Freedman, Harry. *Shylock's Venice: The Remarkable History of Venice's Jews and the Ghetto*. NYC, NY: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2024.

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Harry Freedman has spent decades writing about the Jews with a fervent optimism that seems to often deny the reality on the ground. His mission, which sometimes seems to have an almost Don-Quixote like fervor, seems to be finding slivers of silver linings between Jews and non-Jews amidst the madness, death, and forced exile that has long accompanied the Jews. Harry Freedman is a handsome Jewish man of a certain sort; he has a ruggish face surrounded by an unruly head of hair and sad serious eyes. His new work, "Shylock's Venice: The Remarkable History of Venice's Jews and the Ghetto," describes for us in painful detail how Jews lived in an open-air prison of sorts, surrounded by gates, and guarded by sentries, for almost three hundred years until Napolean freed them and granted them equal rights. Their euphoria was short-lived however, as they were soon annexed to Austria and their rights were rescinded. Such is the story of the Jews throughout history.

But between 1516 and Napoleon's arrival in 1797, Jews lived in an enclosed Ghetto which became the intellectual and creative mecca of the Jewish world. Despite the horrific conditions and imprisonment, Jews found ways to thrive despite terrible handicaps. They were forced by the Venetian authorities to work as pawnbrokers for Venice's poor, who would bring them a piece of clothing or a stick of furniture in exchange for some coins with which to buy the day's food. The doors of the Ghetto were open from 12PM to 6PM and Jews were allowed to leave, and non-Jews could come visit. Only Jewish physicians could leave the Ghetto at any hour to treat their non-Jewish patients. The Venetians only allowed the Jews to remain because they did not want their own people to engage in usury and the Jews were useful for this purpose. In addition, for the privilege of being allowed to remain in Venice, Jews were forced to pay heavy taxes, and regulated as to how much interest they could charge, so that they often barely made a profit.

The Ghetto was unsanitary, crowded, and filled with Jews from all corners of the world. Many were religious and living under the thumb of their rabbis who dictated every aspect of their lives.

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But there were many other Jews who were leaving the fold, and they were left alone and not discriminated against. Freedman seems drawn to these newly secular Jews and gets caught up in their newfound liberation. Jews, perhaps for the first time, were allowed to decide their level of religiosity and piousness. They were beginning to engage with the new ideas just breaking through during the Enlightenment. And there were other Jews, intellectual by nature, who were devoted to writing and printing books. And still others who loved nothing more than to sit all day and discuss dogma with one another. The Venetian authorities only wanted their 'pound of flesh,' and as long as they kept receiving the exorbitant taxes they charged, they didn't really care too much what the Jews were up to. It was for them a financial arrangement that was beneficial and prevented their own people from loaning money which was still taboo. The Jews built synagogues within the Ghetto and were allowed to pray together. The Jews were delighted to have these freedoms. After all, they were prevented from belonging to any trade associations, guilds, or professions open to the general population. They made the best out of the few liberties accorded them.

Some of Freedman's past works like "Britain's Jews: Confidence, Maturity, Anxiety," "Leonard Cohen: The Mystical Roots of Genius," "Reason to Believe: The Controversial Life of Rabbi Louis Jacobs," "Kabbalah: Secrecy, Scandal, and the Soul," and "The Talmud: A Biography," reveal to us an author who is eager to explore all aspects of the Jewish experience with the hope of finding material he could feel hopeful about. He seems particularly captivated by moments of Jewish and non-Jewish interactions that are beneficial and fulfilling to both parties, perhaps believing that only together can the world truly be healed.

One of the early reviewers of this volume, Tanya Gold, does not share Harry Freedman's enthusiasm. She recently visited Venice's old Jewish Ghetto and found herself despondent thinking, "I found the Holocaust memorial, of course: a set of panels depicting I don't know what, but I am sick of Holocaust memorials. I would take instead, a Jew who is not afraid, but I don't know many these days." She points out to her readers how in 1943 when the Germans finally arrived, they asked the head rabbi to provide them with a list of all the Jews and gave him two days to do so. He alerted all of the Jews immediately and most fled, so that when the Nazis deported the Jews, there were only 242 left out of about 2,000.

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The most charming anecdotes Freedman tells are about the Christian scholars who came to work with Jewish scholars in the Ghetto translating biblical texts. The Jews taught them Hebrew and Ladino, and the Christians instructed them in Latin and Greek which gave the Jewish scholars access to texts closed off to them. The Ghetto soon became the center of Hebrew scholarship and printing. A non-Jew named Daniel Bomberg came to the Ghetto to work inside the Ghetto with Felice da Prato, the son of a rabbi, and together they printed the first Hebrew Bible with medieval commentaries. The printing shop employed Jewish workers who corrected text, cut type, and laid out galleys. There was another Jew, Elia Levita, who printed an Aramaic-Hebrew dictionary, as well as taking time out to speak with Christian humanists who visited the shop with questions about the Torah. Freedman believes the Ghetto's separateness was particularly beneficial and uplifting for Jews who wished to live their lives as autonomous men able to govern themselves. Freedman writes how the Ghetto became "a magnet for inquisitive Jews." There were different types of Jews in the Ghetto with different customs and rituals; the Tedeschian Jews from Italy and Germany, the Levantine Jews from Ottoman lands, and the Ponentine Jews from the Iberian Peninsula.

Yet, there were serious ruptures that threatened all of them at a moment's notice. For example, there was a printer's squabble that reached the Pope's ears, and he ordered the burning of all the Talmud's in the central squares. And there was always the yellow hat, a marker of their Jewish faith, that they were forced to wear while leaving the Ghetto.

Freedman tells us of David de Pomis who was born in 1524. He was a physician but couldn't find anywhere he was permitted to practice and wound up in the Ghetto at 45 after tremendous hardships. He wrote about Christians and Jews advocating the universal value of Jewish teachings. He thought it absurd that Jewish thought was denigrated by European intellectuals "even though Christianity had historic roots in Judaism. His book, "A Discourse of Human Suffering and How to Escape it," attempted to universalize Jewish thinking. He followed up with "A Short Course Showing the Divine Origins of the Venetian Republic," which argued the Venetian constitution was essentially Jewish in nature. Pomis claimed "Jews were not inferior to Christians, their common origin meant they should be able to live alongside each other in a spirit of brotherhood."

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Leon Modena was born in 1571 and left an autobiography which he wrote after his most beloved son passed away. He was a spectacular preacher who left audiences mesmerized by his sermons. He also was an addicted gambler who tried to stop repeatedly but could not. His heart was again broken when his prized student left his tutelage after coming under the spell of Kabbalah, a school of thought that deals with Jewish mysticism, which Modena found flawed. Some Kabbalists believe our souls migrate after death to another body or that the recitation of certain prayers can affect how God behaves.

By 1665, there were rumors the messiah had come and his name was Shabbati Tzvi. Like so many times before, it turned out not to be true and his followers mourned when Shabbati Tzvi converted to Islam. There was another young Jew named Moses Chayim Luzzato who was a staunch Kabbalist and swore "a disembodied voice spoke to him." He was thought so dangerous to the minds of the other Jews that the residents of the Ghetto managed to oust him. Luzzato wandered to Frankfurt, Amsterdam, and finally Israel where he wrote "Path of the Upright" which is considered a classic of Jewish ethical literature.

Freedman ends his book writing "The ghetto today is not a place of sadness. It is a vibrant destination, must-see for tourists, perhaps the only group of streets anywhere in the world outside Israel which still retains half a millennium of unbroken Jewish history. It has two kosher restaurants, a Jewish museum and five synagogues, three of which at the time of this writing are still undergoing a restoration. Architecturally, the ghetto looks little different from the way it did in the sixteenth century, though the buildings are, one hopes, less fragile, and the long alleyways more sanitary." Freedman tells us only a few hundred Jews live there, and they are "just like everybody else."

Perhaps that proclamation by Freedman bothered me more than anything else. The Jews have never been seen as like any others; and they have always been ostracized, threatened, and far worse. My heart understands why Freedman might want to think there might come a day when this will not be so, but for now, it seems a pipe dream not possible in today's contentious climate. Still, his well-researched and wonderfully told stories about a mostly unknown and fascinating piece of Jewish history, is well worth the reader's time. Because there are moments within it when

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one will be lost in the possibilities of what might have been, if only the scales of justice had just tipped slightly in our direction. Freedman refuses to give up, so I won't either.

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