various ethnic groups in other Mediterranean cities, such as Alexandria, Constantinople, and Salonika. In those places as well, separate quarters were assigned to different communities, each of which worked in its own economic or commercial sphere. Venice had its Fondaco dei Turchi ("Inn of the Turks"), where the Muslim merchants lived, and the Fondaco dei Tedeschi ("Inn of the Germans"), where the Protestants were concentrated. Other groups that resided in Venice were not obligated to live in a particular area, but chose to stay together within their own communities anyway. The Greek Orthodox, for example, lived near the San Giorgio dei Greci Church in the Castello area, and the Armenians lived on the island of San Lazzaro. At its inception, then, the ghetto was not established with an intent to discriminate against its inhabitants, but was rather a result of a municipal policy instituted for the purpose of maintaining peace between the various communities.

It is within this context that we should view the entry of Levantine Jews into the ghetto. These Jews were among the merchants who had been exiled from Spain in 1492 and settled in the port cities of the eastern Mediterranean, where they engaged in far-reaching commercial activity. Their business dealings included trade links with Venice, which in the sixteenth century was in need of Jewish middlemen in order to cope with the strong competition from other countries and cities.

But the Levantine Jews who settled in Venice were not like the Jews who had signed the first contract with the Venetian republic in 1516. They spoke another language and did not have the same way of life. Above all, they were not moneylenders, but merchants. These differences caused friction among the residents of the Jewish ghetto, and in 1541, the Venetian republic allotted another area nearby, called the Getto Vecchio ("Old Metal Foundry") to the newly arrived Jews, who were subject to the same restrictions that Venice had imposed upon their Ashkenazi and Italian brethren, with one exception: their profession. The Levantine Jews were soon joined by Jews from Spain and Portugal, as well as Marranos who had returned to Judaism upon arriving in Venice. The difference in lifestyles engendered an odd social situation. Though the Jews of the various communities were acquainted with one another and came into contact in a social, cultural, and religious context, they almost never married each other. The archives of the ghetto contain documents attesting to legal disputes between the members of the different groups, for which the Venetian government authorities were compelled to serve as arbitrators.

Anyone walking through the streets of the ghetto can easily identify the four different stages in the development of the Venice Jewish community in the

sixteenth century. In the Ghetto Nuovo, right next to the museum, are the Scuola Grande Tedesca (Ashkenazi Synagogue) and the Canton Synagogue (which also follows Ashkenazi custom), both designed in eighteenth-century architectural style; nearby is the synagogue of the Italian community. At the Campiello delle Scuole ("The Square of the Synagogues"), in the Ghetto Vecchio, are the sumptuous synagogues of the Levantine and Spanish communities.

The story of the Jews of Venice does not end in the sixteenth century. Upon entering the Fondamenta ("Walkway") di Cannaregio adjacent to the ghetto, the visitor cannot help but notice Gam Gam, a kosher restaurant sporting a poster announcing the coming of the Messiah – evidence of the presence of a small Chabad (Lubavitcher) community that has existed in the ghetto for the past 10 years and recently even opened a yeshiva there. There is tension between this community and the other Jews in Venice, but it is essentially no different from the tension that existed 400 years ago: distrust, different lifestyles, refusal to recognize each other's rabbinical institutions, and innumerable squabbles about mundane issues.

If we slip back through that hidden doorway to the past, we will encounter another story, from a different period, that is similar in some ways to the conflict with Chabad regarding the Messiah. In April 1668, Nathan of Gaza, a proponent of the theory that Shabbetai Zvi was the Messiah, arrived in Venice. At the time, many Venetian Jews had turned to Kabbalah and various other messianic doctrines in an attempt to cope emotionally with the economic distress that was driving many families to near-starvation. This preoccupation was evident in the writings of those days.

A good example is *Yesod Olam* ("The Foundation of the World"), which was very popular in the ghetto. Its author, Mosè Zacuto (c. 1620-1697), stressed that man must encourage the coming of the Messiah by the conviction in his heart and by being an observant Jew. This was not a new idea, and certainly not an original one, but it was well suited to a period (1665-66) when echoes of the Shabbetean movement were reaching the Venetian ghetto.

The Venetian rabbis vigorously opposed the ideas of Shabbetai Zvi, both because they had a low estimation of the level of kabbalistic study these ideas represented and because of their fear of losing control over the ghetto population. Added to this rabbinical opposition was the Venetian republic's fear of the Shabbetean movement, which had already caused riots in Smyrna and Constantinople and threatened to spread to other communities throughout Europe.

All of these things considered, it is not difficult to understand why Nathan of Gaza met with such hostility in Venice. He was allowed to remain in the ghetto for only half a month, and even this concession was granted only after the intervention of several Venetian aristocrats. The rabbinical tribunal of the community, headed by the sage Samuel Aboab, did everything it could to keep the damage to a minimum. After bitter arguments, in which all of the communities were involved, Nathan of Gaza was called upon by the rabbis of the ghetto to stand trial,

renounce the Shabbetean and messianic ideas, and exile himself from the city; he chose to leave.

Now let us return to the ghetto of Venice, just after the arrival of the year 2000. Judaica shops offer us works that we can find only here, such as Hanukkah menorahs, mezuzahs, and candlesticks of Murano glass, alongside such novelties as a chessboard whose pieces are designed to look like rabbis and priests. Also on sale are lithographs of ghetto scenes by contemporary artists and the full range of souvenirs, including books, shirts, and postcards. How different these shops are from those that operated in the ghetto on the eve of World War II, when the local population could find kosher meat, a variety of artisans, and peddlers hawking secondhand goods.

Today, only a few Jewish families live in the ghetto, but it serves as a center of cultural and religious activity for the Jewish community of Venice. One of the two functioning synagogues is open on Fridays and Saturdays, and morning services are held on other days of the week. Children study two days a week at the community's religious school in preparation for their bar mitzvahs. There is also a library, a museum, a kindergarten, and a home for the aged that doubles as a pensione and kosher restaurant. The ghetto's wide-ranging cultural activities include courses in Jewish culture, religious laws, and the Hebrew language, and lectures presented under the auspices of WIZO. Annual one-day seminars on various aspects of Judaism usually attract more than 100 participants.

This effervescent activity has always been characteristic of life in the Venice ghetto. The Leone Modena Seminary, the Vivante Seminary, and the Jacob Fano Seminary were among the many institutions that made the Venice ghetto one of the most important centers of Jewish learning in Europe in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Essays and literary works in Hebrew and Italian were written in the ghetto. Rabbis and philosophers argued vociferously about the pros and cons of instituting a reform in the laws and commandments, the value of the Oral Law versus the Torah, and the use of concepts borrowed from non-Jewish philosophy in the study of the Talmud and the Mishnah.

Three multifaceted figures, Rabbi Leone Modena, Rabbi Simone Luzzatto, and Sara Coppio Sullam, made their mark on the Venetian Jewish culture and on the Jewish world at large.

Rabbi Leone Modena (1571-1648) was a teacher and preacher who was also known for his literary works and his great interest in music. He was such a close friend of the Jewish composer and musician Salomone Rossi of Mantua that he staunchly defended the custom of playing musical pieces in synagogue on the Sabbath. His autobiography paints a vivid picture of life in the ghetto in his time. But he was also a compulsive gambler, spending much of his time in the casinos of Venice. Noblemen, commoners, Jews, and Christians were all equal there, hobnobbing with each other in their quest for fortune. He lost a great deal of money in these pursuits, and from time to time he had to come up with original ways to make a living and repay his debts.

His most famous book started a new trend. Finding that his many Christian friends knew very little about the Jewish religion, and concluding that this ignorance contributed greatly to Christians' belief in the satanic power of

Judaism, he decided to provide them with a simple explanation of Judaism and its customs. His book, *Historia de riti hebraici vita et osservanze degl'Hebrei di questi tempi* ("A History of the Jewish Laws and Commandments"), became popular and was translated into many languages. Its success rallied others to the cause of explaining the various aspects of Judaism to the Christian world.

Working alongside Rabbi Leone Modena in that period was Simone Luzzatto (1583-1663), who was chief rabbi of the community and was also well-versed in mathematics and science. Unlike Rabbi Leone Modena, who encouraged non-Jews to listen to his sermons, Luzzatto vehemently opposed this practice. Nevertheless, he wrote booklets that explained various aspects of Judaism and its commandments to the non-Jewish public, such as *Trattato delle opinioni o dogmi degli ebrei e dei riti loro principali* ("Essay on the Opinions of the Jews and Their Major Commandments"), which unfortunately has been lost. Another well-known work by Luzzatto is *Discorso circa il stato de gl' hebrei et in particolar dimoranti nell'inclita città di Venetia* ("Discourse on the State of the Jews and Particularly Those Living in Venice"). It explains the benefit derived by the Venetian republic from its Jewish inhabitants.

The works of these two rabbis reflect Jewish openness toward the Christian world in the early seventeenth century. They were seeking a *modus vivendi* based on the recognition that knowledge of the other side can dispel prejudice and improve relations between neighbors.

The third figure was Sara Coppio Sullam (1592-1641), a pupil of Rabbi Leone Modena. An open-minded person who was sensitive to her cultural environment, she composed many sonnets and participated in the cultural life of Venice. At the same time, she remained faithful to the tradition of her forefathers, which she passionately defended, even in public debates. It is said that she was beautiful, but was in frail health.

Sara Coppio Sullam founded an academy where Jews and Christians jointly sought solutions to literary and philosophical problems. Baldassare Bonifacio, a member of the academy and later bishop of Capodistria, accused her of heresy, but she published a booklet in which she refuted his claims.

The names of major protagonists in the history of Venice's Jews can be found, alongside those of its less illustrious residents, among the cypress trees at the Jewish cemetery on the island of Lido. Family emblems can still be seen on Portuguese and Levantine Jewish tombstones, as opposed to the simplicity of the memorial stones of the Jews of Ashkenaz. A modest tombstone marks the final resting place of Rabbi Leone Modena, and nearby is the grave of his friend Sara Coppio Sullam, whose epitaph he composed. The Jewish cemetery of Venice has provided inspiration for such poets as Goethe and Lord Byron.

The Holocaust dealt the Jews of Venice a fatal blow. About 280 of the 1,000 Jews who lived in Venice on the eve of World War II, among them many children and Adolfo Ottolenghi, the rabbi of the community, did not return from Auschwitz. It took a long time for the community to recover from this shock. Nevertheless, a new generation was born, and it is carrying on the tradition of its forefathers. Though the community includes many families of Italian and Ashkenazi descent,

it now observes the Sephardi customs, and though most of the families are not religious, the community is considered Orthodox. When members of the community intermarry, most of the non-Jewish partners are even more devoted to tradition than their Jewish partners and have a strong desire to give their children a Jewish education.

On holidays, so many people attend services that visitors passing through must reserve seats, or they will be denied entry by security guards. Particularly famous are the Seder night events of “Cuore e Concordia”, Lev Ve-Ah’ava (“Heart and Friendship”), a charitable society that has been functioning in the ghetto for over 100 years.

The community is now trying to raise funds to help it preserve the many cultural and artistic legacies of the ancient ghetto of Venice – its five synagogues, cemetery, religious articles, books, archives, and other treasures – so that this fascinating heritage can be passed on to the generations to come.

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