

## THE JEWS OF 16TH CENTURY ITALY

With the advent of the era of the Acharonim, the Jewish community of Italy was greatly strengthened in numbers. The southward migration of German Jews and their settlement in the northern provinces had already begun in the 15th century. These German Jews formed their own congregations in many places, and gradually there evolved a unique Italian nusach Ashkenaz. Following 1492 and the expulsion of Jews from Spain, and later the influx of Portuguese Jews, the Sephardim became a dominant force throughout Italy. The Sephardic customs in prayer - nusach Sefarad - came to be practiced in Italy alongside the old Italian (Romaniote) and German rites. The influx of a significant number of Conversos throughout the 16th century also further strengthened the already growing Sephardic community.

As for the islands of Sicily and Sardinia, they were Spanish possessions during the 15th century. The Edict of Expulsion in 1492 applied to their Jewish populations as well. Later, the Duchy of Naples in southern Italy was acquired by the Spanish crown, and the Jews were expelled from there, too, by Emperor Charles V between 1510-1541. The focus of Jewish life was now confined to central and northern Italy.

The new spirit of the Renaissance now began to invade the Jewish world of Italy. Jews were very active in translating the ancient works of Israel, as well as those of Greece and Rome. The fields of scientific discovery and human history also gained increased interest. Jews became prominent in these areas as both patrons and participants. Abraham Farissol (1468-1473) of both Mantua and Ferrara served at the court of Lorenzo de Medici. He wrote a book on geography wherein he described the divisions of the world and the peoples who inhabited them. In fact he was the first Hebrew writer to describe in detail the newly discovered America. Joseph ha-Kohen was fascinated about the great conflict between Christianity and Islam. The Turks were constantly expanding and extending their sway over southeastern Europe. HaKohen wrote a history

of France, representing Christianity, and a history of the Ottoman Turks. He also wrote a history of the tribulations of the Jews called Emek ha-Bachah (The Vale of Weeping).

Together with successive members of his family, Solomon ibn Varga (b1450) wrote Shevet Yehudah (The Rod of Judah), an account of all the persecutions which the Jews had suffered during the previous centuries. This book was an attempt to indicate that, sometimes through their own fault and at other times through the fault of others, the Jewish people had undergone many persecutions but had, with the aid of G-d, survived them. He called attention to pride, social climbing, and neglect of Jewish life, but also to the ill will and bigotry which surrounded the Jewish people.

Another important scholar of the 16th century was Azariah dei Rossi (1511-1578), a foremost physician and scientist. Born in Mantua, he later moved to Ferrara, but also resided in several other Italian towns. He was proficient in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. Influenced by the Renaissance spirit surrounding him, he wrote a book on Jewish history and literature called Me'or Eynaim (Light of the Eyes). In 1570 he lived through a terrible earthquake in Sabbioneta and wrote an account of it called Kol Elokim.

Unfortunately the spirit of skepticism and anti-clericalism which led to undermining the rule of the Church, also pervaded the Jewish world. Rabbinic authority was openly challenged, ancient customs of Israel were threatened, and even the texts of the Bible, Mishnah, and Talmud were questioned as to their accuracy and even their holiness.

The Jews felt that in many ways the Renaissance would benefit them both politically and socially. The weakening of the power of the Church, the profligacy and worldliness of the Renaissance popes, and the bitter internecine warfare between the Italian city-states, all seemed to indicate opportunity for improvement of the Jewish situation in Italy. But such hopes ultimately proved to be unfounded. The enemies of the Church were no friendlier, and many times were even more inimical to the Jews than the Church itself. The Christian Hebraists loved Hebrew but not the Hebrews.

Ancient prejudices against the Jews still prevailed. Jewish bankers, brokers, merchants, and physicians were forced out of their fields by the growing Christian non-clerical middle class and intelligentsia. Renaissance men and leaders no longer needed Jews to make their society prosper and grow. They felt free to discard the Jews who for centuries had helped build the empires of Florence, Venice, Rome, and Verona. Jews were expelled from Perugia in 1485, Vicenza in 1486, Parma in 1488, Lucca and Milan in 1489, and Tuscany, including Florence, in 1489.

In 1516, the substitute for complete expulsion of the Jews from a community was invented in Venice. The entire Jewish community was to be forced to live in a tightly segregated and enclosed section of Venice, known as the ghetto. The term ghetto is based on the Italian word for iron foundry, geto, in whose district the ghetto was founded. Living in the ghetto was compulsory. Jews could live nowhere else. This arrangement, an innovation of the leading and most progressive Renaissance community in Europe, soon became the norm throughout Christian Europe. Jews were forced to accept this new arrangement of lifestyle and eventually became proud and protective of their isolation. Ghettos, however, were also efficient in preventing Jews from meaningful self-defense against the mobs of haters who surrounded them.

The introduction of the printing press in the second half of the 15th century soon began to revolutionize Jewish learning. Prior to this only a limited number of copies of a work could be made by hand, thus severely curtailing its circulation. Now thousands of copies could be made at once and distributed throughout the Jewish world. It was the invention of movable type that guaranteed the survival and development of Torah scholarship amongst Jews wherever they might live. In just the first fifty years of printing in 15th century Europe, tens of thousands of Jewish books were printed and disseminated.

Italy became the cradle of Jewish typography, and it retained a leading position in the field of Hebrew printing for many centuries. The first printed editions of the Talmud, Mishnah, Mikraos Gedolos, Tur, and Shulchan

Aruch were produced there. This great availability of scholarly works made Italy a flourishing center of Jewish learning. Many communities supported their own yeshivot, and among the rabbis of the towns were some of the greatest Jewish scholars of that time.

Padua, Calabria, Soncino, and Naples all had Jewish printing presses in operation by the end of the 15th century. Israel Nathan Soncino and his son, Joshua Solomon Soncino, were the first famous Jewish printers. However, Gershom Soncino, Joshua's nephew, far outdid his elders, eventually producing over 100 Hebrew works by 1534. There were also non-Jewish printing presses that produced Hebrew and Torah books for the Jewish market. This competition caused much dissension and turmoil in the Jewish world. Rabbinic bans proliferated, and much heated debate, both oral and written, ensued. Large investments of money in competitive printing presses sharpened the disputes.

The most famous dispute between competing presses involved the noted rabbinic scholar, Rabbi Meir Katzenellebogen of Padua (Maharam MiPadua), (1482-1565). Rabbi Meir attempted to publish his edition of Rambam's Mishneh Torah in partnership with a well known non-Jewish printer. Another powerful non-Jewish printer rushed his competing edition of Mishneh Torah to an earlier press and distribution. Rabbi Meir obtained rabbinic injunctions forbidding Jews from purchasing that new edition. The competing printer retaliated by denouncing Rabbi Meier's work to the pope, alleging that it contained material insulting to the Church. Rabbi Meir's non-Jewish partner and publisher also responded in kind, complaining to the Church about the contents of his competitor's Mishneh Torah edition. The pope accommodated all parties to the dispute, and on August 12, 1553 declared all editions of the Talmud, Rambam's Mishneh Torah, and other books to be blasphemous per se. On Rosh Hashanah, September 1553, thousands of Jewish books were burned in the Campo de Fiori in Rome. Jewish book burning now spread throughout Renaissance Italy. The Jewish community, recoiling in horror at the imposition of such medieval barbarity upon them, reached an accommodation with the Italian Church. It involved a strict discipline of self-censorship on all Jewish books to ensure that they

contained no unfavorable reference to Christianity. The Jews also promised that no Jewish books would be printed unless they first obtained rabbinic approbation (haskama) attesting to their scholarly value, and also guaranteeing that they were free of criticism of the Church.

Unfortunately the rise of the Reformation movement at the start of the 16th century led to a Catholic counter-Reformation movement, and that brought with it a wave of persecutions and anti-Jewish legislation by the Papacy. These enactments had the force of law throughout the Papal States in central Italy, and were soon copied in many other provinces.

Various popes during the 16th century issued anti-Semitic decrees. In 1553 Pope Julius III ordered that all copies of the Talmud be confiscated and burned. Unfortunately the order was strictly and scrupulously enforced and caused tremendous damage to Jewish learning. Paul IV (1555-1559) now ordered that all Jews should be contained in the Ghetto. He also severely curtailed their economic activities, and the only business he allowed to them was the selling of rags. Additionally he ordered that 25 Conversos residing in Ancona, part of the Papal States, be burned at the stake. Pius V (1566-1572) and Clement VIII (1592-1605) additionally banished the Jews from the Papal States, except for the cities of Rome and Ancona. The reason for these exceptions was that the papal treasury would have suffered too much from their total expulsion.

In spite of this oppressive climate in which they lived, Italian Jews did manage to flourish in the 16th and later in the 17th centuries, both economically and spiritually. The Jews in the northern part of Italy in particular were mostly spared from the wave of persecutions that the Jews in central Italy were relentlessly subjected to.