LRB

Vol. 46 No. 11 · 6 June 2024

A Little of This Honey

Erin Maglaque

Shylock's Venice: The Remarkable History of Venice's Jews and the Ghetto
by Harry Freedman.
Bloomsbury, 247 pp., £20, February, 978 1 3994 0727 4

In his book *16 ottobre 1943*, Giacomo Debenedetti describes the deportation of Rome's Jews to the death camps. When the soldiers came in the early evening, everyone in the neighbourhood was at home.

> The Jews of the Regola quarter were still in the habit of going to sleep early. Shortly after dark they were all in their homes. Perhaps the memory of an ancient curfew is still in their blood; from the time, when at the first fall of shadow, the gates of the ghetto screeched shut with an inviolable monotony that routine had perhaps rendered gentle and familiar to them, a reminder that night was not a time for Jews.

Does Jewish time run in a circle or a line? 'Monotony is the most beautiful or most atrocious thing,' Simone Weil wrote. 'The most beautiful if it is a reflection of eternity – the most atrocious if it is the sign of an unvarying perpetuity.' There is the beautiful eternity of faith. And then there is the unvarying perpetuity of an ancient persecution, which – in Debenedetti's telling – left the Regola's Jews vulnerable to a new atrocity.

It's hard to recognise change when history threatens always to bend in a circle. In Rilke's story 'A Scene from the Venetian Ghetto', the narrator is hazy on chronology. When was the ghetto, when were its people? 'I also cannot tell you when [this story] took place. Perhaps under the Doge Alvise Mocenigo IV, but it could also have been a little earlier or a little later.' The exiles, the diasporas, the ghettos: repeated down the generations, the religious year itself structured by their commemoration. Who's to say if one was a little earlier or a little later?

The Venetian ghetto was founded by Senate decree on 29 March 1516. The doge was Leonardo Loredan. 'No God-fearing subject of our state,' the Senate declared, 'would have wished them, after their arrival, to disperse throughout our city, sharing houses with Christians and going wherever they chose by day and night, perpetrating all those misdemeanours and detestable and abominable acts which are generally known and shameful to describe.' By July, all the Jews of Venice were living in the ghetto, an area of the Cannaregio. The two gates were shut from dusk until dawn, guarded by Christian sentries. Boats patrolled the canals that ringed the ghetto. The Jews paid the wages of their own jailers.

The Venetian ghetto is still visually distinctive. The Jews could not expand outwards, so they built upwards, constructing precarious terraces seven or eight storeys high, using partitions to divide apartments into ever smaller units. Rilke writes: 'And their city, which was not on the sea, thus grew slowly towards the sky, as into another sea.' It's distinctive, too, in providing the illusion of a living history: black-hatted men still stride across the campo of the ghetto, buy pastries at Gam Gam, the kosher restaurant. It's easy to feel you've stepped back a few centuries. But the men are Chabad-Lubavitchers, mostly from the US and Israel, who invite secular and non-Orthodox Jewish tourists to a seder. (One online testimonial from an American tourist: 'Perfect place to go if you want to get in touch with your Neshama! Warm, welcoming and delicious food!')

What was the ghetto, in the fullness of Jewish history? Its historians argue that it was both an open-air prison and a bright spot in the darkness of early modern European antisemitism. Spain and Portugal expelled their Jews, or forced them to convert. In Rome they were subjected to weekly preaching by Catholics seeking to convert them, sometimes at the end of a baton. The Venetian government confined Jews to a ghetto, but did not expel them; they were forced to wear a yellow head-covering, but allowed to worship. The ghetto is both a symbol of persecution and a symbol of tolerance, at least insofar as the attitudes of the time allowed. But as Debenedetti remarked, the ghetto is not only a physical place or a symbol but an archaic memory, of a time when the Jews went to bed early.

Renaissance Venetians were pragmatic, compensating perhaps for the original whimsy of building a city on the sea. They needed credit and the Jews could provide it; Church prohibitions against usury meant that Christians' moneylending activities were restricted and covert. There were a handful of very rich Jewish bankers in Venice, but most moneylending took place in pawnbrokers' shops, catering to ordinary Venetians needing access to ordinary credit. When Venetians wanted cash, they took along a piece of furniture or clothing and pawned it as security on a short-term loan. Venice strictly regulated the rate of interest that Jewish moneylenders and pawnbrokers could charge, and taxed them steeply. Venetians recognised not only that they needed the Jews to keep cash flowing, but that they could charge them for the privilege.

Just because Venetians needed Jews didn't mean they liked the proximity. In the late medieval era, the Jews were confined to Mestre, a small town just across the lagoon, until in 1509 much of the Venetian mainland state was lost during the War of the League of Cambrai. Jews came to Venice for shelter, as one student at the Padua yeshiva put it, 'carrying their possessions bundled up in their garments … in fear of their lives, vulnerable to every blow and mishap'. The patrician diarist and senator Marino Sanudo – the Serenissima's Samuel Pepys – recorded in 1515 that resentment of the Jews had reached fever pitch. Even during Holy Week, 'they do whatever they want,' he complained; the preacher 'thunders against them', concluding that 'it is all right to take everything the Jews have and put it towards the defence of the state, since they are our servants.'

Two weeks later, a proposal to segregate the Jews came before the Senate. The next year, the Senate decreed the foundation of the ghetto in the far northwest of the city, and a few hundred people moved into its cramped quarters, their rent higher by a third than the rate paid by the previous Christian tenants. Every morning, the ghetto gates opened. At the centre of the ghetto was the wide, unpaved campo; ringed around it were pawnshops, butchers, a bakery, a tavern. The community was self-governing, a ghetto republic within the Most Serene Republic: the Jews looked after their own finances, legislation, security, sanitation. Jewish confraternities emerged to feed and clothe the poor, to care for orphans and the sick.

The earliest inhabitants of the ghetto were from Italy and Germany, and were called the Tedeschi; they were joined by Levantine Jews from Ottoman lands and by Ponentines, Jews who had been expelled from the Iberian peninsula. Within the ghetto republic, each community negotiated its own charters and obligations to the Venetian state; each maintained its own customs and devotional practices.

Historians have characterised the Venetian ghetto as porous, sharing a name but not a character with the better-known ghettos of 20th-century Europe. Sure, the gates were shut at night, the canalside jetties sealed. When the ghetto tenement towers reached nine storeys high, the Venetians ordered that the windows be boarded up because they didn't like the feeling of being looked at. But people came and went. Jewish doctors were permitted to leave at all hours to treat Christian patients. Jewish musicians and dancers performed across the city and didn't wear yellow caps. It wasn't technically allowed, but Christians enjoyed watching plays in the ghetto and attending Jewish weddings. Giorgio Moretto, a Christian, had an affair with a Jewish woman called Rachel. He wore a yellow cap in the ghetto and even ate matzah at the Passover seder.

What did God think of all this interfaith traffic? The Senate offered Jews only temporary residency charters, so the question came up every few years. In 1519, when the first licence expired, the Senate heard both sides of the argument. Look at Naples: it welcomed the Jews expelled from Spain and its fortunes have precipitously declined. After Portugal expelled its Jewish community, it was rewarded by the discovery of vast riches: a sea route to India and access to the spice trade. But hadn't Portugal's refugee Jews been taken in by the Ottoman Empire, and hadn't it gone on to conquer Syria and Egypt? In the end, questions of divine punishment and favour proved less compelling than cold hard cash. The Venetians wanted to build big expensive ships and they didn't want to levy higher taxes on their own citizens. So they renewed the Jews' charter, on steeper terms.

In its earliest decades, the Venetian ghetto became known as a centre for Hebrew scholarship and printing. Daniel Bomberg wasn't Jewish, but he worked with Felice da Prato, the son of a rabbi, to print the first Hebrew Bible with medieval rabbinic commentaries, and employed Jewish scholars from the ghetto in his print shop. Jews corrected texts, cut type, laid out galleys; Bomberg even convinced the Senate to let pressworkers exchange their yellow caps for black ones. One Jewish scholar, Elia Levita, worked in Bomberg's shop, replacing another Jewish scholar who had converted to Christianity: 'May his soul be bound up in a bag full of holes,' Levita swore. Together, Bomberg and Levita printed an Aramaic-Hebrew dictionary and the *Masoret Hamasoret*, a compendium of the correct spelling and notation of every word in the Hebrew Bible. Levita also worked as a tutor to Christian humanists who took a scholarly interest in the Torah. He did it for the money, though he recognised it wasn't strictly kosher. He couldn't help picking up some Christian theology along the way. 'If I tasted a little of this honey, should I die?'

By the middle of the 16th century, the reforming zeal of the Catholic Church had made Levita's relaxed attitude unthinkable. In 1553, the Talmud was condemned by the Congregation of the Inquisition, which ordered that every copy be burned. Books were piled up on the Piazza San Marco and set alight. One rabbi wrote later of the 'continual fire which was not extinguished. I fixed these days for myself, each year, to fast, weep, and mourn, for this day was as bitter to me as the burning of the House of our God.' Another day added to a crowded calendar of mourning. In 1568, the Senate's blasphemy censors, the *esecutori*, began a campaign against all Hebrew books, claiming that 'the perfidy of many Jews is such that they seek with diverse means to subvert our true and holy Christian faith.' The state fined

publishers, banished copies of Hebrew texts, burned yet more books on the piazza. With the Talmud banned and burned, what was left? The ghetto became a centre, instead, for the study of the Kabbalah, an esoteric tradition mostly ignored by Catholic censors.

Scholarship and the occult rubbed up against each other in the ghetto: 17th-century Jewish thinkers published major works on interfaith relations; a reconstruction of the trial of Socrates; sermons strewn through with natural philosophy; works of mathematics and music and poetry. There was a musical society, the Accademia degli Impediti (impeded, that is, by the ghetto gates). But the ghetto's association with kabbalistic study made it a magnet for the esoteric. The Venetian Inquisition uncovered all kinds of occult practices, including one – for catching a thief – that involved a bowl of water, candles, a virgin and the appearance of a white angel. Christians came to the ghetto to have their dreams interpreted. Messiahs turned up roughly once a century. In 1523, it was David Reubeni, a traveller who claimed to be David, son of Solomon, and had some success touring his act around Italy: he left Rome in a flutter of glittering streamers, embroidered with the words of the Ten Commandments in gilded thread. In the 17th century, it was Shabbetai Tzvi, who heralded the return of the Jews to their homeland. When Tzvi's prophet, Nathan of Gaza, washed up in the ghetto, the rabbis interrogated him until he became 'so ashamed in their presence that he could hardly speak'. The rabbis concluded that Nathan had been possessed by an evil spirit and sent him on his way.

The decline of Venice's fortunes in the late 17th and 18th centuries inevitably entailed the decline of the ghetto's economic and cultural life. The Venetian Republic's failed war with the Ottomans over Crete created enormous debt; between 1669 and 1700, the ghetto paid something like 800,000 ducats in taxes and loans. When the Senate demanded another 150,000 in 1700, the Jews refused; they didn't have it, and the Senate had to practically detain them in the ghetto to keep them from leaving Venice. In 1773, Salomon Treves, the scion of a Jewish banking family, rented a palazzo outside of the ghetto, a sign that if you were wealthy enough you might transcend the old laws. In 1827, Treves's son Giuseppe bought the home of a formerly glorious Venetian patrician family, but in the meantime Napoleon had conquered Venice; in 1797 the ghetto gates were torn down on his orders.

Harry Freedman has written varied books about Jewish history and culture: on Leonard Cohen's spiritual sources; the Talmud; the Kabbalah; Britain's Jews. In *Shylock's Venice*, he has taken a broad brush to the history of Venice's Jews, producing a book of lightly informative anecdotes about various residents of the ghetto, or visitors to the ghetto, or fictional characters who lived in the ghetto. One of the most intriguing is Leon of Modena, a rabbi and cantor, poet, translator, historian and gambling addict, who began a diary aged 47, in 1618, after the death of his adored eldest son, Mordecai. He wrote optimistically of interfaith toleration and sceptically about the fanaticism for the Kabbalah in the ghetto. But his life was hard. 'From the moment I entered the world,' he wrote, 'I had neither tranquillity nor quiet nor rest … I await death, which does not come.' His perfect eldest son was dead at 26; a ne'er-do-well second son with deep gambling debts absconded to Brazil; a third son was murdered before his eyes, the result of a feud with a Christian gang. Just after Leon reports Zebulun's murder in his diary, he lists his only 'source of comfort': his many works of scholarship and translation. 'My name will never be blotted out among the Jews or in the world at large, as long as the Earth remains.'

Perhaps the best cameo is made by Sara Copia Sullam. A talented poet and musician, Sullam started a literary salon in her home in 1618. She held meetings during the day, when the ghetto gates were open, for the Christian philosophers and intellectuals who wished to come.

Almost immediately, the salon attracted trouble. A correspondent wrote her increasingly aggressive letters, accusing her of sleeping with men at the salon. Numidio Paluzzi, a poet and Sullam's tutor, conspired with a friend to steal her jewels and cash – and then blamed the heist on an evil spirit. One of her critics wrote that she was more dangerous than Eve because she didn't believe in the immortality of the soul, and argued that she should convert. Sullam wrote back, in verse:

> Lord, with you at my side, I make ready
> My defence, since I am abused and harassed
> By a warrior who dares to deem faithless
> A soul, by Your mercy, with faith made steady.

The only unaccountable presence in the book is the titular Shylock. Freedman attempts a half-hearted argument for a 'real-life' Shylock in 16th-century Venice: Anselmo del Banco, a prominent banker known in the ghetto as Asher Meshullam. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock's daughter, Jessica, steals jewels from her father and elopes with a Christian; Anselmo's son Jacob also stole jewels and converted to Christianity. Coincidence? OK, there's no smoking gun, but Freedman argues that 'the possibility exists' that Anselmo was Shakespeare's model. Is it too cynical to think that Shylock is here only to lend his name to the title, to make Italian Jewish history legible to British readers?

Freedman has strung together these character sketches without much sense of what their collected lives might mean. (That's not to say they aren't interesting: the false messiahs alone could sustain a book.) But he approaches something like an idea when he discusses the cultural efflorescence of the ghetto. He suggests that its overcrowded conditions led to a kind of concentration of Jewish culture. 'Had the Jews of the Serenissima not been corralled into a ghetto,' he writes, 'the stirrings of the Jewish Enlightenment in Venice would never have occurred.' This aligns with the relatively positive view of the ghetto in contemporary scholarship. It was permeable. Its very existence was a formal recognition of Jews' place in Venetian society. In the words of one of its foremost historians, Benjamin Ravid, ghettoisation led 'in certain cases to an intensification of [Jewish] cultural life'. This is probably true, but it's also true that when Napoleon's army arrived in May 1797, there was an explosion of music, dancing, celebration; the gates were smashed to splinters by residents who chanted in the synagogue: 'Long live brotherhood, democracy and the Italian nation.'

Freedman concludes with the deportation of 243 of the ghetto's Jewish community by the Nazis, but wants a more cheerful last word. The ghetto today 'is not a place of sadness', he writes. 'It is a vibrant destination, a must-see for tourists': a pairing that remaining Venetians, battling against the ecological crisis of mass tourism, might see as a contradiction in terms. The Venetian ghetto is 'perhaps the only group of streets anywhere in the world outside Israel which still retains half a millennium of unbroken Jewish history'. What does it mean for history to be unbroken? Is it that Jews have lived on those streets for five centuries? Jews have lived pretty much everywhere for five centuries. The Venetian ghetto is braided into the history not of Jewish territoriality but of diaspora: of the German, Spanish, Ottoman, Portuguese Jews who passed through, or settled down; who became, eventually, Venetian.

I started writing this review during Passover. 'You have made it to the seder,' the Jewish Voice for Peace Haggadah opens, 'to this consecrated place where we tell and tell again stories of liberation.' Is Jewish history a circle or a line? This Passover, more than any other, has been a time to question what the history of Jewish persecution and diaspora has meant, and what it means today. I can't read the words 'open-air prison' and not think of Gaza before the

genocide. I can't read about the flourishing of Jewish intellectual life in the ghetto and not think about the Palestinian universities, archives, printing presses that have been bombed, about the university students and faculty around the world facing state repression for their acts of protest and witness. I can't read Freedman's suggestion that 'when religious fundamentalism is in the ascendant, Jews serve as the whipping boy against whom all can unite,' and not think of the way Israel's fundamentalist government has wielded that sweeping theory of history as a brutal weapon. When I was a child, my sister and I hunted during the Passover seder for the afikomen: the customary piece of broken matzah, always hidden by my grandmother (one year, in the liquor cabinet). Once it is found, the broken pieces are reunited. We learn that oppression cannot be undone, that there is no such thing as an unbroken history. Only the possibility – this year, next year, every year – of repair.