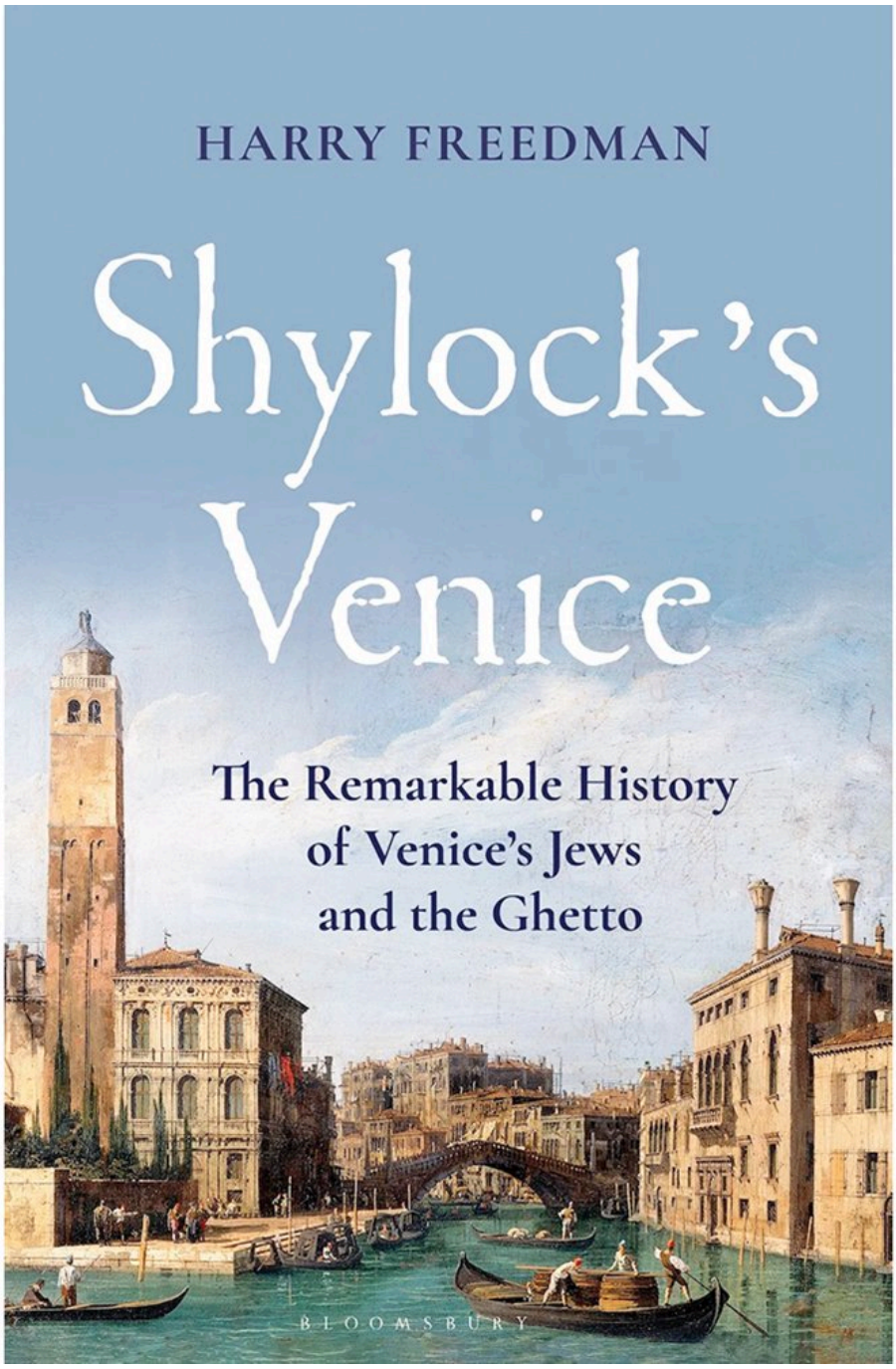
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'Shylock's Venice': A History That Goes Beyond Shakespeare

By Bracha Schwartz | March 28, 2024



Reviewing: "Shylock's Venice: The Remarkable History of Venice's Jews and the Ghetto," by Harry Freedman. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. 2024.
ISBN-13: 978-1-3994-0727-4.

Venice is more than a picturesque sightseeing trip on a gondola through the canals. It was once a great power, whose fortunes rose and fell over hundreds of years. "Shylock's Venice: The Remarkable History of Venice's Jews and the Ghetto" by Harry Freedman, examines how Jews found a home there and were generally tolerated, but never accepted. They were never more than tenants whose lease was constantly up for renewal with the terms always changing. Jews were useful to the powers that be on the one hand, and despised on the other. But despite being pushed into the world's first ghetto, where living standards were atrocious, with very few options for a livelihood, the Jews of Venice

developed religiously, culturally and intellectually. Freedman's engaging narrative shines a light on the individual Jews who played a part in that history, the ideas and events that defined it, and how the community survived its many challenges.

Freedman's central question, and the skeleton on which he fleshes out the story, is: Why did Shakespeare write "The Merchant of Venice," with its Jewish central characters, and how authentic were his descriptions of place and plot? The play was written (1596-1598) at a time when Jews were banned from England. (It was not until 1656 that Oliver Cromwell allowed Jews back.) What caught Shakespeare's attention?

Freedman flirts with the answers to these questions throughout the book, analyzing clues but never coming to factual conclusions. The author is from Great Britain, where Shakespeare is a constant presence, unlike the U.S. English actress Tracy-Ann Oberman, who is Jewish, is currently starring in the West End production "The Merchant of Venice 1936," a reimagined version of the classic set in 1930s London, which has earned rave reviews as well as the ire of pro-Palestinian agitators. Anecdotally, I asked a few American friends of various ages if they had read "The Merchant of Venice" in school or if their children have read or are reading it. While many of my peers answered that they had read the play in high school or college, none were aware that their teenage or adult children had read it.

The author's fascinating and engaging history of Venice and its Jews would be enough of a draw on its own. Shylock seems to be a "hook" to attract readers but I found it a distraction at times. At the end of the book we know a great deal about the history of Venice and the Jews, but very little about why Jews and Venice were of interest to Shakespeare.

What makes "Shylock's Venice" worth reading is Freedman's well-paced, thorough look at the Jewish experience in a complex culture. Although Jews were penned in the ghetto, discourse and scholarship prospered, although at other times it was suppressed. Venice is where the Talmud was first printed but also publicly burned. The gates of the ghetto were locked at night but during the day Jews and Venetians mingled to a large degree. The Catch 22 of Jewish identity is that Jews were forced into being pawnbrokers and contributed to the economy, but were hated for their forced vocation.

Much of what is known about Jewish life in Venice comes from the autobiography of Rabbi Leon Modena, born in 1571. Rabbi Modena was a religious and intellectual giant. Freedman writes that many upper-crust Venetians came to the ghetto to hear the rabbi's sermons. He had his share of failings, particularly a gambling addiction, and a dysfunctional family. None of his sons followed in his footsteps. One died early from exposure to fumes from his lab experiments with alchemy; another developed a gambling addiction that ruined his life. A third son lived a dissolute life and was murdered for revenge.

I first became acquainted with Rabbi Modena through reviewing two recent works of fiction loosely based on his autobiography, by author Nina Wachsman. "The Gallery of Beauties" and "The Courtesan's Secret" are very entertaining if you like historical fiction; a third book in the series is planned.

Rabbi Modena had many connections with learned Englishmen including the ambassador to Venice, Sir Henry Wotton and his chaplain, William Bedell. Rabbi Modena taught Hebrew to Bedell, who in turn introduced Rabbi Modena to "Christian interpretations of the Bible."

Freedman indulges in some speculation about whether or not Rabbi Modena was familiar with Shakespeare, and if so, what he thought about Shylock. Freedman tries to unravel the connections Shakespeare had to Venice, though his sleuthing is always speculative, never definitive. It's an interesting rabbit hole but one that never surfaces back above ground.

There are more fascinating stories in "Shylock's Venice" that show how some of the Jews of Venice achieved great stature, but stopped in their tracks if they went too far. Sara Copia Sulam was a wealthy Jewish woman who was a writer and musician. She held a literary salon at her house in the ghetto that "attracted many more Christian participants than Jews." The salon was held during the day since the ghetto gates were locked at night. Sulum had to close the salon after being robbed and later becoming the subject of a smear campaign by men she had thought were her supporters, if not friends.

The Jews of Venice had a few years of freedom when Napoleon Bonaparte pressured the Venetian Republic to surrender to a "French-controlled, provisional government." At the French military commander's direction, the gates of the ghetto came tumbling down in 1797. Unfortunately, later that year Napoleon ceded the Republic of Venice to the Austrian Empire. Freedman writes, "The Jews lost the civil liberties they had briefly enjoyed. But the gates were never replaced. That much at least had improved."

Freedman's last portrait of a Jew in Venice, who should be remembered for the ages, is of Giuseppe Jona, president of the Venetian Jewish community in 1943, when the Nazis entered Venice. Ordered to hand over a list of all the Jews in the city to the Nazis in two days, Jona warned the Jews to flee or hide. He destroyed every document relating to the Jewish community, after which he wrote his will and committed suicide. According to Freedman, his actions saved over 1,000 lives.

In a recent interview for the Italian online publication YtaliGLOBAL, Freedman said that people visiting the ghetto today often complain that they are disappointed. But the ghetto is and always was a poverty-stricken, unhappy place to live. He is glad that the ghetto hasn't been turned into a "theme park" to attract visitors. "It is ideally suited to contemplation, a largely unspoiled reminder of how its inhabitants lived, a testament to persecution, suffering and the eternal, indomitable spirit of the Jews."

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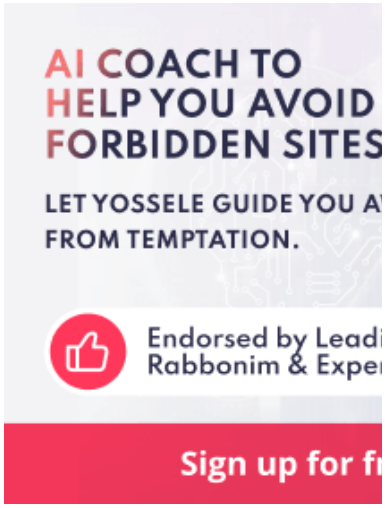
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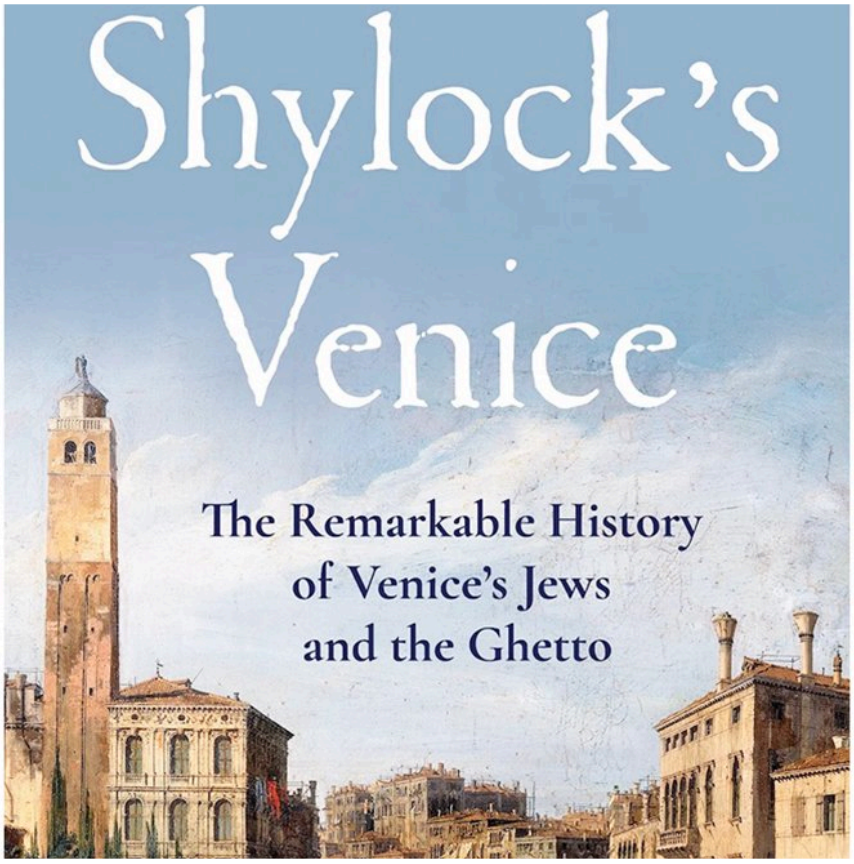
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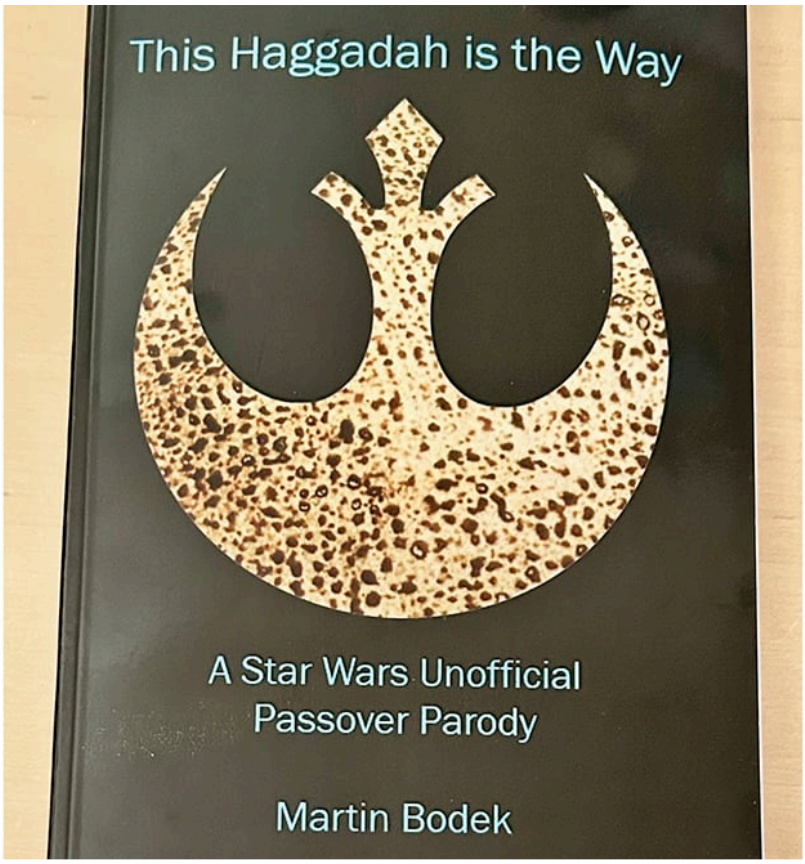


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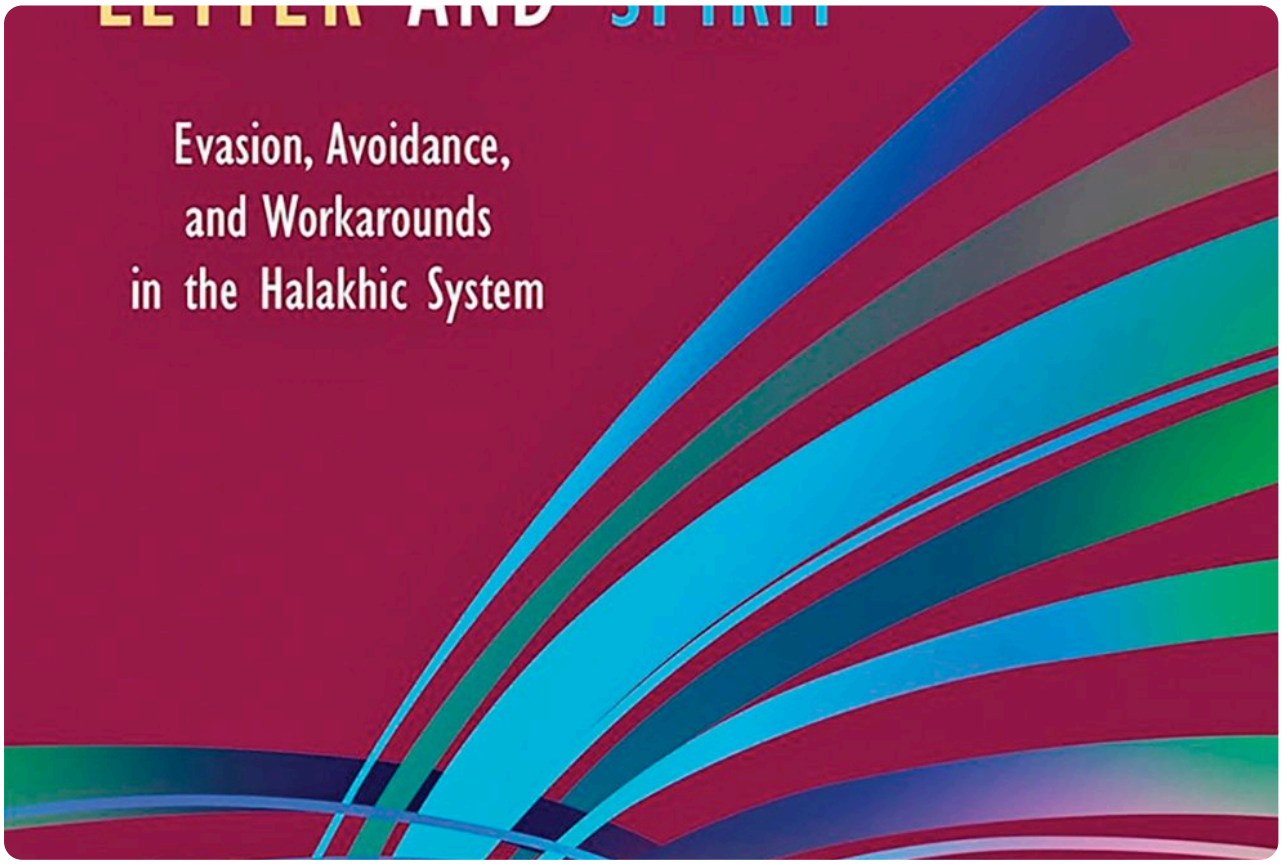
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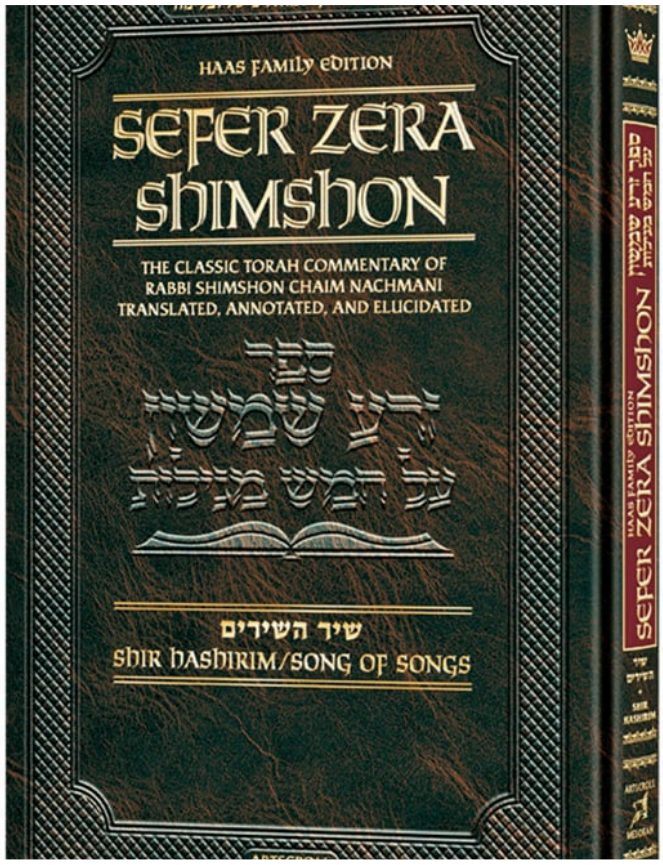
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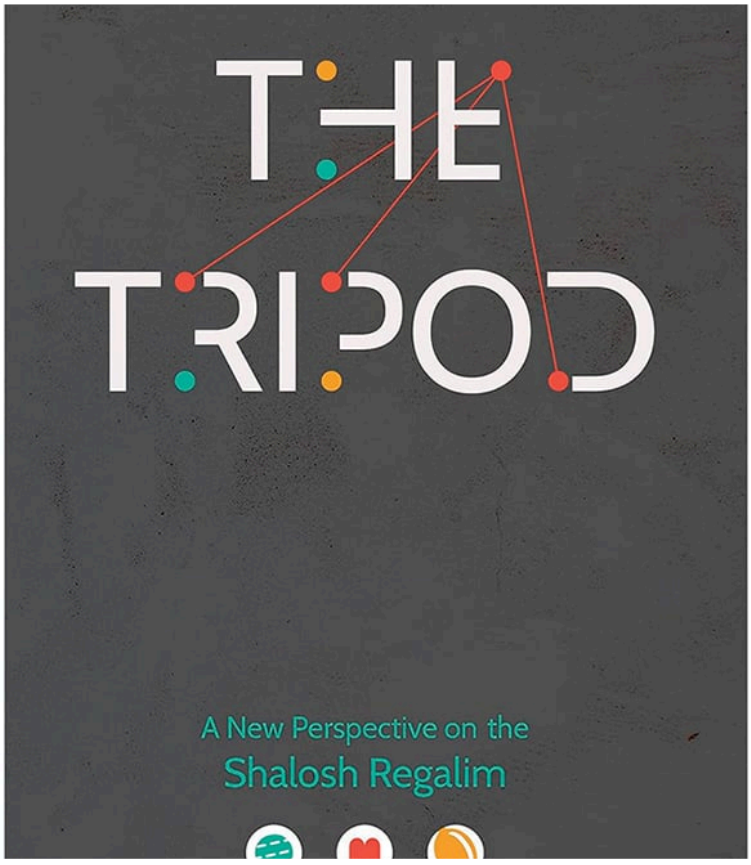
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