INTERVIEW

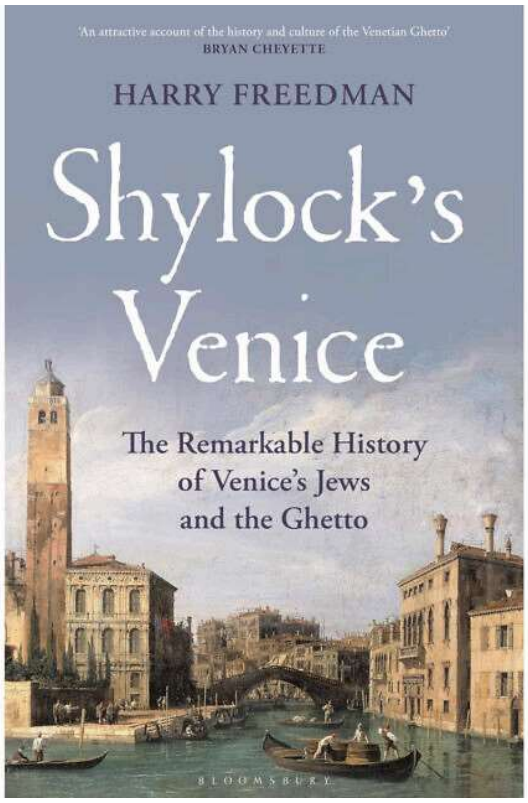
# Poetry, philosophy and a gambling rabbi: A colorful history of Venice's Jewish ghetto

In 'Shylock's Venice,' UK author Harry Freedman paints a vibrant picture of an oft-overlooked side of Jewish history that goes far deeper than the famous Shakespeare character

By RICH TENORIO FOLLOW

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Left: Orthodox Jews congregate in Venice's ancient Jewish ghetto. (Photo by Paolo Raccanelli); Right: Cover of 'Shylock's Venice: The Remarkable History of Venice's Jews and the Ghetto,' by Harry Freedman. (Courtesy)

When British author Harry Freedman asks audiences to name a historical Jew from Venice, one name almost always comes up: Shylock.

The moneylender who sought a pound of flesh for a transaction gone wrong in "The Merchant of Venice" is one of Shakespeare's best-known characters. He's also fictional. This has not prevented Shylock from capturing the popular imagination, even as the real-life inhabitants of Venice's Jewish ghetto over the centuries remain largely forgotten today. This paradox stayed in Freedman's mind as he penned his most recent book, "Shylock's Venice: The Remarkable History of Venice's Jews and the Ghetto."

"I think the story of the ghetto is fascinating," Freedman told The Times of Israel over Zoom. "Once I started to write, I couldn't do this without including Shylock."

Based in London, the author explored the world of Elizabethan drama in which Shakespeare wrote "The Merchant of Venice" — and where the Bard possibly had an influential Jewish girlfriend. Freedman also visited contemporary Venice and the site of the former ghetto, where he marveled at the historic buildings stretching upward instead of outward, hemmed in by ghetto walls that confined Jews from their establishment in 1516 until their destruction by Napoleon in 1797.

Freedman's previous works address subjects as varied as the Talmud, Kabbalah and Leonard Cohen. His latest book contains a vivid cast of real-life characters — rabbis and kabbalists, musicians and merchants. Seventeenth-century rabbi Simone Luzzatto opined on a theological issue appropriate for Venice: In the wealthy island city, center of a maritime empire, was it permissible to traverse a canal by gondola en route to Shabbat services? Luzzatto was known for encouraging interfaith outreach in one of his works, the "Discorso." And overall, Venice afforded Jewish ghetto inhabitants rare-in-Europe possibilities to interact with Christian neighbors, according to the book.

"Each group was of interest to the other group," Freedman said. "Once there were separate spaces, it was safer to engage than if they were living as neighbors. With neighbors, there are always disputes."



Illustrative: The Spanish Schola Synagogue in Venice, June 1, 2022. The Spanish Schola, founded about 1580, but rebuilt in the first half of the 17th century, is the biggest of the Venetian synagogues. Venice's Jewish ghetto is considered the first in Europe and one of the first in the world. (AP Photo/Chris Warde-Jones)

Such interchanges occurred in academia, in the literary salon, or via the printing press — all with limits. Although the self-styled Most Serene Republic did not expel its Jews, it taxed them progressively more harshly over the centuries. Officials of the Catholic Church sometimes objected to Christian-Jewish relations, with occasional severe repercussions, including the burning of hundreds of copies of the Talmud in St. Mark's Square in 1553. The city-state periodically made threats against its Jews, ordering their expulsion several times. Yet Freedman notes that such expulsions were never carried out.

"You have to live alongside people," he said. "Jews were used to this treatment for hundreds of years. They made the best of it. Jews were economically important to the Christians as pawnbrokers or small-scale moneylenders. Christians needed to trade with them. Jews needed to trade. They needed some sort of stable relationship."

### A period of cautious, separate and unequal, existence

As the book explains, some of Venice's original Jews arrived in the 14th century, as German refugees fleeing pogroms in central Europe, where they were blamed for the Black Death. Venice allowed them to live in the surrounding area and work as moneylenders — employment forbidden to Christians. In the late 15th century, these Tedeschi or Germans were joined by Spanish and Portuguese Jews expelled by Catholic monarchs. During an early 16th-century war, Venice permitted Jews to reside in the city proper, which stirred debate among the Christian population.

"One group [of Christians] wanted to keep them, one did not want them there," Freedman said. "The solution was to keep them there — in one place. It was the beginning of the ghetto."

The book addresses possible explanations for the term "ghetto," noting its similarity to geto, Italian for "foundry" — a foundry once occupied the site where Jews were confined. The ghetto became overcrowded and unsanitary, with access closed from dusk till dawn. Despite these limitations, points of contact arose between Jews and Christians.

"Venice was the center of printing Hebrew and Christian books," Freedman noted. "Scholars came into the town to have their book printed. Scholars are curious people. They want to learn from one another. They do engage in intellectual activity."

Although Jews were not allowed to be printers, they found other opportunities to work in printshops, including as censors. The Catholic Church mandated censorship of printed texts, which created ways for Christians and Jews to interact in the printing industry, according to the author.

In this complex environment, some Jews made a name for themselves, most notably Rabbi Leon Modena. Over the course of eight decades, he would become an authoritative voice on diverse matters, as a rabbi, cantor, author, playwright and musician who helped Jews and Christians learn about each other's faith. While filled with accomplishment, Modena's life was also marred by tragedy: Of three sons who survived to adulthood, two died and one disappeared abroad. The rabbi's addiction to gambling caused added financial and personal stress.

"He's a fascinating character," Freedman said, calling a rabbi with a gambling problem "very atypical."



Harry Freedman, author of 'Shylock's Venice: The Remarkable History of Venice's Jews and the Ghetto.' (Courtesy)

Another 17th-century luminary was Sara Copia Sulam, a trailblazing Jewish female head of a literary salon and a distinguished poet.

"Salons were quite common in those days," Freedman said, "maybe like book clubs today. People got together to discuss things — music, drama, art… She obviously had very sophisticated cultural tastes."



The Campo del Ghetto Nuovo, the Venice Jewish ghetto's religious and commercial hub, December 28, 2019. (Giovanni Vigna/ Times of Israel)

Although it closed after six years due to Sulam enduring misogyny and vilification from male participants, during its existence it offered Christian participants a chance to enter the ghetto and discuss the fine arts at Sulam's home.

Of Jewish-Christian interaction in general during the centuries of the ghetto, Freedman said, "You would go out into the streets, talk to them, and cut out again. That was the psychological basis of it."

### What kind of man asks for 'a pound of flesh'?

Psychology plays a significant part in "The Merchant of Venice." It is hard to pin down how, exactly, Shakespeare felt about the character of Shylock.



The streets of Venice's former Jewish Ghetto. (Orge Castellano/JTA)

"We don't know if Shakespeare was antisemitic or philo-Semitic," Freedman said. "Shakespeare did not say all the things about Jews that people were typically saying in those days — that they killed Christian children… started plagues, poisoned wells. It's a more sympathetic picture of a Jew. At the same time, there was the stereotype of Jews as moneylenders."

In the play, Shylock agrees to lend the merchant Antonio a sum of three thousand ducats. Antonio needs it to help his friend Bassanio woo the heiress Portia. The loan comes with an unusual penalty for default — a pound of flesh. When news breaks that Antonio has lost a cargo-laden vessel at sea, Shylock vows to claim his revenge upon a man who hates him because of his religion, and who only deals with him out of necessity.

Yet there are hints of authorial sympathy toward Shylock: His daughter Jessica leaves him to marry a Christian, and absconds with some family treasures. In a courtroom scene, Portia masquerades as a lawyer and outwits Shylock, forcing him into the loss of his riches and conversion to Christianity, which Jessica has promised to do as well. In a famous soliloquy, Shylock gives a moving response when asked why he wants a pound of Antonio's flesh.

"He hath disgraced me," Shylock explains, "and hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies, and what's his reason? — I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes?"




A sign in both Italian and Hebrew shows the way to the Jewish ghetto in Venice, northern Italy, June 1, 2022. (AP Photo/Chris Warde-Jones)

Freedman notes that a previous Elizabethan-era play — "The Jew of Malta" by Christopher Marlowe — featured a much uglier stereotype of a Jewish villain. He speculates that in creating a more sympathetic portrayal, Shakespeare may have had an unexpected influence — a Jewish girlfriend named Aemilia Bassano.

The daughter of a Venetian-born converso and musician in the English court, Bassano has been credited as the author of a first-of-its-kind female-written book of poetry in the English language, "Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum." Some have suggested her as the "Dark Lady" of the Bard's sonnets, or as the actual author of Shakespeare's plays. Freedman is intrigued that Shakespeare penned two plays set in Venice that were first staged around the same time — "The Merchant of Venice" and "Othello." His alleged lover's name is seemingly suggested in both: In "Othello," the wife of villainous Iago is named Emilia, while the name "Bassanio" in "The Merchant of Venice" resembles "Bassano."

"What Shakespeare probably tried to do is respond to Marlowe," Freedman said. "His Shylock character is complex."



One of the canals going through the Venice Jewish ghetto, December 28, 2019. (Giovanni Vigna/ Times of Israel)

The fate of real-life Venetian Jews contained elements of tragedy. As the republic receded in power, it taxed its Jews ever more oppressively, until a liberator emerged in Napoleon. Intending to emancipate the Jews of France, he did the same for their Venetian counterparts by destroying the ghetto walls in 1797.

Later that year, Napoleon ceded Venice to Austria, which reimposed the ghetto — but without the walls. This paved the way toward steadily greater freedoms, including after Italian unification, until the ultimate tragedy intervened in the 20th century: World War II and the Holocaust.

"Jews seemed to live a fairly free life in Venice until the 1940s, when the Nazis conquered it," Freedman said.

When he walked the streets of the former ghetto, he noted the paving stones and memorial plaques for victims of the Shoah. Yet he also observed a vibrant contemporary scene.

"The ghetto has come back to life — there are shops there, people living there, restaurants," Freedman said. "It is alive. I think it's very positive, a very optimistic thing."