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**Leone Modena's *Life of Judah*:
A Textual and Contextual Inquiry into Early-Modern Identity.**

Dominique Anne McCaughey

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

History

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
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ABSTRACT

Leone Modena's *Life of Judah*:
a Textual and Contextual Inquiry into Early-Modern Identity.

Dominique Anne McCaughey

This inquiry explores the juxtaposition of medieval rabbinic and Renaissance humanistic thought in the autobiography of Rabbi Leone Modena (1571-1648). The emphasis is placed on the role that context and text played in shaping Jewish identity and self-consciousness. Specific attention is given to the unique dynamics of Counter-Reformation Venice, as well as the post-Spanish expulsion rupture with Biblically-driven Jewish historiography. Finally, a textual interpretation, resting on the recently published English-language translation of Modena's autobiography, the *Life of Judah*, is posited in light of this context.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my dearest, still sadly missed, friend and fellow graduate student Keith Lowther (1964-1997).

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Inasmuch as the King's word has power to remove man from this world on the day of his death—after which all is forgotten—for more than twenty four years I have desired in the depth of my soul to set down in writing all the incidents that happened to me from my beginnings until the end of my life, so that I shall not die, but live. I thought that it would be of value to my sons the fruit of my loins, and to their descendants, and to my students, who are called sons...¹

—Rabbi Leone Modena (1571-1648)

CHAPTER ONE: The Inquiry

1.1. Introduction to the Inquiry

*Hayyei yehudah (The Life of Judah)*² presents historians of the early modern period with an opportunity to reassess many assumptions.

As an autobiography it is an eyewitness account of Counter-Reformation Venetian society, as well as a rare³ record describing the private sphere of a leading scholar of that period, Rabbi Leone Modena.⁴ It is also a testament to the impact of cultural pluralism in Venice—a city which was, paradoxically, home to Europe's first ghetto.

While physically sequestering Jewish and other immigrant groups (such as the Turks), the ghetto doors were porous, allowing diverse cultural groups to flow back and forth, to meet and exchange as would naturally occur in any other city marketplace.

In Leone's case it would therefore be a mistake to view his status as a Jew as limiting him to the margins of Venetian society. Leone was an active participant in the

¹ Mark R. Cohen. *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth Century Venetian Rabbi. Leon Modena's Life of Judah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 75.

² Hereinafter referred to by this title, provided by Cohen in the English translation.

³ The closest corollary is the ethical will, which is described in further detail in Chapter Four.

world. As a rabbi and recognized Talmudic authority, he engaged in lively discourse with his co-religionists, as well as with Catholics and Protestants. Significantly, while Leone knew clerics and scholars, diplomats and politicians, he also knew alchemists, fortune-tellers and, to his great shame, gamblers. He was a man touched by many cultures, a man of many talents, but also a man of many vices. And yet, of all the characteristics that emerge from his autobiography, it is his humanity that startles the most.

That a Jew of this period would chose to express himself in such a highly personalized manner was probably due to the unusual *conjoncture culturelle* that was Counter-Reformation Venice. The extent of Leone's discourse with Christian Hebraists, for example, was driven by one such context-specific factor, the emergence of Hebraic studies, which constituted a third humanist culture. While "rival Christian denominations were attracted to different Judaisms"⁵ a lively cross cultural discourse⁶ was generated, one which likely shaped the identities of the figures who were at the heart of these exchanges, men such as Leone. The larger historiographic framework must therefore be taken into consideration if one is to explain how and why Leone, a rabbinic Jew, wrote such a non-normative document.

Curiously, the influence of Venetian pluralism and the lively Christian Hebraicist discourse did not factor into early scholarly treatments of Modena. Until recently, he

⁴ Cohen addresses the question of the topography of Jewish names as well as his preference for the Venetian dialect version of Leone, that is Leon. As most scholarship, including recent reviews, refer to the subject of this inquiry as Leone Modena, so shall the present author.

⁵ Frank E. Manuel. *The Broken Staff. Judaism Through Christian Eyes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 64.

⁶ Manuel refers to other examples of the dialogic character of this relationship. One such example is Jean Bodin's *Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime*. Trans. Marion Leathers Kuntz (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). In this work, a dialogue takes place between seven men of different faiths and philosophies. The eldest, the Jew Salomon, the one espousing tolerance and wisdom, is "witness to Bodin's absorption in both Testaments; and his scores of citations from Philo, Josephus, the Talmud, The *Zohar*, Rashi, Maimonides...bear the marks of a Hebraist culture far superior to the platitudes of mediocre Hebraists who drew their knowledge from thumbing Bomberg's rabbinic Bible," 55-56.

remained a subject for inquiry within the realm of rabbinic thought or nineteenth century Jewish Enlightenment treatises. Scholarship began to shift, however, with the work undertaken by Mark Cohen and his colleagues, Theodore Rabb, Benjamin Ravid, Howard Adelman and Nathalie Zemon Davis of a Princeton University Seminar.⁷ Thanks to Cohen's translation of the *Life of Judah* and to an article by Nathalie Davis that was published in the micro-historical journal, *Quaderni Storici*⁸, Modena scholarship became more accessible to non-Jewish historians and also open to broader historiographic interpretations.

It is important to note that within that more traditional framework, scholars had sought to either integrate Modena into a particular current of Rabbinic thought, or to distinguish him as a radical reformer, anticipatory of the Jewish enlightenment. Proponents of this insular perspective also advanced a corollary argument stating that early-modern Jewish perceptions of time, context, and events may only be studied within the Jewish Biblical tradition. Since the tradition functions as its own supra-historical framework,⁹ these scholars argued that there was no other contextual lens through which an analysis could be developed.

In contrast, the following study relies on both culturally specific and as well as universal categories of periodization. As Frank Manuel quite usefully states,

Benchmarks of change cannot be fitted neatly into the
chronology of Christian centuries: the eye necessarily

⁷ The seminar participants engaged in comparative studies of both Jewish and non-Jewish early-modern texts. The translation of *The Life of Judah* was one result, as were a number of articles, included in the Cohen translation.

⁸ This is the translation into Italian of Nathalie Zemon Davis' article in the Cohen edition "Fame and Secrecy: Leon Modena's *Life* as an Early Modern Autobiography" in *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth Century Venetian Rabbi. Leon Modena's Life of Judah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 50-73.

⁹ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi. *Zakhor. Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989).

moves backward and forward across a shifting landscape. In Venice, rabbinic Jews assimilated the classical literature, and sometimes the vices, of their Christian neighbors: Rabbi Leone Modena learned to rhyme drinking songs in the Italian manner and to gamble.¹⁰

Hence, it is to this shifting landscape that this inquiry turns in order to reconstruct the complex of cultural influences affecting both Modena and his autobiography.

The *Annaliste* school's focus on the subject's *mentalité* (or world-view) and on the study of slow, systemic shifts that exert influence on a subject's particular social context (*l'histoire évènementielle*)¹¹ is of particular assistance in grappling with the historiographic dimensions of this inquiry.

Additionally, the "micro-historical" school of interpretation associated with Carlo Ginzburg also provides a compelling argument for engaging in a more narrowly focussed analysis centered on the *Life of Judah* itself.

For as Ginzburg attempted to demonstrate in his study of the sixteenth-century miller Domenico Scandella (Menocchio)¹², reconstructing an individual's thoughts and his relationship with the surrounding culture (oral/written; high/low), presupposes the existence of a "baseline culture": in Modena's case, late medieval rabbinic Judaism, in Menocchio's peasant oral culture. Such a reconstruction may yield insight into the interaction between the dominant culture, in this instance, that of seventeenth-century Counter-Reformation Venice and Jewish culture, through the case-study of Modena's autobiography.

¹⁰ Manuel, 56.

¹¹ Please see Marc Bloch. *Feudal Society*, Vol. 1 & 2. Trans. L.A. Manyon. (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul Ltd., 1961).

¹² Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms. The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1980).

Thus, understanding the extent to which *The Life of Judah* accurately reflects or distorts early modern society is but one element of this inquiry. The other involves Modena himself and, by extension, Judaism of that period. His thought, at moments, seems to depart from medieval rabbinic tradition, revealing perhaps the existence of a decidedly modern perspective. The question, reminiscent too of the debates regarding Petrarch's thought and its modernity,¹³ is to what extent is he modern or medieval?

To historians, such as Nathalie Davis,¹⁴ Modena would seem, at first glance, to offer proof of the considerable influence of Renaissance modes of thought.¹⁵ For, *The Life of Judah*, a self-reflective text written with a future readership in mind, demonstrates an individual's desire to be remembered, even to stand out.

The document reveals, for instance, numerous secular activities and even of challenges to his faith. There is substantial evidence of interactions of dynamic, personal exchanges with Christian theologians, both Protestant and Catholic. All these factors inspire Davis to ask if this text offers proof of the emergence of the first modern Jew? If so, then one might also wonder if Modena's writings and thought could be classified within a secular humanist tradition?

Does *The Life of Judah* lie within a long Western literary tradition of self-expression dating back to Saint Augustine's autobiography? Could this thus indeed be the first modern Jewish autobiography? If so, then why Modena?

¹³ Numerous scholars such as J.H. Whitfield in *Petrarch and The Renaissance* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1943), Ernest Hatch Wilkins in his classic biography *Life of Petrarch* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) as well as more recently Nicholas Mann's biography *Petrarch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) have grappled with the perceived modernity in Petrarch's thought. This debate, still unresolved, echoes in the discussion that Modena scholars have about Leone and the fact that he chose a highly unusual manner to express himself when he wrote his autobiography.

¹⁴ Davis. "Fame and Secrecy."

In contrast, Howard Adelman, whose doctoral dissertation remains to this day the most comprehensive biography of Modena, posits that modernity did not penetrate Jewish writing until the spread of the eighteenth-century *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment.¹⁶

He dismisses as mistaken the scholarship lead by nineteenth-century Jewish reformers, who read quasi-modernity into Modena's thought.¹⁷ Nor does he give weight to theories that interpret Modena's participation (his *engagement*) in the secular world around him as indicative of something unique about him or his status in the Venetian world. Adelman is particularly cautious regarding the nexus between Fra Paolo Sarpi (1552-1623)¹⁸ and Leone. He is reluctant regarding the inference that certain scholars have drawn from the Sarpi-Modena connection—an inference that would lend credibility to Leone's unique status and possibly explaining a certain cultural fluidity of his identity.

Intriguingly, both men did interact. It is even speculated that Modena's allusion to "a certain friar friend" in *the Life of Judah* is indeed a reference to Sarpi.¹⁹ Both had a wide range of similar interests, including an understanding of "the historical development

¹⁵ It is useful to note that most early modern Jewish history specialists also acknowledge the impact of Renaissance culture on the Jewish community. For particular reference to this, see Arthur M. Lesley's recent review article "Jews at the Time of the Renaissance." *Renaissance Quarterly* 52 (1999): 845-856.

¹⁶ Adelman, Howard E. *Success and Failure in the Seventeenth Century Ghetto of Venice: The Life and Thought of Leon Modena, 1571-1648*. Ph.D. Dissertation (Brandeis University, 1985).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Paolo Sarpi was a prominent figure in Venetian politics who played a critical role in the Republic's struggles with the Papacy at the close of Council of Trent. Talya Fishman explains that Sarpi was "a Servite Friar appointed by the Venetian Senate as its consultant in theology and law" *Shaking the Pillars of Exile: Voice of a Fool, an Early Modern Jewish Critique of Rabbinic Culture* (Stanford: The University of California Press, 1997), 16. Importantly, Sarpi also wrote (from 1612 to 1615) *Istoria del Concilio Tridentino* a highly critical history of the Council of Trent. This text not only "exposed a spiritually impoverished Church and a hypocritical papacy that had traded otherworldliness for naked political ambition" (Fishman, 19) but also "portrayed the Reformation as a salutary development and expressed support for the Protestant attack on the Church's deviation from its original simplicity and poverty." (Fishman, 20)

¹⁹ This is certainly the inference from the Cohen translation and one of the basic submissions made by Fishman whose recent translation of a text possibly attributable to Leone, *Kol Sakhal*, relies heavily on the Modena-Sarpi nexus. See above.

of their religion,”²⁰ but in the end, Adelman argues that Modena was a defender of rabbinic authority and rabbinic Judaism, unlike his Christian equivalent Sarpi who critiqued both Roman lay and religious institutions.

Critical features of the following analysis must therefore include an examination of the extent of such cultural and personal interactions, as well as an inquiry into the specific issues that affected the community of Jews living in Venice in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century.

To that end, this inquiry shall be divided into four sections. Beginning with an introduction and an overview of Modena scholarship, the balance of this chapter shall delineate the various interpretive schools that have characterized the historiographic treatment of Modena. The particularities of the Venetian Republic and of the Jews residing behind its ghetto gates shall next be examined. This second chapter shall also delve therefore into the intellectual environment in which Modena lived. In so doing, the early-modern dimensions of Modena’s thought, such as the influence of Renaissance humanism and its emphasis on historical self-consciousness, shall be explored. A third chapter shall focus more specifically on the Venetian ghetto as an incubator and percolator of Jewish culture. Particular attention shall be given to Modena’s public role first as *haver*²¹, then *gaon*²², then finally as *rabbi*. Finally, the fourth chapter shall examine Modena, his autobiography, and their place within the Italian Renaissance.

1.2. The Sources

The publication of the first English translation of *The Life of Judah* opened the way for comparative study of early modern European and Jewish sources. In his lead

²⁰ Adelman, 879.

²¹ A student.

article to the 1988 translation, Mark Cohen enthusiastically described *The Life of Judah* as offering fertile ground for cross-cultural or comparative studies. He also cited sub-fields (or specialties) such as Family History and Medical History as possible areas for more focussed future studies. Curiously though, since the publication of the English edition few seem to have heeded the call.

One obvious problem for Renaissance “generalists” is the availability of other primary sources in English. That is, indeed, one of the challenges that needed to be overcome in the present inquiry. It is hoped, however, that given Adelman’s and other specialists’ translations of additional Modena writings, as well as relevant secondary scholarship and reviews, that this study will be deemed to be based on solid foundations. It is sincerely hoped that by undertaking the present historiographically driven analysis of the *Life of Judah*, in response to Cohen’s challenge, a modest contribution has been made to this compelling area of early modern historical scholarship.

When beginning to assess the most recent scholarly treatments of Leone the man and the writer, two key works must be discussed. Importantly, though, each offers a different perspective.

As previously mentioned, ongoing reference is made throughout this inquiry to Howard Adelman’s doctoral dissertation. This is done with relative confidence as Adelman’s work is cited authoritatively in the Cohen edition of the *Life of Judah*. Further authority is derived from the fact that Benjamin Ravid, noted specialists and scholar in the field, was Adelman’s doctoral advisor.

A recently published counter-point (cited earlier) to Adelman’s biographical undertaking, is the 1997 publication of Talya Fishman’s work *Shaking the Pillars of*

²² A scholar.

Exile, a detailed study of Modena's possible authorship of a polemical, anti-rabbinic work, *Kol Sakhal* (*Voice of a Fool*).

Importantly, there is a gap of ten years between these two studies and it should be noted that Fishman employed her own "pseudopigraphical stratagem"²³ to determine *Kol Sakhal's* provenance.

Yet, despite Fishman's convincing argument for accrediting the authorship of *Kol Sakhal* to Modena, thereby placing a new perspective on the rabbi's multifaceted persona, Adelman's work remains the most comprehensive of the two studies available to Modena scholars.

A good starting point in understanding the interpretive gap between Adelman and Fishman, and more generally the scholarly polarization on the historical Leone, is to review Adelman's analysis of the cyclical appropriation and rejection of Leone by generations of Jewish and Christian scholars.

1.3. Modena Scholarship Through Time

Examining how Leone's legacy was honoured shortly after his death in 1648 is a good place to begin.

Leone's first archivist was his grandson Isaac min Haleviim, who inherited numerous manuscripts and who was himself a prolific writer, as well as a cantor in Leone's synagogue. Thanks to his largely biographical writings about his grandfather we

²³ In his generally glowing review of her scholarship and translation, David Malkiel (*Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. XLIX, 1998): 383-385 questions the strength of Fishman's hypothesis. He does not, however, completely dismiss the claim (of Leone's authorship of *Kol Sakhal*). In fact, he credits Fishman with making several significant contributions to modern Jewish scholarship: first the translation, second the first textual study of the book on its own merits, which leads to her most innovative and evocative resurfacing of the pre-early modern rabbinic tradition. Arthur Lesley's favorable 1999 review in "Jews at the Time of the Renaissance." *Renaissance Quarterly* 52 (1999): 845-56, does not question the matter of provenance.

know, through Isaac, of the existence of numerous letters of praise, honorific poems and tributes sent to the family from both Christian and Jewish admirers upon Leone's death.

The commemorated Leone emerges from these records as many things to many people: a spiritual councilor, a jurist, a philanthropist (despite on-going personal financial difficulties), a defender of the rabbinic tradition against the perceived threat of Kabbalism, a Biblical exegete, an ambassador of the religion to non-Jews, a poet, a musician and a scientist.²⁴

Adelman explains that over the next two hundred years, the rabbi's numerous works in Hebrew and Italian would be periodically republished and circulated among a wide audience. Leone's writings, already fairly broadly distributed in his own lifetime, would gain scholarly authority as subsequent generations began to appropriate, for a variety of reasons. his teachings.

A compelling case in point is Leone's description of Jewish religious practices in his work the *Historia degli riti Hebraici* (the *Riti*).

Clearly one of Leone's most popular volumes, this document was written originally in Italian for a Christian readership, and translated into English by Edmund Chilmead (1610-1611) under the title *The History of the Rites, Customs, and Manner of Life of the Present Jews throughout the World*. This text, which Leone had originally written for King James at the request of Sir Henry Wotton (1568-1639), the English ambassador to Venice, was regarded among Christian scholars as the first-published,

²⁴ On the matter concerning Modena's scientific curiosity, please see Adelman's section entitled "Modena and Galileo," 347-351. Also note Adelman's comments on Sarpi and Modena's scientific interests and how scholars have been misled by this joint curiosity, 879.

authoritative description of the Jewish religion. There is even evidence that suggests it may have played a key role in Cromwell's consideration of the Jewish question.²⁵

That a rabbi would write a text explaining the Jewish religion to non-Jews was not unusual for the time. It indeed reflects Frank Manuel's assertion that the Counter-Reformation period was one of considerable interest by Christian scholars, particularly those engaged in translations, publication and distribution of the *Bible*, in all things Hebraic. After the revival of Latin and Greek, scholarly interest turned to Hebrew, in great part because competing schools of Biblical scholarship hitherto reliant on the Greek *Septuagint*, increasingly sought out scriptural accuracy in order to fulfil their own ideological agenda.

Motivations for learning more about Judaism were not always enlightened, however. Under close scrutiny, certain Christian scholars would distort rabbinical disputations, dwelling on contradictions, and on subtle aspects of the discourse hitherto kept within the tradition. Manuel writes that

On the one hand, inimical Christians wanted to see Judaism as a stagnant pool of dogma and empty ceremony so that Jewish thought historically and in the present could be refuted and dismissed once and for all, making it easy to characterize the religion in simple pejorative terms. On the other hand, as they became fairly well versed in rabbinic disputations, rival sects, and theological conflicts among Jews, scholarly Christians could not remain indifferent to the Jewish quarrels.²⁶

²⁵ Adelman, 6-7. The Jewish question refers to the readmission of Jews in England after they had been banished in 1290.

²⁶ Manuel, 57-58.

Yet, despite appearances, Leone's willingness to disclose precious information on the Jewish religion was qualified. In fact, as Manuel points out, he and a number of his co-religionists who

...wrote in Latin or vernacular and expressly addressed Christian audiences about the prevailing practices and beliefs in European society were careful to present a sanitized version of their religion.²⁷

In the main, however, both Jews and Christians frowned upon such cross-cultural interactions, particularly theological disclosures. Jews feared, as Manuel explains, that revealing information about the tradition "might lead to slander and false accusations, thereby endangering the tenuous civil status of their community."²⁸ In the seventeenth-century, the regretful emergence of a Jewish apologetic policy in Calvinist and Anglican lands confirmed to the advocates of insularity these concerns. And to many Christians, interest in the Jewish tradition automatically aroused suspicions.

The *Riti* itself soon surfaced at the center of a polemic that began during Leone's lifetime after the publication, in Basel, of an anti-Judaic tract by Joahannes Buxtorf the elder, called *Synagoga Judaica* (1603). Manuel writes that, in describing to the Christian outsider the Jewish religion, Buxtorf the elder presented a caricature:

Buxtorf the elder also punctuated his narrative with snide remarks on Jewish deceptions. Judaism was represented as essentially a haphazard conglomeration of ceremonies, an impression that was sharply engraved on the minds of literate Europeans and reappeared in the writings of the deists, who declared Mosaic Judaism devoid of noble sentiments about God and immortality.²⁹

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 87.

The controversy was further complicated when Buxtorf's son republished his father's work, citing the *Riti*. Ironically, as Adelman notes, the *Riti*, originally written in response to *Synagoga*, emerges distorted in this latter edition.³⁰ Manuel explains that Buxtorf the younger's use of Modena's *Riti* lent a rational, philosophical air to Judaism and ironically improved Christian understanding of the Jewish religion.³¹ In fact, he writes, the widely distributed 1618 *Buxtorf Bible*, which was used by Protestant pastors in Europe and in America, ironically served as a vehicle for diffusing Jewish thought. Manuel thus asserts that "rabbinism infiltrated the sermons of Protestant Christendom."³²

Yet another example of "the continued favorable impact of Modena and his *Riti*" was the anti-Judaic refutation called *Via della Fede* (1683), written by a former student of Leone's and convert Giulio Morosini (1612-1683), formerly Samuel Nahmias.³³

In an effort to counter the growing impression among theologians that Leone's *Riti* presented arguments in favour of a *rapprochement* between Jews and Christians, Morosini set out to prove that Leone and, by extension, Judaism, was fundamentally hostile to Christianity.

Morosini did this by closely examining Leone's description of Jewish rites. In one revealing example he turned to Modena's examination of the prohibition against drinking non-Jewish wines.

In that instance Leone explained that Levantine (merchants from the Ottoman Empire) and Ashkenazic Jews (also known as *Tedeschi* Jews—from France and Germany) maintained this ancient prohibition (which was originally formulated as a

³⁰ *ibid.*, 7.

³¹ *ibid.*, 80.

³² *ibid.*, 84.

³³ *ibid.*, 8.

caution against drinking wine that may have been produced by idolatrous people) whereas Italian Jews abandoned this prohibition as a result of their acceptance of Christian monotheism.³⁴ Morosini is quick to point out that the private Leone, in fact, choose instead to drink only wine produced by Jews and even growing his own wine in his vineyard. Adelman concludes that

Morosini's dual purpose was to undermine Modena's attempt to minimize negative attitudes towards Christianity and to cast aspersions on Modena's credibility. Modena did in fact keep a vineyard in Ferrara and circulated a letter strongly opposing Jewish use of non-Jewish wine.³⁵

The periodic appropriation of Leone's *Riti* would extend well into the eighteenth century, where once again it was used alternatively in defense of or against Judaism. As Manuel notes, however, this appropriation was not unique to the *Riti* itself. In fact, this was part of the overall transliteration or syncretism that occurred at the hands of an increasing number of Christian Hebraists.

One example that anticipates these eighteenth century distortions may be read in Thomas Godwyn's *Moses and Aaron* (1625), who randomly cited various rabbinic authorities "from any period, regardless of sequence."³⁶ Such was the confusion and distortion arising from the Christian appropriation of Jewish sources, that, as Manuel writes,

³⁴ H. Stuart Hughes, *Prisoners of Hope. The Silver Age of the Italian Jews 1924-1974*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) comments on the different religious practices that arose with each successive wave or layer of Jewish settlement on the peninsula. He writes that by the sixteenth century Jews followed a wide range of rituals. Hughes states, in reference to the typical Jew of that period that "accustomed as he was to this kind of pluralism in ritual, even the strictly observant Italian might not judge too strenuously a certain laxness among his neighbors", 11. He also quotes Roth as saying "Italian orthodoxy was at no time as rigid as it was north of the Alps", 11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁶ Manuel, 80.

Judaism was being profoundly amended even as it was being examined, though its fluidity has been frequently ignored.³⁷

Leone's *Riti* is but one compelling example of the periodic appropriation and distortion that characterizes Modena scholarship. Other examples include Simon Simonsohn's *History of the Jews in the Duchy of Mantua*,³⁸ where reference is made to the *Riti* being cited in defense of a Jew facing murder charges.

Yet, another example involves the important case of Jacques Christian Basnage (1653-1725), a Protestant theologian, who argued that Leone was really an anti-Christian polemicist.³⁹ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi notes that Basnage's work was "the first real attempt in modern times at a coherent and comprehensive post-biblical history of the Jews."⁴⁰

Yerushalmi cautions, however, that Basnage's analysis is predicated on "the basic Christian presumption of an ultimate conversion of the Jews"⁴¹. Yet, despite the efforts of Basnage and others such as Paulo Sebastiano Medici to cast Modena as an enemy of Christianity, the *Riti* continued to garnish praise and renown among Christian Hebraists. As the text continued to have a life of its own, thanks to numerous inquiries and scholarly exchanges between theologians and rabbinical scholars, new facts regarding Modena's other works emerged.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Simon Simonsohn. *The History of the Jews in the Duchy of Mantua*. (New York: Ktvar Publishing, 1977), 438-9.

³⁹ Adelman, 12-13.

⁴⁰ Yerushalmi. 81.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Adelman describes how a close reading of the correspondence between Theophile Unger (1671-1719) and Rabbis Jacob Aboab of Venice and Isaac Hayyim Cantatini (1649-1723) disclosed the existence of a trade in extant Modena manuscripts.⁴²

Within the circle of Modena's Jewish readership, however, interest was focussed primarily on his teachings. Adelman, for example, writes that

In 1718 Jewish readers were able to learn about a major aspect of Modena's life and writing. Solomon ben Moses Lipshitz (1675-1758), a German cantor and writer who had served in Prague, Frankfurt, and Metz, published Modena's *responsum* on the permissibility of choral music at synagogue services.⁴³

1.4. The Normative Modena: Efforts to Situate Him in the Rabbinic Tradition.

Interest in these texts remains strong to this day, as they are still studied within the corpus of rabbinic *responsa* literature. A quick look at one example of Leone's works anticipates what shall be examined in a later section: the fact that the rabbi had a keen sense of historical context, and was not afraid of adapting to change.

In response to the question as to whether it was appropriate to sing or have music in synagogues, something forbidden since the destruction of the Temple ("rejoice not, O Israel, among the nations", *Hos.* 9.1), Modena wrote for example that the answer "depends upon the reason for the music."⁴⁴ Citing the Talmudic prohibition (*Sanh.* 101a) which states "the ear that hears song will be uprooted, and song in the house means destruction in the end," Modena acknowledged that the prohibition was instituted due to

⁴² Adelman, 15.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁴ Leone's *responsum* as cited in Solomon Freehof, *The Responsa Literature and A Treasury of Responsa*. (Philadelphia: Ktav Publishing House, Inc. 1973), 163.

the Temple's destruction and the exile of the Jewish people. He adds, however, that music has gradually been allowed to mark a *mitzvah*, such as a wedding.

Citing authoritative passages from Maimonides, among others, "who forbade vocal singing for self-indulgence,"⁴⁵ Modena proceeds to make a case for adapting to the fact that music is generally recognized as an art form and that its inclusion during Jewish ceremonies has virtually become custom. He concludes by writing that

There is no place for complaint, except possibly against those who learn this art, not for singing in the synagogue or for a *mitzvah*, but for its own sake...All the more it is permitted to learn it, for it is a right and proper thing to do, in order to rejoice bride and groom, and in order to praise God in the synagogue, and for every other such *mitzvah*. How can people do these worthy things if they do not first learn the skill? If they know a little of the art and want to perfect it and fix it in their minds so that it should not be forgotten, all this is permitted.⁴⁶

Another aspect of Leone's teachings pertinent to his Jewish readership is the controversy over his anti-kabbalistic position. This first Jewish-based controversy over Leone's thought stemmed from Moses Hayyim Luzzatto's (1730-1747) struggle with both his teacher Isaiah Bassan (d. 1739) and the Venetian rabbinate to publish a pro-Kabbalah text called *Maamar havikkuah beyn hoker umkubal*.

In seeking to validate his own defense, Luzzatto reluctantly embarked on a critique of Leone. The rabbi had sought to establish, through the application of a historical method (using philological techniques), that the *Zohar*⁴⁷ was written much later

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ Meaning the *Book of Splendor* or *Book of Radiance*, written circa thirteenth century Spain; a text on Jewish mysticism, particularly the practice of Kabbalah. For more please see David R. Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism. The Merkabah Tradition and the Zoharic Tradition*. (New York: Ktav Publishing, 1979) as well as Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah. New Perspectives*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

than originally thought, and was therefore a historically fraudulent document. Even attributing Leone's thoughts to the correct documentary source proved to be controversial, as his critique was believed to be included under any one of three different titles. Adelman reviews the three texts in the following passage,

Shaagat Aryeh, the title used by the rabbis of Venice and by Bassan, actually belonged to another manuscript by Modena in defense of rabbinic Judaism; *Kol Sakhal*, the title used by Moses Zacuto, Bassan's teacher and a contemporary of Modena's, was the name of the manuscript once owned by Modena; only *Ari Nohem*, the name also used by Bassan, was the title of a work by Modena against Kabbalah. Bassan asserted that the manuscript in question was an autograph copy by Modena.⁴⁸

According to Adelman, Luzzatto's document also caused a stir among the Venetian rabbinate, which feared

that Luzzatto's kabbalistic writings aided the conversionary arguments of Christian missionaries among the Jews and strengthened the convictions of those who had become apostates. Modena's *Ari nohem* was directed against Christian use of the Kabbalah and thus a work opposing it would have been helpful to Christian kabbalists.⁴⁹

It is interesting to retain Manuel's characterization of Leone's writings, (particularly with those apt to find their way to a Christian readership) as cautious. This is not to say that Leone was anti-Christian, as his later interpreters such as Luzzatto (and including, one might suggest, Adelman himself) have sometimes argued. It is simply that Leone defies easy categorization (as even the current cleavage between Adelman and Fishman's perspectives reveals).

⁴⁸ Adelman, 21.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

In the nineteenth century another shift in Modena scholarship occurred. Archival misclassifications regarding the rabbi's writings resulted in several critical errors. Most of these errors coincided with the rapidly shifting course of Jewish history itself, marked by Jewish Emancipation, the Jewish Enlightenment and the emergence of Reform Judaism. This is most clearly illustrated in two cases.

First, several mistakes in dating Leone's birth and death resulted in a sustained belief that he may in fact have been a supporter of the false messiah and apostate Shabbatai Tzvi. One of Leone's liturgical poems, *Yom zeh yehi mishkal*, was believed to contain a reference to Tzvi.⁵⁰ This occurred despite the fact that Leone died twenty years before the Shabbatian movement began. Nevertheless, as Adelman points out, doubts as to the orthodoxy of Leone's thought were beginning to permeate rabbinic discourse. Leone would thus become a figure to be reckoned with.

A second series of misrepresentations and possible misattribution of the rabbi's work ensued from the archival work undertaken by another Christian Hebraicist, Giovanni Bernardo de Rossi of Parma.

De Rossi catalogued Leone's work and wrote, in Latin, about the anti-rabbinic document, *Kol Sakhal* (*Voice of a Fool*) and Leone's response titled *Shaagat Aryeh*⁵¹ (*The Lion's Roar*). Parenthetically Adelman notes that Jewish scholars would not quite fully grasp this complicated provenance until Leone's name surfaced again at a later date during "deliberations on the authorship of the *Zohar*."⁵²

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 36.

⁵¹ Leone wrote this as a refutation of *Kol Sakhal*. Fishman posits that this explains part of the confusion among scholars who have failed to see the "mask of pseudepigraphy" and *pil-pul* (or medieval Rabbinic casuistry) at work in Leone's authorship of both works. Please see further discussion in section 1.5 of this chapter).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 38.

The time delay in a rabbinic response to de Rossi's research is understandable, according to Adelman, as most "Jewish writers did not pay much attention to the discoveries of Christian Hebraists published in Latin."⁵³ The controversy over Leone's orthodoxy arose later during a series of scholarly exchanges amongst leaders of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.

This first modern, secular Jewish intellectual movement (part of the unfolding Haskalah) sought, as early as 1822, to establish "first the textual study of Judaism; second, a historical study of Judaism; third, a philosophy of Judaism."⁵⁴

In so doing, this new generation of scholars re-examined their own long, unbroken textual patrimony. In this era, the work undertaken by Modena's inadvertent biographers, the Christian Hebraists, figured prominently in new compendia of Jewish scholarship. Regrettably, as both Adelman and Fishman note, so would numerous paleographic and interpretive mistakes.

Amidst the debates regarding the authorship of the *Zohar* and the impact of Kabbalism on traditional Judaism, various scholars turned to Modena's *Ari Nohem* as validation for their anti-Kabbalistic perspective. Others began to doubt the consistency of Leone's opinion by questioning rumours, based on reading his autobiography, that he had turned towards Kabbalism late in life. Another Luzzatto, Samuel David (1800-1865), who was one of the first scholars to work on the newly-discovered manuscript of Modena's *Hayye Yehudah*, advanced this perspective.

Adelman explains that, upon the discovery of Leone's autobiography, one copy and four summaries were made. Luzzatto made his summary from the original

⁵³ Manuel, 80.

⁵⁴ Yerushalmi, 83-84.

manuscript discovered at Treves. Surprisingly little attention was paid to the actual biographical contents or historical value of the work. Rather, the work, containing Leone's own lengthy bibliography, was seen by its nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft* readership, or *maskilim*, as a sort of reference tool. Leone's autobiography was in fact viewed by many anti-Kabbalists as a liability. Leone's retraction of his earlier negation of the Kabbalistic belief in the transmigration of souls, for example, posed one of a number of problems.⁵⁵

This is further evidenced in Isaac Samuel Reggio's (1784-1855) decision to discuss Leone's gambling habit. In Reggio's hands Leone becomes a moderate who favoured recreational gambling. Adelman's research reveals that Reggio actively suppressed the fact that Leone wrote of his torment at the hands of this life-long, ruinous habit. Adelman explains Reggio's manipulation of the facts as a necessity because "this information could have greatly undermined the suitability of Leone as an anti-kabbalistic authority."⁵⁶ This was indeed the case when Luzzatto would publish, in the footnotes to an article in a scholarly journal of the day, two critical points regarding Leone's character and scholarship.

First he attacked Leone on the very grounds that Reggio had so feared, by citing the autobiographical data regarding Leone's gambling. Secondly, Luzzatto claimed that Leone had badly proofread the *Rabbinic Bible* of 1617. Adelman, who demonstrates that Luzzatto knowingly misrepresented Leone's role in the editing of the 1617 *Bible*, quickly dismisses this second charge.⁵⁷ Yet the damage to Leone's reputation was done. And

⁵⁵ Adelman, 93.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 53.

Luzzatto administered a final blow to Leone's legitimacy by attributing the authorship of *Kol Sakhal* to him. In 1846, he wrote

The matter is now clear, beyond all doubt, that the *Kol Sakhal*, also is the work of Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh. That rabbi was a hater of the sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud more than the Karaites. He was more reform than Geiger. This was 220 years ago! And in Italy!!⁵⁸

At the time, Luzzatto's attribution of *Kol Sakhal* to Leone was tantamount to calling him a heretic. In fact Leone, referring to the text's author in his notes on *Kol Sakhal*, called him a *hores*, the Hebrew word for heretic or destroyer.⁵⁹ By the nineteenth century, the work was either rejected on those grounds, or appropriated by reformers.

The principal proponent of the Reform movement was Abraham Geiger (1810-1874) who, as reformer and historian, sought to ascribe new intent to rabbinic texts. To that end, Geiger, for example, read a pro-Islamic tendency into Maimonides' (1135-1204) *Iggeret hashemad*.

Through Geiger's interpretive lens, Leone was seen as a rabbi who raged against the Talmud in private. Geiger further argued that Leone's criticism of Kabbalah was part of "a program against the oral law of the rabbis."⁶⁰ Ultimately, Geiger interpreted *Kol Sakhal* as the rabbi's pseudonymous attempt at rabbinic criticism.⁶¹

In the following passage, Adelman offers his own view of Geiger's motives for painting Leone as a reformer. He writes that,

By trying to prove that Modena had been a well-respected traditional rabbi and then trying to support the view that he had also been a heretic who hated the oral law but kept his

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 59.

⁵⁹ Fishman, 4.

⁶⁰ Adelman, 90.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

peace in public, Geiger was trying to undermine the credibility of all medieval rabbis. He wanted to show that Modena was typical of rabbis who kept their positions for the sake of power, prestige, and income but who did not believe in the oral law. While Geiger's chief message was that his own views had been expressed already in the seventeenth century by at least one legitimate rabbi, he also wanted to show that in general traditional rabbinic authorities could have lived deviant lives.⁶²

The polemic over Leone's orthodoxy would continue throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century. A major breakthrough occurred with Ludwig Blau's (1861-1936) edition of a collection of Leone's Hebrew letters. Adelman rightly emphasizes the difference between Blau and all preceding Modena scholars.

Blau's work was the first empirically sound study of the historical Leone within the context of the history of the Jews of Italy. Blau argued with documentary evidence that another man, a known heretic, was the author of *Kol Sakhal*. By positioning *Kol Sakhal* within what became known as the Spanish heretical stream, Blau postulated that the author may well have been a *Marrano*.⁶³ In his rehabilitation of Leone, Blau shifted the course of all subsequent inquiries by imposing, despite his own methodological flaws, a historical and scientific approach not just to the thought, but to the life, of Leone.⁶⁴

Yet despite the emergence of this modern, historically-based approach to Modena, the issue of Modena's pro- or anti-rabbinical thought still dominates most contemporary scholarship.

This is indeed the case with Adelman's work, as he clearly views Leone within the medieval tradition. This perspective underscores Adelman's belief that Leone could

⁶² *ibid.*, 94.

⁶³ Pejorative word meaning pig, but "probably originated from an Arabic word meaning forbidden," see Michael Alpert. *Crypto-Judaism and the Spanish Inquisition*. (London: Palgrave, 2001), 204.

⁶⁴ Adelman, 130.

never have authored *Kol Sakhal*. Through Adelman, Leone appears as a man “who spent much of his adult life defending traditional medieval rabbinic authority over the Jewish community against aspects of incipient modernity.”⁶⁵

It is fascinating to note how the debate over the authorship of *Kol Sakhal* seems, at moments, to become a prism through which one may assess either, alternatively, Leone’s orthodoxy (and adherence to the medieval rabbinic tradition) or his modernity (and therefore his heresy).

1.5. The Authorship of *Kol Sakhal* and the “Rediscovery of Rabbinic Casuistry”⁶⁶

Fishman’s recent scholarship offers another quite different glimmer both into Leone’s highly fluid identity, as well as into the more general historiographic question regarding how historians perceive the pre-modern Jewish past.

If correct, Fishman’s hypothesis would completely re-align all Modena discussions. She contends that while Modena may conclusively found to be the author of *Kol Sakhal*, he may be also still be situated squarely within the rabbinic tradition. To Fishman there is no contradiction, for she writes that

a committed Rabbinate Jew of the pre-modern period might have been capable of subjecting rabbinic culture to trenchant criticism.⁶⁷

In making this argument, Fishman disputes the image of the pre-modern Jew “as intellectually credulous and behaviorally subservient.” She cites an “epistemology of doubt” which was based on a skeptical tradition, that of *pil-pul*—or what an outsider to the tradition might call a rabbinic corollary to Scholastic casuistry—“manifest in

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁶⁶ I have chosen to use the decidedly Christian and Scholastic term of “casuistry” as my readings into Fishman’s exploration of the pre-modern Jewish rhetorical tradition (or *pil-pul*) and reviews of her work that also canvassed this question, reminded me of that medieval Christian corollary.

⁶⁷ Fishman, 5.

anticlericalism, blasphemy, questioning of theological dogmas, and mockery—or even inversion—of received traditions.”⁶⁸

Fishman attributes most misrepresentations of pre-modern Jewish culture to the Post-Emancipation legacy that sought to align modern Jewish thought with the world of the Enlightened, freed Jew. The impact of the Reform movement “retroactively shaped perceptions of earlier reformist impulses.”⁶⁹

Fishman builds her case by first summarizing pre-modern, anti-rabbinical trends in the following manner. First, she explains, Judaism recognized two sets of laws handed down at Sinai, one written (Torah) and one oral. The interpretive oral law was revealed to succeeding generations of rabbis, who eventually codified it into *Midrash* and *Mishna* by the second-century CE.

Christian attempts to censure the canon of rabbinical writings during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance stemmed, Manuel explains, from the Christian rejection of perceived Jewish literal Biblical interpretation.⁷⁰ Furthermore, Fishman writes that

The Talmud, or portions thereof, was periodically banned, and on several occasions the Holy See consigned rabbinic writings to the bonfire in the hope of removing the ultimate barrier that prevented Jews from acknowledging the truth of Christianity.⁷¹

Muslims as well criticized the role played by the oral tradition by dismissing it “as a post-Mosaic falsification of the true revelation at Sinai.”⁷² And criticism of the rabbinic tradition also existed within Judaism itself.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ Manuel, 14.

⁷¹ Fishman, 9.

⁷² *Ibid.*

Fishman writes that the Karaite sect, which emerged in the eighth century, adhered only to the written Torah. By rejecting the Talmud, the Karaites “challenged the hermeneutical assumptions of Talmudic reasoning, impugning the authority of the modes of inference that link the teachings of the Oral Law to the Torah.”⁷³ As has been previously mentioned, the author of *Kol Sakhal* was believed by many Modena scholars to have held Karaite views. Yet, as Fishman notes, and as become evident in reading her translation, there are numerous passages within the text that ridicule or criticize the Karaites for their literalism.

Fishman’s greatest contribution lies in her desire to place the text and Modena squarely within their specific historical context. In doing so, Fishman believes that it is evident that the text is not a “historical anomaly” but rather a product of its specific Venetian context.

By drawing comparisons between *Kol Sakhal* as a critique of corrupt rabbinical authority and the Venetian criticism of Roman corruption lead by Fra Paolo Sarpi, Adelman would likely say that Fishman commits an interpretive mistake. Yet Fishman’s contention that Modena and *Kol Sakhal* are both products of the external Venetian context and of specific Jewish political discourse is highly attractive. Through Fishman’s lens, one thus wonders if such conclusions could apply to Modena’s autobiography?

Kol Sakhal begins with a series of assertions regarding the existence of God, the creation of Man and his relationship with God as measured by his actions in the earthly realm. Torah is described as being a tool by which Man should lead his life. The second chapter is acknowledged in the author’s (in Leone’s?) own words as something that will

⁷³ *ibid.*, 10.

shock the rabbinic community. Indeed, this section is devoted to challenging rabbinic authority and its monopolistic pronouncements on “post-biblical legislation.”⁷⁴

Echoing Karaite claims that rabbinic Judaism did not have a legitimate claim on the Torah, the author/Leone proceeds to discuss the relationship of the Pharisees (along with other critics of Rabbinic Judaism) and Jesus. Fishman explains below,

The author asserts that Jesus, whose own beliefs were very close to those of the Pharisees, left the company of that sect because he was outraged by their representation of pietistic practice as compulsory legislation. And beyond this, notes the author, the absence of legal consensus within rabbinic writings themselves is clear proof that the issues being debated had never been transmitted as tradition!⁷⁵

In the third essay, Fishman explains that the author/Modena proposes his own legal code based on a fourteenth-century Rabbinic text known as the *Tur*. Every-day matters from dietary requirements, to observances for religious holidays, to a moral code for living a pious life (alms giving, remembering the dead, etc...) are glossed. In conclusion the author, echoing Maimonides, states the following

However, who knows that it might reach and be seen by some singular person in the generation, free of the affliction of foolishness, of habit, and of arrogance. It is sufficient for me if I benefit one in a thousand of the wise. Then I would be [prepared to be] even more reviled than all the mass of fools.⁷⁶

We may thus characterize *Kol Sakhal*'s author as both a reformer and a traditionalist, someone who hoped to transmit his particular (arguably more developed) sense of the truth to those who might be susceptible of listening to the message. That this author would be tempted to write such a document, convinced that there was a readership,

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 70.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 71.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 158.

and willing to face whatever criticism would be leveled from the rabbinate of the day, infers a certain freedom or *liberté de pensée*, or at least a context that allows for such dissenting opinions to be published and circulated. Fishman's hypothesis that the particular characteristics of the Venetian Jewish community lent themselves to this type of discourse (or at least to the writing of this type of critique) begs further investigation.

To that end, it is critical to first review those specifically anti-Roman features that characterized Venetian republicanism as well as changes brought about through various reform movements. Understanding the unique ideological context that was Venice of the Counter-Reformation period will assist in a subsequent review of her politics and her relations with the Jewish community. Finally the discussion will close with an assessment of the impact of the ghetto (est.1615) as both an institution and a concept.

Because of its large population and its manifold variety, there are many in that city that practice philosophy and pass judgment without knowledge. Much freedom reigns there in every respect, and what I should call the only evil prevailing — but also the worst — far too much freedom of speech.⁷⁷

— Francesco Petrarca (1304-74)

CHAPTER TWO: Leone's Venice

2. 1. Venetian Polity and Institutions

Leone's world, specifically Venice of the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries, was immersed in the turmoil of post-Tridentine Europe. Counter-Reformation politics played an important role in shaping Venetian political discourse.

Rome's interdict pronounced on Venice and its territories in 1606 and Venice's resistance under the leadership of Paolo Sarpi serve, as Talya Fishman writes, as "one of the historical backdrops to *Kol Sakhal*'s composition."⁷⁸ This, she states, certainly invites "parallel speculations about Rabbi Modena's place on the religious spectrum."⁷⁹

In order fully to gauge the impact of this highly charged environment on the thoughts and words of Leone, it is best to turn first to an analysis focussing on the unique features of Venetian politics, and then to a closer examination of the relationship between the republic and her Jewish inhabitants.

To study Venetian republicanism is to witness the birth of one of the first truly modern states. Yet, in order to appreciate the subtleties of Venetian politics, it is essential to understand the concept of Renaissance republicanism, and of how it differs from medieval political theory.

⁷⁷ Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller & John Herman Randall Jr., eds. *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1948), 121.

⁷⁸ Fishman, 16.

In *Venice and the Defense of Republican Liberty*⁸⁰ William Bouwsma writes that Renaissance republicanism offered a new, modern (and profane) conceptualization of the state, one that is distinct from the medieval theocratic ideal of *respublica christiana*.

Much in the vein of R.G. Collingwood,⁸¹ Bouwsma situates the beginning of modernity at the break with Christian universalism. He writes that the “essential feature of the medieval political ideal was its denial of the legitimacy of the particular, the autonomous, and the secular.”⁸² The hierarchical structure of the medieval Church was replicated from the top down through a system based on the recognition of divinely sanctioned authority. Thus, he writes that “as subordinate members of a universal system men could be seen to have no right to govern themselves, and states no right to determine their separate courses of action.”⁸³

Bouwsma further states that Renaissance republicanism, as an ideal and as a political construct, was based on a new vision of the human condition. Rather than schematizing the world into a divinely ordered plan, the Renaissance mind, man, and state, sought ways to negotiate the world’s contradictions by incorporating inconsistencies, acknowledging the particular and appreciating the individual. Bouwsma explains that republicanism

...saw no absolute structure in the nature of things, no clear gradations of ultimate value, no ground for classifying some elements in the universe as higher and others as lower, no reason accessible to man for affirming that reality consisted of a system of unchanging forms and that the fluidity of common experience could be dismissed as

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ William J. Bouwsma. *Venice and the Defense of Republican Liberty. Renaissance Values in the Age of the Counter-Reformation*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

⁸¹ R. G. Collingwood. *The Idea of History*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1956).

⁸² Bouwsma, 6.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 6.

meaningless. It accepted inconsistency, contradiction, and paradox as insurmountable.⁸⁴

In the Renaissance conceptualization, the personal and the political, bound together, forge a path to an unknown future. This is in contrast to medieval eschatology, which saw man as an element or an extension of a highly structured universe where all is already written, and winding up towards a known end.

Republicanism, while leading to the recognition of distinct political communities, also bred both internal struggles and external ones between city-states and with the Papacy. In the Venetian case, republicanism translated internally into the development of a system of checks and balances, and externally on matters of international relations, a balance-of-power ethic.

It is also important to note how Venice conceived of itself. Much as did Florence, Venice fashioned herself as one of the truly independent and free Italian city-states. Unlike Florence's, however, Venice's break with Christian universalism pre-dated the *Quattrocento*.

Venetian republicanism was incubated in the city's own founding mythology, one that permeated all aspects of Venetian individual and collective life. The apostolic origins of Venice are the bedrock of its identity. As traditionally the final resting-place for St. Mark's relics, Venice rivaled Rome, the seat of St. Peter, and in so doing, claimed "that a mystical bond linked saint and city so inextricably that each had taken on the other's attributes and qualities."⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Bouwsma, 9.

⁸⁵ Edward Muir. *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 23.

The cult of St. Mark not only ensured a unique place for Venice among her Italian and European counterparts, it also led to the juxtaposition of the religious with the civic. This was achieved by infusing, with this symbol of divine designation, Venice's longstanding claim to be the divinely appointed heir to the Roman Empire.

Another example of Venetian religious and secular dualism may be seen in the date of Venice's founding, which is reported in early sources (such as Doge Andrea Dandolo's chronicle), as being Annunciation day 421. Turning to Robert Findlay's study of Venetian diarists and the city's iconography, the following passage illustrates Venetian civic piety,

Sculpted on the corner of the arcade near the *Porta della Carta*, the main entrance to the courtyard is the Judgement of Solomon, representing the Old Law, with a statue of the archangel Gabriel announcing the New Law directly above. Gabriel was of special import because the city was thought to have been founded on Annunciation Day in 421; Venice, the "virgin city," received special protection from the virgin...Taken together, the three corner sculptures present a complex theme of the relationship between divine wisdom and human frailty. God's justice and man's condition: The Venetian state, guided by the Old and New Law, exemplifies the virtues of Justice (Michael), peace (Gabriel), and charity (Raphael).⁸⁶

Findlay further writes that the Venetian State was thus

Conceived as a vessel of divine intention; the constitution, as a blessed amalgam of justice and liberty; the magistrates of government, as informed by celestial powers—an elevated scheme that implicitly transformed the nature of politics.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Robert Findlay. *Politics in Renaissance Venice*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1980), 28.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

Venetian offices and civic institutions that characterized the state are yet another facet of the dualistic nature of the commune. The first office, that of Doge or *Dux*, was long established as a combined princely and elected office. Once again, in order fully to understand this office, it is important to return to the mythology of Venice. Bouwsma writes that because,

...the republic had arranged peace in 1177 between Frederick Barbarossa and Pope Alexander III...The Pope, the emperor and the prince of Venice thus emerged as the three parallel potentates of Christendom.⁸⁸

The office of Doge came to symbolize Venetian secular and religious autonomy. This is asserted in Bouwsma again, when he states that,

The tale was taken as a demonstration that the piety of Venice, her rule of the Adriatic, and her liberty were together recognized on Venetian terms by both universal powers.⁸⁹

The Doge's powers were derived from ceremonial duties and from "his position as chairman of the Great Council, the Senate, Collegio and the Council of Ten."⁹⁰ Though customarily recognized as a prince, the Council of Ten elected him for life. Muir writes,

Symbolically, he was the sovereign of Venice; legally, he was merely the *primus inter pares* of the patrician class; but practically he would wield whatever powers his own ability and political connections provided.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Bouwsma, 55-56.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁹⁰ Muir, 20.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

The Doge while both sovereign and chief executive, was the symbolic rival to the Roman Curia. The fact that the Palace of the Doge was mainly a chapel where no Papal Bulls were allowed illustrates this rivalry. In noting that many members of the Venetian Patriciate held both types of offices one sees further evidence of the distinctive political and ecclesiastical characteristics of Venetian offices. The patriciate clearly perceived Venetian political independence as tied to the independence of its religious institutions.

According to Bouwsma, close to ten per cent of the active Venetian population participated in one level of government or another. At the top of the hierarchy of offices was the Great Council,⁹² which after a reform in 1297, was composed of all noblemen of twenty-five years of age or over. It acted principally as the electorate by voting for magistrates, and for other judicial, administrative, and legislative offices.⁹³ The heart of governmental activity was the Collegio of the Senate, which was comprised of the Doge, his counselors and three committees, whose members were called *Savii*—or wise men — mainly responsible for diplomatic, colonial, naval and ceremonial duties. The Council of Ten was another somewhat parallel and secretive office with police powers—essentially a broad judicial mandate encompassing state security.

This highly participatory form of republican government is interpreted by many scholars as reflecting an ethic of political service. It echoes the humanistic tenet of *vita activa*.

Yet civic humanism as it was known in Florence and expressed by Salutati and Bruni, in the early *Quattrocento*, was manifested belatedly in the Venetian context. This

⁹² In an article, "At the Roots of Republicanism" in *Venice and History: the Collected Papers of Frederick Lane* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1966), Lane refers to the Great Council as the Venetian electorate. Additionally, he writes that this institution may be understood as a possible prototype or forerunner of the American Republic's constitutional office: the Electoral College.

⁹³ Muir, 19.

is illustrated in a report to the Senate, dated 1527, by Marco Foscari, upon his return from Florence. He wrote that the senators should be guided by three principles: “*ut intelligent, ut explicant, ut ament rempublicam.*”⁹⁴ Apart from intelligence and rhetoric, senators were told to be guided by their filial love for the Republic. Thus, at the core of Venetian polity lies what Jacob Burckhardt called a factor of “moral influence.” Burckhardt further writes that,

...the genuine Venetian courted rather than fled sentences, not only because the republic had long arms, and if it could not catch him might punish his family, but because in most cases it acted from rational motives and not from a thirst for blood. No State, indeed, has ever exercised a greater moral influence over its subjects, whether abroad or at home.⁹⁵

Bouwsma further posits that civic humanism in the Venetian context did not require the reinforcing words of a *Salutati*, since individuals and political institutions already reflected and indeed promoted a civic ideal. Yet, despite this seemingly successful exercise in participatory government, the republic did face its fair share of challenges, both internal and external. One of the most revealing crisis points, as identified by Bouwsma, lay at the mid-point of the sixteenth century. This crisis transformed Venice, at a much later date than Florence, into a fully “self-conscious republic of the Renaissance type.”⁹⁶

2.2. Venetian Reformist Movements

The turning point came primarily through external factors. The commune’s decision to focus her attention away from her possession of the sea (and specifically the

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹⁵ Jacob Burckhardt., *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. (New York: the Modern Library, 1954), 55.

⁹⁶ Bouwsma, 53.

Levant), which according to Machiavelli had been her glory and strength, and to the *terraferma*, her land empire, was fateful. As Bouwsma writes, Venice's conquest of Padua and Verona exposed her to aggression from Milan.⁹⁷

By 1425, when she struck an alliance with Florence, Venice was "clearly an Italian power, and Italian politics was henceforth of crucial importance to the republic."⁹⁸ Bouwsma states that 1425 "may be taken to mark the practical end of Venetian isolation, although it persisted as an ideal."⁹⁹

The Venetian acquisition of mainland territories would not only change the nature of her foreign relations, it would gradually modify her economy and change the composition of her citizenry. A gradual rift emerged between the new (landed) and the older (merchant-based or mercantile) order. Turning to Bouwsma again, the following key passage stands out,

Ecclesiastical benefices were increasingly held by Venetians, and large amounts of land soon passed into their hands...The transformation of many Venetian patricians into a landed aristocracy was chiefly the work of the sixteenth century, but a social change of revolutionary implications had been started. In addition the annexation of by Venice of territories that had acknowledged imperial suzerainty, and which she ruled officially, after 1437, as imperial vicar, complicated her legal relationship to the rest of Christendom.¹⁰⁰

The combined effect of internal and external changes may be said to have metaphorically launched Venice into new waters. Internally, the rise of a younger stratum

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, 66.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, 68.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 70.

of what Frederic Lane called “new men” would challenge this ancient and venerable “community of boatmen.”¹⁰¹

One voice that emerged at this time, very much in the civic humanist tradition, was that of Francesco Barbaro. Expressing prescient concern regarding Venice’s shifting power base, Barbaro was an early advocate of a balance-of-power ethic. Bouwsma canvasses the possible influence of Florentine polity (resulting from a trip taken there as a young man) on Barbaro’s preference for reason over impulse in policy-making. Concurrently, however, a new strain of republicanism was beginning to permeate Venetian political discourse.

Bouwsma situates the origins of this so-called “stubborn” strain in Venice’s strange ecclesiology. This view (supported by Lane as well), is evidenced by Venice’s absorption of Eastern, or Byzantine, piety and organization. Historically and formally, when it was under the aegis of the Byzantine Empire, the Venetian “national” church was structured as a conglomeration of local congregations, rather than the “unitary organization” more typical of the Latin Church. Bouwsma reasons that,

...if Byzantine ways caught on in Venice, it was because they seemed appropriate in the beginning, and in the long run proved effective. It is thus more to the point to recall that Venice saw herself as an independent city-state; and it should hardly be surprising that she found congenial the manner of reconciling local particularity with Christian universalism that had been maintained in the eastern Mediterranean, far more than the West the direct heir to the ancient city-states.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Frederic Lane uses this evocative expression in his work *Venice: A Maritime Republic*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

¹⁰² Bouwsma, 72.

Venice, finding herself at the crossroads between the Latin and Greek churches, was naturally suspect in the eyes of Latin theologians. This “hybridity” would be more clearly pronounced, as previously mentioned, during the Counter-Reformation.

On the question of piety, Bouwsma explains that Venice’s particular ecclesiology, influenced by later medieval evangelism, promoted lay involvement in church affairs.¹⁰³

Fishman adds that “Venice was seen by Rome as embodying precisely the values that the Counter-Reformation intended to eradicate.”¹⁰⁴ She argues that the proliferation of heretical books (for example, Calvin’s *Institutes*) contributed to the problem. In the 1540’s, for example, the situation intensified as freedom-seeking reformers “from other cities flocked to Venice following the demise of the Florentine republic and the establishment of the Inquisition in Rome and Naples.”¹⁰⁵

Both Bouwsma and Fishman agree that Venice’s reputation as the most difficult nunciature in Europe was compounded by the proliferation of heretical sects. Anabaptist *spirituali*, for example, “insisted that they professed Catholicism while affirming the doctrine of salvation by faith alone,”¹⁰⁶ while Venetian millenarians followed “the eschatological prophecies of Joachim de Fiore,” and Eirenicists sought “the reunification of Christendom.”¹⁰⁷

A further affront to Roman authority was Venice’s demand (via the Council of Ten) to participate in Roman inquisitorial hearings by invoking local sovereignty. Venice’s resistance to any threat to her local sovereignty was based on her constitution, which though eventually encoded, rested on custom.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 72-75.

¹⁰⁴ Fishman, 17.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 17.

Adding to the overall crisis in Venetian politics in the later sixteenth century were mounting economic difficulties, such as bank failures (the Pisani-Tiepolo bank in 1583), a serious lack of capital, the decline of local shipbuilding, and foreign threats from the League of Cambrai and the Turks.

Papal sanctions, such as the Pope's rejection in 1578 of a *rapprochement* between England and Venice, and his claim to new jurisdiction over Venice in 1580, only added to the tensions. Finally, the Black Plague of 1576 took an estimated 40,000 lives, thus further aggravating the situation.

A new order of men (alluded to previously) would seize these issues and seek control. Their experience differed greatly from the maritime tradition of the established patriciate.

By 1582, a movement known as the *giovani* would challenge the old order by calling for institutional reforms. Paolo Paruta was among these reformers (called one of the most effective servants of the Republic, according to Bouwsma) who, in his *Historia vinetiana* (echoing strains of Florentine humanism), writes

The Republic had for a long time enjoyed a continuous prosperity, but now it was necessary to learn to tolerate adversity. When the condition of the times changed, she could easily revive her first reputation and recover her empire and her ancient glory. Meanwhile it was essential to employ much prudence and moderation rather than do violence to the time and, by too much acceleration the reborn greatness of the Republic, conduct it to its final ruin.¹⁰⁸

Significantly, the advent of the *giovani* marked the beginning of a literary and historiographic impulse among the new *intelligentsia*. Reformers, such as Nicolo

¹⁰⁸ Bouwsma, 232.

Contarini (b. 1553), who wrote “philosophy finds its perfection only in utility to the state and to other human beings,”¹⁰⁹ moved from a contemplative to a more active life. This period offers other similarities with the earlier civic humanism of the Florentine *Quattrocento*.

We note a familiar polemic regarding the *questione della lingua*. This debate, which arose in reaction to the predominance of Latin in written form, was stated most fervently in Dante’s defense of the vernacular in the *De Vulgaris Eloquentia*. The movement to unify vernaculars into one Italian language was lead by Florentines, as the Marxist scholar (and founder of the Italian Communist Party) and critic Antonio Gramsci wrote. Gramsci explains that Latin was the language of scholars, of clerics and that this caused

...a split between the people and the intellectuals, between the people and culture. (Even) religious books are written in middle-Latin, so even religious discussions are out of reach of the people, although religion is the most important element of culture. The people *see* religious rites and *hear* exhortatory sermons, but they cannot follow discussions and ideological developments, which are monopolized by a caste.¹¹⁰

Despite the Tuscan language’s eventual triumph over Venetian, the use of Venetian as a common tongue and the revival of a certain literary patriotism, evidenced by a renewed republican enthusiasm among poets (such as Francesco Zano and Giovanni Querini), suggest a patriotism reminiscent of the Florentine humanists. Gramsci writes the following, in reference to the spread of the Tuscan language:

I think that in Venice, for example, the Italian introduced was already elaborated by scholars on the Latin model and original Florentine never entered (in that Florentine

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹¹⁰ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 168.

merchants did not make real spoken Florentine heard there as they did, for instance, in Rome and Naples; the language of politics continued to be Venetian.¹¹¹

Ironically, “while elsewhere in Italy literature was increasingly remote from life, in Venice it was being brought into closer relation with immediate human concerns.”¹¹²

Importantly, the *giovani* program also restructured the sagging economy¹¹³. This was achieved through targeted reforms such as the “transfer of fiscal responsibility from the Council of Ten to the Senate.”¹¹⁴ The founding of the Banco di Rialto (1587) as a measure that revived Venice as a money market, stimulated both commerce and industry. The relaxation of the prohibition in foreign-built boats meant that “Venetian commerce showed a substantial rise.”¹¹⁵

Giovani reform was also the catalyst for a new polity.¹¹⁶ Noting Paruta’s pronouncement that “the Italian wars had destroyed the possibility of an active statecraft, the basis of political greatness”¹¹⁷, the *giovani* took advantage of this failure and were able (thanks to the typically Venetian balance-of-power ethic) to seize upon the opportunity. Bouwsma states that

To promote her interests, they were prepared to enter now into relationships with any European power, regardless of religion.¹¹⁸

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 169-70.

¹¹² Bouwsma, 238.

¹¹³ Although as Bouwsma cautions, “renewal of Venetian prosperity toward the end of the century cannot be attributed entirely to the policies of the new government. Commerce increased in the eastern Mediterranean because the Portuguese route through the Atlantic was now increasingly harassed by Dutch and English corsairs”, 241-42.

¹¹⁴ Bouwsma, 241.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*, 242.

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, 243.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, 246.

This invigorated political realism opened new and somewhat intriguing avenues for the Republic. In 1602, for example, Venice courted English favour against the Pope and his supporters in Venice. The Republic also sought an alliance with France after the death of Henry III and the ascension of Henry of Navarre.

Much like the earlier Florentine civic humanists, the *giovani* also represented a new level of political and historical consciousness. This consciousness was, nevertheless, filtered through the particular Venetian world-view: an *optique* that differed greatly from Salutati's, or even Machiavelli's later. This is most striking when we consider Paruta's refutation of the Roman model of government. Bouwsma summarizes Paruta in the following passage,

...politics must be approached not as a science based on general principles of the sort Machiavelli attempted to identify but as the art of adaptation to circumstance.¹¹⁹

For Paruta and his colleagues, the overarching principle was the Renaissance doctrine of the occasion, which "was essentially concerned with this problem of action in a world dominated by forces beyond control." In the new reformed Venetian sphere "the mark of the statesman is an ability to wait patiently for the moment of action, to identify it precisely, and then to act with decision and vigour."¹²⁰ Laws, for examples, in the *giovanni* conceptualization articulated by Paruta "must be adapted to the character of the particular peoples for whom they are devised; no utopian model could be applied to them."¹²¹

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*, 275.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, 277.

¹²¹ Bouwsma, 276.

Another voice of this new generation was Paolo Sarpi, whose *Istoria del Concilio Tridentino* demonstrated that historical inquiry of the mature Florentine type had found an intellectual heir in sixteenth-century Venice, and that the ideals of Renaissance republicanism had clearly become part of the Venetian experience.

This is striking right from the onset, if we consider Sarpi's choice of subject. Rather than chronicle the various military, maritime or communal accomplishments of the Republic, Sarpi chose, by analyzing her struggle with the Church, to demonstrate Venice's self-consciousness and autonomy. By adapting typical humanist leitmotifs regarding man's nature and moral fiber, Sarpi critiques the scholasticism of his Venetian colleagues, and in so doing, passes judgment on the old order of the Republic. As Bouwsma states,

...for Sarpi the exclusion of secular influence from the Council was precisely one of its most serious defects; it was this that had largely prevented the adoption of a genuine program of reform.¹²²

Beyond the "polemical vigor" of Sarpi's *Istoria* lies a vision of republicanism. This vision was profoundly anticlerical because of his belief in the primacy of secular administration and the independence of local government and the role of particular customs, all of which characterized a state's ability to rule effectively.¹²³

To many scholars Sarpi's thought and work "has some claim to be considered the last major literary achievement of the Italian Renaissance."¹²⁴ He thus offers rather clear and eloquent evidence of a dynamic political discourse, one that could only have existed within the larger framework, and tradition, of Italian Republicanism.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 580.

¹²³ *ibid.*, 583.

Sarpi's influence reached beyond a Christian readership, as there is, as mentioned earlier, evidence that Leone read the friar's work, despite its being placed on the *Index*. At this juncture, however, it is important to examine more closely the situation of Jews living in the Venetian republic. In so doing, the extensive and unique interaction between the men of Sarpi's and Leone's generation shall be better understood.

2.3. Tracing the History of Jews in Italy

In any study of the Jews of Italy it is important to know that one is not referring to a homogeneous grouping. Nor, as it has become evident to this writer, may we refer to Judaism as a rigidly monolithic system of beliefs. Moreover, as Moses Shulvass¹²⁵ cautions, it is also best not to refer to a universal treatment of Jews by Christians during the Renaissance. One must tread carefully, and by doing so, determine general patterns while noting exceptions.

Thus, on the matter of Jewish identity during the Renaissance, it is critical to mention the first problem, that of sources. As Shulvass stresses,

...statistics on the Jewish population in any period usually present a difficult problem for historians. The data available for calculating the size of a population in a distant period are particularly complicated when they refer to a persecuted minority, which is not the master of its own fate.¹²⁶

As for any research into Italian Jewry, Shulvass further states,

...there are in fact further difficulties to be overcome. Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century Italy comprised a multiplicity of states, large and small. The treatment of Jews varied widely: while those in one area enjoyed a

¹²⁴ Fishman, 6.

¹²⁵ Moses A. Shulvass. *The Jews in the World of the Renaissance*. (Leiden: E. J. Brill and Spertus College of Judaica Press, 1973).

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

measure of freedom, their counterparts in another suffered oppression.¹²⁷

H. Stuart Hughes posits that the four waves of Jewish settlement, from the original *Italiani*¹²⁸ onward, should be understood as layers or accretions through which developed a unique, distinct form of Jewish identity. He writes that

Schematically (and simplistically) presented, the succession goes about as follows. To an original nucleus of Jews from Palestine itself—dating back to the Roman Republic...there was added in the first millennium of the Christian era a second stratum of merchant families from the Mediterranean diaspora. In the fourteenth century Jews from Germany began to flee south over the Alps—hence the Ashkenasi element still perceptible in Italy today, not in language but in its distinctive religious rite. Around the same time, a comparable migration from southern France reinforced this third great accretion to Italian Jewry. Finally...the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and Portugal after 1492 brought the largest contingent ever to arrive on Italy's shores.¹²⁹

Subsequent Jewish settlements were, in many ways, a reflection of shifting policies regarding loan banks, proscriptions on usury,¹³⁰ persecution in the Papal states and, in a larger sense, the political disunity of the peninsula.

Thus, at the beginning of the fourteenth-century, the notable increase in Jewish migration stemmed from the Angevin kings' policy of forced conversions of resident French Jews. Another influx (somewhat transitory according to Shulvass) may be traced by examining the Sicilian Jewish population that fell under the expulsion decree of Ferdinand and Isabella.

¹²⁷ Hughes, 1.

¹²⁸ Defined as the original Jews that settled Rome, after the destruction of the Temple.

¹²⁹ Hughes, 3-4.

¹³⁰ Arnaldo Momigliano, *On Pagans, Jews and Christians*. (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1987).

In this instance, most Jews who crossed the Strait of Messina and made their way to the mainland only passed through Italian borders on their way to eastern Europe or to the Levant.

Shulvass and Riccardo Calimani¹³¹ note that there is evidence of Ashkenazi communities in the outlying regions of the Venetian Republic even before 1300. Nevertheless, with regards to the growth of a Jewish population in the North, the principal written source that Shulvass draws from is the record kept by Elijah Capsali, who described a flourishing community. This leads Shulvass to assert that

...the Ashkenazi clearly formed the largest group among the Jewish immigrants who came to Italy during the Renaissance.¹³²

As for Jewish influx from France (also referred to, rather confusingly, in subsequent sources as “German Jews”) Joseph Hakohen’s chronicle describes their resettlement in the Savoy region first, then their relocation, after the expulsion decree of 1461, to the region of Lombardy and Romagna. There was also a French Jewish settlement in the Piedmont area in 1410.

Finally, at the end of the century, Hughes’ fourth influx, the migration from Spain and Portugal, was estimated at about 9,000 persons in 1492 alone. This post-Spanish expulsion wave poses many intriguing questions, as forced conversions and the emergence of *Marrano* crypto-Judaism¹³³ introduced a third element into the Judeo-Christian dialogue, the Jewish convert.

¹³¹ Riccardo Calimani. *The Ghetto of Venice*. (New York: M. Evans and Company, Inc., 1987).

¹³² Shulvass, 5.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

Displaying a Christian identity in public and a Jewish one in private while being rejected by many Christians as well as Jews, this generation of refugees faced a multitude of dilemmas.

Marrano migration occurred in a fragmentary way. In some cases, individuals or parts of a family would flee to new shores, leaving relatives behind to face an uncertain future. Demonstrating an on-going concern with identity even in their host country, these refugees confronted a different reality than their German or French counterparts.

For unlike preceding waves, the *Marranos*, because of their shifting cultural identity and questionable alliances, faced suspicion and, in some cases, persecution in their new surroundings. Brian Pullan writes that the *Marranos* were “on the frontier between Christianity and Judaism.”¹³⁴ Post-conversion persecution or communal exclusion of those who reclaimed their concealed Judaism is indeed a difficult situation to assess.

In his *History of the Marranos*,¹³⁵ Cecil Roth explains Rabbinical discomfort with crypto-Judaism. Although the Talmud outlines conditions under which saving one's life may override other rules, allowing, for example, exemption from ceremonial practices in times of persecution (*She'at ha-Shemad*), the exceptional condition must be for a positive reason. Thus, concealing one's Judaism is one matter, while converting to another faith is quite another. Roth compares the situation faced by Jews in Persia under the Zoroastrian persecution, which forced Judaism underground, with that of the plight of Spanish Jews who in some cases converted while continuing to practice Judaism secretly.

¹³⁴ Brian Pullan. *The Jews and the Inquisition of Venice 1550-1670*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), xiii.

¹³⁵ C. Roth. *A History of the Marranos*. (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1932).

In both examples, the lines between Talmudic exemption and apostasy were, to some traditionalists, quite blurry.

Michael Alpert's very recent scholarship¹³⁶ offers insight into how contemporary rabbinic authorities viewed their brethren. His analysis is based on new critical information that challenges those who claim that the number of *conversos* who continued to practice Judaism was small. Alpert argues that sources of that period reveal that *Marranos* continued to marry among themselves. The validity of *Marrano* marriage was also recognized by rabbis of the period, as they continued to insist that a married woman fleeing the Iberian peninsula and wishing to remarry needed to have a religious divorce (a *get*). The problems posed by this policy (that is, leaving women potentially without the possibility of re-marriage), were resolved by the ex-patriated Iberian rabbinate centered in Salonika. Alpert writes that they held,

...that marriages performed in the Iberian peninsula after the Expulsion were no longer valid Jewish marriages because of doubts about the validity of the witnesses. In this way the rabbis automatically freed any married woman — or indeed man—who arrived in their communities. Such couples had to be remarried according to Jewish law and the records of such marriages and the circumcisions of the men provide useful data in calculating the numbers of *Marranos* arriving in a community such as the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue founded in London in 1656.¹³⁷

Alpert also writes that the post-expulsion rabbinate referred to these Christian converts (who continued to cleave to Judaism by marrying among themselves) as “children captives among the Gentiles,”¹³⁸ denoting a sympathy or tolerance for their predicament. He adds that

¹³⁶ Please see full reference in Chapter One.

¹³⁷ Alpert, 19.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

When any *Marrano* escaping from the Inquisition arrived in a free community outside of Spain such as Salonika, Venice, Leghorn, Bayonne, Bordeaux, Amsterdam or London, until well into the eighteenth century, he or she was accepted as a Jew and not required to submit to a rite of conversion.¹³⁹

As for Christian and particularly Tridentine Catholic theologians, forced conversion was regarded with great suspicion and, indeed was seen, in some cases, as uncanonical. Given that inquisitional tribunals were established as guardians against heresy, *Marrano* Christian piety was quite naturally suspect. Yet at this juncture in the Latin-West, despite some instances of State-sanctioned forcible mass conversions, the Christian solution to dealing with Jews was often persecution, death or expulsion.

At the frontier of two faiths and caught between state borders, the victims of the Spanish expulsion, arriving in the Italian peninsula, constituted indeed an unusual migratory wave.

Jewish historiography, for its part, has interpreted this event in numerous manners. As Yerushalmi writes:

Precisely because this expulsion was not the first but, in a vital sense, the last, it was felt to have altered the face of Jewry and of history itself.¹⁴⁰

Yerushalmi explains that the expulsion provoked a new, historiographically driven response from Jewish writers of the sixteenth century. Almost all works, whether historical or not, made reference to the great tragedy.

Thus, for the first time in post-Biblical Jewish history, a secular event would take hold as a recurring *topos*. Significantly, Yerushalmi does not, however, go as far as to

¹³⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Yerushalmi, 59.

state that this change established the end of medieval rabbinical thought and the beginning of a modern, Renaissance-type, secularizing Jewish history.

The expulsion was not thus interpreted as a *novum* in itself, but it was *felt*, nevertheless as a *novum*, he writes. The novelty was in the shocking destruction of one of the oldest Jewish settlements. This tragedy essentially displaced ancient Jewish perceptions of time and context, and interjected the cruelties of the present. Critically, however, post- expulsion writing did not result in a rejection of traditional ritual cycles and ancient commemoration, but in subtle changes of emphasis.

As mentioned, it is impossible to assess the situation of Jews in the Italian Renaissance in a uniform manner. This is even more the case as we turn to the Venetian context, which scholars consistently characterize as being exceptional on numerous levels.

First, as we have seen earlier in this chapter, the markedly independent nature and endurance of Venetian republicanism positioned the Serene Republic at odds with her Italian counterparts and, more specifically, with Papal authority in Rome.

Furthermore, Venice's topography and colonial territories allowed and indeed promoted migratory demographic patterns and population shifts. As a maritime economy that depended on trade with the East, Venice was an attractive port.

From the Venetian perspective, Jewish traders from the East (Levantine Jews) often enhanced relations with the economically vital Ottoman Empire, and Jewish money-lenders served a critical role in the city itself by financing loans at low rates of interest to the poorer members of the Venetian population and, at times, even to the Patriciate.

As in all things Venetian, the status accorded to the Jewish population was closely regulated and codified.¹⁴¹ Contracts, or *condotti*, conferring money-lending privileges for specified periods, were negotiated at frequent intervals. Jewish settlement patterns were also closely regulated, as the population began to spread from outer regions of the Republic (such as Livorno) to the city itself as economic opportunities presented themselves and the city gradually opened to Jewish residency.

Life for the Jewish residents of the city offered some opportunity and, to some extent, a degree of “peaceful” cohabitation with the Christian majority. Venetians themselves, though very insular and protective as to their own hereditary rights, were pragmatic enough to learn how to live and trade with new partners. An international hub of activity for Orthodox Christians from the East, Islamic Turks and Jews of the three main “nations” (German, Italian and Levantine), Venice is indeed an exceptional context for the study of Jewish history during the Renaissance.

How then is one to explain the fact that Venice in 1516 was the first state to establish a Jewish ghetto?¹⁴² How might we understand this sequestering of a segment of the population, which was considered, both legally and in daily interactions to be of major economic importance?

¹⁴¹ It is also critical to note that Venetian policies towards its Jewish residents varied depending on the location. As David Jacoby writes in “Venetian Jews in the Eastern Mediterranean” in *Gli Ebrei e Venezia*, ed. Gaetano Cozzi (Milano: Edizioni Comunita, 1987) 29-59 has explored the differences in financial, professional and political terms outside the commune.

¹⁴² The etymology of the word, according to Benjamin Ravid, “is of Venetian and not Jewish origin...The use of the word ghetto in connection with specific geographical locations in Venice prior to the dwelling of the Jews there is additionally attested to in sources dating from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Today it is generally accepted that the term derives from the previous presence of foundries (*getto, ghetto* from the verb *gettare*, to pour or cast)[...], cited in “The Establishment of the Ghetti of Venice”, in *Gli Ebrei e Venezia*, 218.

The classical work on the topic is Roth's *History of the Jews in Venice*.¹⁴³ More recent scholarly analysis, however, is relied upon for the purposes of the present inquiry. Particular reference is made to Calimani's work *The Ghetto of Venice*. While drawing on Roth, *The Ghetto of Venice* relies on the more accurate demographic work undertaken by experts, such as Benjamin Ravid and Simon Simonsohn.

Calimani explains, for instance, that in order to understand the emergence of the first European ghetto, it is critical to first clearly grasp the economic paradox that characterized the relationship between the Jewish and Christian populations. The central issue was money lending and its relationship to the wavering position of the secular and Papal authorities regarding usury.¹⁴⁴

Both religious traditions shared an apprehension about lending for profit. Indeed, both drew on the *Hebrew Bible*, and specifically the Deuteronomic injunction forbidding lending for profit to one's brethren.¹⁴⁵

Thus, during the medieval period, Jews were limited to this form of trade as a Christian solution to the injunction. For as long as the Jew was considered as alien or other he could be permitted to engage in such "tainted" financial transactions denied to Christians. Indeed, Church tolerance of Jewish money-lending, though resting on canonically convoluted argumentation, may be summarized in the following statement by Francesco Sforza, which clearly situates Jews as outside the realm of Christian concern. He writes that,

The Church and the Christians commit no sin when they allow the Jews to observe their rituals, since they do not

¹⁴³ Cecil Roth. *History of the Jews in Venice*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1975).

¹⁴⁴ Calimani, 5-9.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

approve them but only tolerate and permit them, for it is impossible to eradicate the bad will of them.¹⁴⁶

Interestingly, a shift in theological perspectives occurred in the sixteenth century. Benjamin Nelson sees a critical theological argument based on medieval universalism, developed by Calvin, whose “exegesis spells the demise of usury.”¹⁴⁷ Calvin argued that God only meant to outlaw “biting usury,” that is, “usury taken from the poor and the defenseless.”¹⁴⁸ Calvin further stated that the Deuteronomic prohibition only applied to Jews, and in fact proceeded to condemn modern Jews for believing that they were permitted to seek interest from others but forbidden to do so among themselves. In his condemnation, Calvin argues that taking usury from others is like taking usury from one’s own community because there is a *conjonction fraternelle* between Jews and Christians. Benjamin Nelson refers to Calvin’s following statement as “epoch-making.” It reads,

There is no difference in the political union, for the situation in which God placed the Jews and many other circumstances permitted them to trade conveniently among themselves without usuries. Our union is entirely different (*Nostre conjonction n’a point de similitude*). Therefore I do not feel that usuries were forbidden to us simply, except in so far as they are opposed to equity or charity.¹⁴⁹

Jewish rabbinical perspectives on usury were not uniform either. Early rabbinical evidence it is to be found in the *Babylonian Talmud*, which stipulates “the profit deriving from usury, even if gained by an idolater, is vowed to perdition.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ Calimani, 17.

¹⁴⁷ Benjamin Nelson. *The Idea of Usury. From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Otherhood*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 74.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 78.

¹⁵⁰ Calimani, 14.

In the medieval context where “trading in money was a matter of life and death,”¹⁵¹ a certain pragmatism emerged. This is evidenced in the following *responsum* by Talmudic scholar and rabbi, Rashi de Troyes,

When this prohibition [against trade] was pronounced, the Jews all lived together and could trade with one another; but now that we are a minority, we cannot survive unless we trade with non-Jews, because we live among them and also because we fear them.¹⁵²

Interestingly, by the seventeenth century interpretive pragmatism continued among rabbinical scholars. Sensing that societal attitudes towards Jewish money-lending rested not only on shifting ecclesiastical perspectives but also on fickle popular opinion, Leone himself stated in a *responsum*:

If we open new banks the people will be angry and will have the Jews expelled, because everyone knows how the people detest usury, and more than the approval of the rulers, the Jew needs the good will of the people. For when the people are hostile to the Jews they petition their rulers to have them expelled, which does not please God, and the ruler listens to them, as has occurred for our sins in various places, but above all because of usury.¹⁵³

The changing tides of popular opinion (often fuelled by the anti-Semitic and anti-usury preachings of Franciscan and Dominican friars) and the state’s response to such opinion, frequently resulted in revocation of the *condotta* and expulsion.

By the mid-fifteenth century, Italian preachings against usurious practices had reached a climax. The leading voice in this campaign was the Franciscan friar Bernardino of Siena. One response to his opinion that all money lending was usury, and

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *ibid.*

¹⁵³ *ibid.*, 16.

that tolerance of usury was grounds for excommunication, was the development of the *monti di pieta*.

This urban-based Christian lending institution granted interest-free loans to the poor. Financing for this new institution was a complicated matter, as money was collected through pledges, since money from loans could not be used for commercial transactions. In Venice alone there were numerous *monti*, founded by Fra Bernardino da Feltre between 1484 and 1492.

Initially, as Calimani notes,¹⁵⁴ there was little competition between these two institutions, but as the *monti* were reformed and gradually began to charge interest, the competition increased. Eventually, by the early sixteenth-century, the *monti* lost much of their entrepreneurial effectiveness. While they “tended, rather, to take on the character of charitable institutions, which indeed had been the original pious intention of their advocates,”¹⁵⁵ Jewish pawnshops tended to be the interest-charging and economically attractive alternative to the *monti*.

The popular outbreaks of aggression against the Jews, frequently fueled by ongoing accusations of ritual murder, were another feature in the backdrop. The prevalence of the motif of the Jew as baby-killer, did prompt at times ecclesiastical authorities to take matters into their own hands and place Jews under special protection. The secular arm was therefore asked to enforce specific Papal bulls that denounced these aggressions. Here below is an excerpt of the one issued by Pope Paul III,

The enemies of the Jews, blinded by hate or envy or, even more plausibly, by greed, as an excuse for usurping the possessions of these same Jews falsely accuse them of killing little children and drinking their blood and of

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 23

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 22.

committing other frightful crimes of all kinds against our Faith, and in this way they attempt to incite against them the simple souls of the Christians, so that they, the Jews, are often unfairly deprived not only of their property, but also of their lives.¹⁵⁶

A specifically Venetian example of these popular outbursts is the annihilation of the Jewish community in Portobuffole in 1480, which pushed Doge Pier Mocenigo to take protective actions.¹⁵⁷

Calimani also cites the case of the alleged murder of a child named Lorenzino in Marostica, which coincides with the time of Bernardino da Feltre's rabidly anti-Semitic sermons. Despite the lack of documentary evidence regarding the actual murder, a cult grew around this alleged murdered "innocent", and on April 12, 1486, Doge Marco Barbarigo banned all Jews from Vicenza and its territory. Eventually the cult of Blessed Lorenzino led to his beatification. As late as 1867, solemn masses commemorating his murder were held on the anniversary of his alleged death, and after the town of Bassano was heavily bombed in 1945, it rebuilt a chapel in honour of Lorenzino.¹⁵⁸ Calimani further states that

As recently as the 1950's, a reprint of an 1885 publication with the Church's *imprimatur*, containing accusations against the Jews, was distributed in church.¹⁵⁹

Bernardino da Feltre's sermons and accusations of ritual murder often resulted in backlashes against Jewish inhabitants and considerable civil unrest. Authorities in Ravenna, Padua and Venice had to find means to stop the frenzied throngs and to appease the powerful, popularly based anti-usury movement. The solution, as previously

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 24-25.

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 25.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*

mentioned, was in the creation of the *monti*, curtailing Jewish money lending, coupled with efforts to avoid expulsion, at least within Venice itself.

Jews within Venice continued with their pawnshops, which thrived because of flexible loan policies (often benefiting the rich as well as the poor), giving liberal estimates on traded goods and adopting discreet accounting practices. And the Venetian authorities continued to levy taxes on the Jews, no doubt a good source of income for the Republic.

By 1515, the situation of the Jews in Venice proper was somewhat stable. In fact, the government had even allowed them to rent shops on the Rialto bridge, where they could sell second-hand goods. It is thus quite odd that it was at a time of relatively peaceful co-existence that several members of the Venetian Senate proposed that the Jews be sent to live in an unseemly quarter of Venice called the *Giudecca*.

Despite loud opposition from Jewish leaders, such as Asher Meshullan, who argued that this would hinder their ability to reach their place of trade, a decision was finally reached on March 29, 1516, which decreed that all Jews must live in the New Ghetto near San Girolamo. A special council, the *Cattaveri*, was appointed to oversee all matters relating to the transfer of the Jews to the ghetto, money lending and enforcement of the decree. Ghetto inhabitants were expropriated and Jews installed, paying a third more rent to their new landlords.

For the next few decades the tide of Venetian-Jewish relations would periodically take a turn for the worse at every re-negotiation of the 1516 charter.

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*

Such was the precariousness of the Jewish population that on one occasion, in 1526, Asher Meshullam declared in response to yet another demand for money from the Republic that the Jews would rather leave than pay again.

A compromise was finally reached in 1528. It was agreed that the Jews would remain, continue with their usual business activities and finance a loan of seven thousand ducats, and pay out an annual tax of five thousand to the Republic. This arrangement could be renewed on the expiration of the Charter within five years. If either party opted out, the Jews would have one year's notice before leaving the city.¹⁶⁰

This last example confirms again the existence of a dialogue between the minority and the majority. The fact that Jewish leaders could petition the Venetian senate indicates a certain (if somewhat precarious) validation of the Jewish presence in the city. This is not to say that negotiations occurred on a level playing field, but the fact that there were negotiations, Jewish resistance, and occasional compromise reveals a subtle quality to the power dynamics between Christian and Jews.

Restrictions nevertheless abounded, such as the wearing to the yellow hat¹⁶¹ instead of the Venetian black hat. This limited fraternizing with Christians and constantly curtailed Jewish mobility. Other minorities too, however, were also closely regulated.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 37.

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*, 40. Jewish Physicians were a privileged group within the ghetto, that also paradoxically aroused suspicion. One example of their ambivalent position in the ghetto hierarchy is cited by Calimani who writes that: "in 1517 the Council of Ten ordered doctors to wear the yellow hat, but in 1529 permission was granted to "Mastro Jacob Mantino, a Jewish physician, to wear the black cap in this our city of Venice, freely living in the Ghetto where the other Jews live".

¹⁶² Greeks in Venice, although never subjected to the level of restrictions as the Jews or the Turks, were highly suspicious on a religious level. Calimani writes that "Not until the mid-fifteenth century were they granted the rights to build a church, and not until the end of the century were they allowed to establish a "school" for Greeks, 39.

The Turks, for example, were generally regarded as a bigger threat than the Jews, as Venetian-Ottoman relations (critical to the Venetian economy) vacillated in this period between cooperation and confrontation. The Turks lived in their own guarded district, in a small quarter on the Grand Canal known as the *Fondaco dei Turchi*. Thus, on certain levels, we may say that restrictions on non-residents and not only on Jews, was a matter of course within the Venetian context.

The situation of the Jews, however, extended far beyond a matter of restrictions. For unlike other non-residents, Jews were continuously confronted with having to re-negotiate their presence within the city (and pay for it), and were to a very great extent dependent for their survival on the economic needs of the Republic, on popular opinion, and on papal policy.

By the mid-sixteenth century, however, the Jewish quarter expanded. Growing trade between Levantine Jews and the Republic assisted in highlighting the pivotal role that Jews played within the Venetian economy. This was on many levels a “golden age” of Jewish-Venetian relations. As Levantine merchants settled into the new ghetto¹⁶³ and the German or Tedeschi “nation” continued to thrive in the old quarter, this period saw

...the passing of Venetian trade, albeit only in part, from the hands of the Venetian patriciate to those of the new foreign merchants.¹⁶⁴

Tensions would, nevertheless, rise yet again, as by 1553, Venetian authorities would join forces with the Papacy in a quest to eradicate heresy, and begin a campaign of

¹⁶³ Documentary evidence supporting Levantine residency in the New Ghetto has surfaced through recent demographic studies by Benjamin Ravid. Calimani refers to this issue at page 46.

¹⁶⁴ Calimani, 46.

terror aimed at the ever suspect *Marranos*. The burning of Talmudic texts, for example, in St. Mark's square is yet another testament to the fragility of Venetian-Jewish relations.

By 1566, negotiations regarding charter renewal would take an unprecedented bad turn. A new decree concluded with the stipulation that expulsion, not renewal, would be the automatic outcome of any future lapsed contracts. This reversal of fortunes firmly demonstrates, yet again, that the situation of Venice's Jews (though at times seemingly better than others in the peninsula) was never static.

As one of the few Italian states where we may examine a continuous Jewish presence, the Venetian Republic reflects the two principal features (economic and religious) of medieval and early modern Jewish-Christian relations. In its darkest moments, Venice cast Jews into the role that medieval Christianity had carved for them, limiting them to money-lending and viewing their religion as secretive and threatening. Thus the two recurring motifs—the Jew as moneylender and the Jew as baby-killer—loom large in the Venetian context.

Yet there is another dimension to the story of Jews, even within the walls of the first European ghetto. As Shulvass strives to demonstrate, the Jewish desire to participate fully in the life of the Republic indicated a “feeling of security, unmatched in other states”¹⁶⁵. Indeed, he cites numerous examples where Jews expressed their attachment for Venice, by contributing to the very survival of the Republic during times of war.

A case in point is the offer made by Venetian Jews to help liberate Padua during the War of the League of Cambrai. Admiration for Venetian republicanism even found its way into Jewish writings, as is evidenced in a tract by David dei Pomis.

¹⁶⁵ Shulvass, 355.

By adopting the Venetian civic myth of divine origin, dei Pomis “went so far as to ascertain that the Scriptures contained an allusion to the Venetian victory over the Turks in the sea battle of Lepanto in 1571”¹⁶⁶. This identification with the government of the Christian majority lasted well into the seventeenth century, where for example, even Leone himself praised her for the many opportunities she offered Jews. He describes his relationship with Venice below,

...loved it sincerely with all its virtues and faults. He was miserable whenever compelled to reside in another city and he always returned to his beloved Venice where he spent most of his tempestuous days.¹⁶⁷

The following chapter further explores the relationship that Leone had with both Venice, and its Jewish community.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 356.

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 355.

We are a people of teachers. For millennia, Jews have taught and been taught. Without teaching, Jewry was an impossibility.

—*Ravelstein* by Saul Bellow.¹⁶⁸

CHAPTER THREE: Leone's World

The following chapter explores specific aspects of the relationship between Leone and his context. A closer examination of Leone's life uncovers remarkable details of the social and intellectual world of Renaissance Venetian Jewry. *The Life of Judah*, written in 1617, is in many ways a window into both the public and private lives of early modern Jews. Mark Cohen aptly remarked that the value of the autobiography for the historian is in its detailed account of "the vicissitudes of a Jewish family, typical of many others, at that time, not blessed by great inherited wealth."¹⁶⁹

3.1. Origins and Early Childhood

At the beginning of the autobiography, which serves the dual purpose of official family history (in the tradition of the Italian *ricordi*) and personal self-examination, Leone traces his ancestral history.

Leone writes that his father's *tedeschi* family, upon expulsion from France, in the fourteenth century (thus during what Hughes would refer to as the third layer of migration), settled first in Modena, where they established a moneylending business. The family eventually moved to Ferrara, then Bologna.

It is evident from the very on-set of *The Life of Judah* that Leone takes pride in his ancestral past. This is particularly obvious when he states that his forefathers were the first to be granted a license to lend (a fact not substantiated by any documentary evidence

¹⁶⁸ Saul Bellow. *Ravelstein*. (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 101.

other than his autobiography). The family's coat of arms¹⁷⁰ might nevertheless lead us to assume some sort of official sanction and imply a long lineage.

The family moved frequently, as the tide of anti-usury laws and Papal edicts turned against established Jewish communities. Such was the situation in 1569 when Leone's father, Isaac, was expelled from Bologna. The elder Modena left with his first wife Peninah and other family members, taking refuge, finally in Venice. Widowed by then, Isaac married a second time, to one Rachel Levi Parenzo, and Leone was born in 1570.

The elder Modena's misfortunes, a seemingly endless rags to riches to rags cycle, would deeply mark his son's life. Leone's early adulthood was defined by the need to regain this lost social status. Well-defined professional goals and ambitions seemed to offer the means of achieving success (and of regaining a higher status). Unfortunately, as shall be discussed below, Leone's professional aspirations were ill timed. His personal losses only confirmed the conclusion he arrived at later in life, that the Modena name and family were cursed.

Resignation and fatalism, ever present throughout *The Life of Judah*, are indeed central themes in understanding a fundamental paradox involving Leone's career, belief system and state of mind. This paradox, or rather this internal conflict, opposed what Leone believed he could have become with what he was fated to become.

The initial privileges bestowed on the young Leone held the promise of another sort of life than the one he would lead. His father Isaac provided his children with both a traditional Jewish education and, as well, with a humanistically influenced training.

¹⁶⁹ Cohen , 4.

Young Leone thus learned both Hebrew and Latin. He memorized sections of the Torah, and wrote sonnets, at an early age. A studious boy, privately tutored in dance and music, Leone was familiar with the courtly arts. The adult Leone's work (his musical compositions, sonnets, and his flair for oratory) continued to show aspects of this mixed (humanistic and rabbinic) cultural framework. This was not, however, unique to Leone.

Hughes suggests that the apex of Christian-Jewish, humanist-rabbinic "cultural symbiosis" occurred during the Golden Age of Italian Jewry, circa 1500. This was when the population reached its highest point, "possibly 120,000, slightly more than one percent of an Italian total of 11,000,000 and eight percent of world Jewry."¹⁷¹ This was also a time where,

The breadth of view, the freedom from prejudice, characteristically ascribed to the men of the Renaissance benefited the Jews as it did so many others of heterodox manners and opinions. And they in turn relaxed, if ever so little, the rigidity of their own customs in order to grasp the hand of friendship extended to them.¹⁷²

Hughes confirms the presence of "Jewish dance masters and violinists."¹⁷³ This view also coincides, from the humanist perspective, with Manuel's description of the third wave of linguistic and philologic revival, the Christian "rediscovery" of Hebrew. Thus, the fact that Leone received such an education is not surprising.

Leone's life, both professional and personal, was filled, by his own account, with tragedy and melancholy. It is indeed significant that Leone begins to write his autobiography only two months after the death, on November 7, 1617, of his eldest son

¹⁷⁰ The Modena family coat of arms is described as depicting a lion, which incidentally is also Leone and, in Hebrew, Judah.

¹⁷¹ Hughes, 15.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 15.

Mordecai. The tragedy is continued throughout, as illustrated by the brutal murder of his youngest son Zebulun.

Yet again, Adelman is very helpful in establishing episodic divisions which assist in understanding the critical periods in Leone's life. He informs us, for example, that from 1580-89, Leone's existence was punctuated by travel and tutelage, under some of the best mentors his family's money and name could buy.

Indeed, literally from its on-set in 1571, Leone's life was marked by prestigious associations. This is confirmed, by the fact that he was circumcised by Rabbi Menahem Azariah Fano who, according to Leone, was a gaon and noted kabbalist.¹⁷⁴

In another example (taken from the British Museum's collection of Leone's letters), we have two early accounts of the value Leone placed on this tutoring. In the following excerpt Leone, aged ten, writes to his father from Ferrara, where he was studying under Hiskiah Finzi. Leone writes

And also today the Torah is my nurse, and I shall fly from the house of prayer to the house of learning, and I will dwell there and take what gets into my hands, so that in the coming days thou wilt not regret having spent money for me.¹⁷⁵

In 1582, upon his return to Montagnana, Leone writes to Asher Meshullam's son, Simson, one of his friends (from Ferrara). In the following passage, the young boy's

¹⁷³ Hughes notes, for example, that the artist Raphael used a Jewish model for his Apollo on Mount Parnassus, indicating Jewish participation in the artistic community, 15. The reader will also note, that Leone's son in law was a dance master.

¹⁷⁴ Cohen, 82.

¹⁷⁵ Kobler, Franz, ed. *Letters of the Jews Through the Ages. From Biblical Times to the Middle of the Eighteenth Century*, Vol. II (Ararat Publishing Society, 1953), 402. Prof. Ludwig Blau, one of Modena's first modern biographers, first published this collection in 1905. The published correspondence, transcribed by Modena himself, covers the period from 1579 to 1608. There are several other epistles written in Hebrew and Italian dating from 1639 to 1640 (see Kobler, 401)

burgeoning need for intellectual stimulation and companionship is stymied by his isolation:

I feel very lonely here, because I am accustomed to the city. Indeed, what shall an active man, be he even Moses himself, the great and mighty man, do without near neighbours, and how shall he make use of what he has learned, according to the words of Abraham: "Lord God, what wilt Thou give me, seeing I go childless?"¹⁷⁶

Yet another exemplar of his early correspondence, illustrates the great need and affection that Leone had for city life. Here it is not simply scholarly stimulation he seeks but also the lure of its dynamism, the decidedly secular goings-on that a place such as Venice holds for a restless young man.

The excerpt below is taken from a letter written at the age of fifteen, to his stepbrother Abraham Parenzo in 1586. It is in response to a rather scornful rebuke Modena received from Abraham, who seems to have mocked Leone's rural lifestyle. We read the following:

If I lived like you in a great city where there are scholars and writers, where ships sail in and out, where merchants from far and away gather and bring news from all four parts of the world, where the deeds of the princes are known, then I would write letters every hour; the letter carriers would be unable to carry them, and you would spend all your fortune to pay for the delivery. And you would consume all your time in reading my letters and ask me "Stop, please!" because your lips would faint through reading. Truly I have ceased to write not for mere laziness, because it is by no means difficult for me to write letters when I have subjects...But in the villages where I live there is nothing but cattle, fields and vineyards, there are no people to be seen, no news to be heard. What shall I tell you? How the birds chirp and the ox cries for his food, or the calf roars? Or shall I tell you that the time for the harvest has come? What shall your servant do at all in the country? Or—as this is so—shall I perhaps fill the pages

¹⁷⁶ Modena as cited in Kobler, 402.

with flatteries that are worthless? They may perhaps be acceptable among friends when they confess their mutual love, but not between brethren for whom love is taken for granted....¹⁷⁷

3.2. Leone the Teacher

From roughly 1589 until his move to Venice in 1592, Leone began his scholarly and pre-rabbinical career by giving private lessons in Torah. This is when he experienced one of his first personal tragedies, the death of his fiancée Esther. In a critical passage of his autobiography, Leone reveals a most touching and personal side. He writes

On the day she died, she summoned me and embraced me and kissed me. She said, "I know that this is bold behavior, but God knows that during the one year of our engagement we did not touch each other even with our little fingers. Now, at the time of death, the rights of the dying are mine. I was not allowed to become your wife, but what can I do, for thus it is decreed in heaven. May God's will be done."¹⁷⁸

Despite the tragedy of Esther's death Modena is beseeched by both families to marry Esther's younger sister. In a revealing passage we learn that immediately after Esther's burial, Leone was hastily pushed ("to the point of embarrassment," he writes) by his mother and his future in-laws. Seeking his father's council in the face of mounting pressure, Leone recalls that Isaac leaves Leone to make up his own mind. Isaac simply says

Do as you like, for the choice is yours. Today or tomorrow I will be taken from you, and you and your children will be left with her. For this reason, understand well what lies before you, and act to the best of the ability granted you by God.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 404.

¹⁷⁸ Cohen, 91.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

Leone succumbed to maternal influence and wed Rachel on July 6, 1590. Upon his return to the family home in Montagnana that summer, drought, famine and unemployment greeted the newly married couple. A son was born a year later, and named Mordecai — despite his father Isaac's opposition (because he had lost his own son, also named Mordecai, at the age of twenty-four). Interestingly, the aging Leone recalled in his memoir that he should have heeded his father's words, as his firstborn would also die young, at the age of twenty-six. Leone's remorse was deepened by the loss of his beloved father only two months after his son's.

Grieving in rural isolation and frustrated by an unfulfilled business partnership with one Solomon Navarro (described by Leone as a “diabolical Sephardi”), the young Leone decided to move to Venice, forgoing the world of commerce for what he assumed would be a fruitful career in the rabbinate.¹⁸⁰

Yet the timing of Leone's decision to relocate would, sadly, work against him. As Howard Adelman clearly explains, there were two sets of issues colliding with the young Leone's aspirations. The first set stems from the heady period of *Giovanni* politics, and the second—more pertinent to this section of the present inquiry—from conflicts within the Venetian Jewish community itself.¹⁸¹

3.3. Frustrated Aspirations

Adelman illustrates the complexity of the Venetian-Jewish relations in the case of one Daniel Rodriga, who applied in 1589 for a charter on behalf of the Ponentine Jewish merchants. He asked for the right to excommunicate community members in order to assure payment for taxes. The Senate modified the petition, removing the notion of

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁸¹ Adelman, 264.

Jewish excommunication and replacing it with a proviso for official recourse directly to Venetian magistrates.¹⁸²

An ironic rift was thereby created within the established rabbinate, as the Venetian government was now a possible remedy for dissatisfied members of the Jewish community. Now, instead of settling matters from within and presenting a unified position when negotiating charter renewals, Jewish leaders could break rank, circumvent their colleagues and deal directly with external authorities. This was most certainly not the ideal context for a young rabbinical aspirant to make his debut.¹⁸³

Several other strictly internal Jewish communal matters further complicated Leone's situation. Once again these developments arose from the conflict between Papal and Venetian authorities. The first factor was the special status granted to Iberian Jews or former *Marrano*.

As Adelman explains, the antecedents may be traced back to the 1570's, when a policy of safe-conduct from the Papal Inquisition was issued allowing Iberian Jews to pass through Venice and continue their trade with the East on the condition that they reside as Jews within the ghetto. This was reinforced by the 1580's, climaxing with the granting of a charter in 1583 to the Iberian Jewish community when the tide of "anti-Spanish and anti-Papal feelings strengthened the government's resolve to allow Marranos to live unmolested by the government or by the Roman Inquisition."¹⁸⁴

Adelman writes that this was a Venetian stroke of genius, driven by mounting economic needs since technically all Portuguese had been decreed in 1556 by Pope Paul IV to be Christians. Venetians, on the one hand recognized the *Marranos* as Jews, and on

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ *ibid.*

the other dispensed them from Inquisitional persecution. In doing so, the Venetian authorities were taking upon themselves (in clear defiance of Papal authority), the mandate to define the status of these new immigrants. The effect bestowed greater commercial privileges on the *Marranos* than on some native Venetians and Christian non-Venetians.

In yet another act of defiance against Rome, further compounding the situation, was the fact that Venice in 1589 recognized the Huguenot Henry of Navarre as King of France. This, as Adelman argues, demonstrates the lengths that Venice was willing to go to ensure its economic and political integrity.

The special status granted to *Marrano* inhabitants posed a number of problems for the established rabbinate. As previously mentioned, *Marranos* were suspect to both Christians and Jews. At the frontier between both traditions¹⁸⁵ and fed by their own history of persecution, abandonment, conversion and survival, *Marrano* piety was driven by an “innate predisposition against many aspects of Jewish life, which constituted post-biblical traditions.”¹⁸⁶

Often shunned by their co-religionists, many turned from the frontiers of both traditions to the fringe. From anti-rabbinical Jewish Kabbalists to Christian Anabaptists, wealthier *Marranos* sought to glean what they could on the margins of both communities, and positioned themselves further away from the established rabbinate. Adding to this estrangement was the fact that many *Marranos* children had no Jewish education, and were unable to read Hebrew.

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ Pullan, xiii.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

The granting of the charter of 1589, which initially exempted Levantine and Ponentine (Sephardic) Jews from sharing in “the financial burdens of the Jewish loan banks,”¹⁸⁷ posed another serious problem to (what appeared from the outside as) communal cohesion.

Sephardi-Ashkenazi tensions peaked by 1596, when the Sephardim were asked to pay taxes and contribute to the lending institutions. Rabbinic sanctions were imposed by the more established Ashkenazi rabbinate in order to collect taxes, thus adding to growing rivalries.

Newly emerging tensions between rabbinical and lay leadership soon became another issue complicating Leone’s prospects. Adelman describes how the twenty wealthiest lay leaders of the community (many were Ponentine Jews) issued a challenge to the established rabbinical order in 1594. They asked that one of the leading rabbis of the city, Judah Katzenellenbogen (d.1597), approve a lay-driven community decision, which Katzenellenbogen signed.

A controversy followed when the text of the decision was somehow modified, with the rabbi’s signature affixed. Denials and counter-allegations ensued, with the whole *fracas* culminating in Katzenellenbogen declaring the original document void. The damage was done, however. A rift between lay and rabbinical leaders emerged, fracturing what was perceived from the outside (by the authorities) as a once-cohesive Venetian rabbinate. Thus, lay encroachment on a hitherto exclusively rabbinical domain eroded the autonomy of the rabbinate, particularly in matters concerning ordination.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ Adelman, 267.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 267-68

One matter which had direct influence on Leone's career was the lay-driven campaign to raise the age of ordination when a *haver* (or student) could become a rabbi. Adelman explains that, previously, ordination could occur by one's mid-twenties, but by Leone's time in Venice, it was raised to thirty-five and, in some cases, forty. Adding to Leone's dilemma was the fact that he had positioned himself clearly on the side of the established, old guard rabbinate at several critical, early junctions in his career.¹⁸⁹

This is illustrated in the matter of "the twenty versus Rabbi Katzenellenbogen" (as Adelman describes this episode), Leone not only took up the rabbi's defense but also criticized members of the *va'ad* for not rallying to the venerable rabbi's defense. This is most clearly illustrated when we read a poem Leone wrote in condemnation of the attack on Katzenellenbogen (citing here again Adelman's translation in its entirety):

On the Fall of the Crown of the Rabbis because of the Spirit of the Twenty

Raise the crown of honor and remove the crown
of abstinence.
They cut the long robe and also remove it.
Woe, students of Torah, didn't they reduce
your number because they dispersed it.
The name of rabbi is not for benefit and is not
a help.
What is it to me with your prohibitions or if
you allow it?
If you say "allowed" or if you forbid,
There is no longer excommunication here
and no longer judgments between man and a sage
or with his neighbor.
There will no longer be a difference between
all men.
We renounce the ancient honor and prevent it
Haver and the name Rabbi.
And one who makes a *haver* will be diminished
and will not be
increased and we will scatter him to the left,

¹⁸⁹ *ibid.*

backwards,
and to every side.¹⁹⁰

Adelman explains that Leone is using the word “robe” as a metaphor for the rabbinate which is under attack from the lay leaders. Leone also refers to the scattering of the clergy, which has resulted in insufficient numbers to tend to the city’s present needs. Finally, he scolds the lay leaders for their reaction to his responsa on matters of rituals and observances. Leone writes that although it is no longer possible simply to excommunicate a community member, this also removes sanction. By devaluing the office of rabbi, the community has devalued learning, education, and, in the end: Torah.

¹⁹¹

On the matter of *Marrano* and broader Sephardi opposition to the authority of the traditional Venetian rabbinate, Leone also ventured a rebuke in 1600, ten years after his arrival in the city, when he referred to them as “fools” “because they mocked the commandments of rabbinic Judaism.”¹⁹²

To Adelman, Leone’s forays into the communal matters of his day would clearly indicate a pro-rabbinic posture. Indeed much of Adelman’s thesis turns on this interpretation (whether Leone may be understood as a staunch defender of the old guard rabbinate, or as a reformer, is one of the crucial questions pertinent to the analysis of *The Life of Judah* in chapter four). Whatever the case may be, it is reasonable to concur with Adelman that the timing of Modena’s introduction into the world of Venetian Jewish communal politics was unfortunate.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 267. Archival information regarding extant copies of this poem, is available through the British Museum’s index of Modena manuscripts.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 267.

¹⁹² *ibid.*, 265.

Where many of his contemporary rabbinical candidates chose to leave the city and pursue career opportunities elsewhere, and despite his own periods of exile, Leone clung to the hope that his candidacy would, one day, be accepted. The question is, would Leone choose to align himself with a crumbling old order? An answer may be found in a closer examination of the Venetian rabbinate and Leone's relationship with its leaders.

Adelman explains that Leone served as legal clerk to Katzenellenbogen, often writing opinions for his master and serving as official mouthpiece for the old order. In the following passage Adelman clarifies what was at stake:

Basically, the Venetian rabbis were anxious to have a role in affairs throughout northern Italy. They wanted Jews to come to Venice for adjudication and were willing to use threats, including excommunication, even against other respected rabbis. However, despite all their bluster, they were not particularly successful in imposing their will.¹⁹³

He further speculates on the effect such a perspective may have had on Leone:

We may surmise that Katzenellenbogen aroused in Modena, as well as in many other Venetian Jews, two deeply contrasting emotions. As a defender of rabbinic prerogatives against lay encroachments, he was admired by Modena, particularly when his own well being was jeopardized; as an assertive antagonist against other rabbis, Modena probably resented him, particularly when the rabbis were his friends or their supporters were from his family.¹⁹⁴

After Katzenellenbogen's death in March 1597, Avigdor Civald took over as chief rabbi of Venice and continued to assert the primacy of rabbinical authority over the lay leadership by going to the non-Jewish Venetian authorities to settle disputes.

¹⁹³ *ibid.*, 269.

¹⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 270.

As legal clerk to the rabbinate Leone thus frequently found himself in an awkward position. This is exemplified, in 1600, in a case involving two rival leaders in Padua, which fell under Venetian jurisdiction.

Simon Archivolti, one of Leone's mentors, and Simon Luria, a lay leader, had excommunicated each other, thereby creating a great rift that came to the attention of the Venetian authorities. After several failed attempts to resolve the dispute, the Venetian rabbinate was in the odd position of having to rebuke one of its own in favour of the lay Paduan leadership.

Leone penned several documents condemning archrivals, his former mentor, and was even called before the secular authorities to explain the crisis. Perhaps as a result of mounting frustrations, or with an eye to better professional prospects, Leone worked for a private employer shortly after the Paduan conflict.¹⁹⁵

This first foray into what we might call the private sector marks, for Leone, the beginning of what would become a life-long cycle alternating public rabbinical duties and private tutelage. Leone's convoluted and frustrating career path, which alternated between a public role responding to the needs of various smaller Jewish communities, and a more dependant and subjective one working in the private employ of prominent families, positioned Leone at the center of the community.

It is thus interesting to observe how Leone's documents written as a result of these many professional duties and travels offer, *in toto*, the historian a rich and substantial record. Whether looking at letters penned for his employers or *responsa* written to answer the inquiries of isolated communities of the *diaspora* needing Halakhic guidance, the cumulative effect speaks volumes. The corpus of Leone's writings

describes both popular and learned sections of early modern Jewry and, in many instances, the inner workings of the Venetian community.

A case in point is the documentation regarding Leone's first job in this "private sector," as the personal secretary for the "prominent Levantine rabbi and merchant"¹⁹⁶ Joseph Pardo (d.1619). Whether making urgent appeals for ransomed Jewish hostages abroad, or for special-projects in the land of Israel or, closer to home, leveraging funds for the next set of charter negotiations for the Ashkenazi moneylenders in 1601, the Venetian community had significant fundraising capacities. It is thanks to these records that insight is gained into the prominent role that the Venetian Jewish community played amongst its peers in Europe.

These documents, commissioned by Leone's private employer, reveal how the laity made a significant contribution, ensuring the survival and continuity of Jewish communal values. One example arose when Pardo sponsored "a free school in Venice for Jewish children from abroad who lacked a Jewish education because they abandoned it" or, because "of the sins of their parents," never had one.¹⁹⁷ Adelman incidentally surmises that among the "sins" Pardo alludes to is the sin of ignorance, visited onto the next generation by *Marranos* parents who had either abandoned, diluted or distorted their Judaism in order to survive expulsion and persecution.

In contrast to these documents, Leone's output of personal rabbinical writing is quite limited at this point in his career. This is perhaps due to his numerous writings on behalf of the rabbinate or, as Adelman suggests, is evidence of a cautious stance from a

¹⁹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ *ibid.*, 280.

¹⁹⁷ *ibid.*, 281.

then-thirty-five year-old man still waiting to be ordained. Whatever the motive, Leone the *haver* was busy.

And again, by reading Leone's commissioned work, evidence emerges of a highly stratified and sophisticated Jewish community in Venice. Leone's public-professional life serves as a good example of the dynamism and energetic character of the Jewish community of that time.

It is as a private tutor to children of prominent families, or as the first teacher in 1594 at the Talmud Academy (and various *scola*), or in his leadership role in Jewish confraternities such as the *Shomrim Laboker*, that Leone's numerous activities offer proof that the community was thriving.¹⁹⁸ This would also indicate that the community needed scholars with advanced levels of Hebrew in order to teach and to publish in the language.

Schools to meet the needs of different communities, poverty relief agencies and other benevolent societies were established, all within one central location, and Leone was at the heart of this. And, as already noted, he would continue to wait for his official status to change.

During the period from 1592 to 1599, Leone wrote less on strictly rabbinical issues, his output seems to have been of a more general nature. This decade in the Modena-documents is punctuated by several poems and tracts on a variety of topics in both Hebrew and Italian, as well as other texts, such as eulogies and dedications penned on request by various members of the lay and rabbinical community.

One interesting poem that Adelman mentions and cites from Blau is on the merits of Hebrew over Italian. This is an interesting example of a humanistic theme, the nature

¹⁹⁸ For more information on this matter, see Elliot S. Horowitz "Jewish Confraternal Piety in the Veneto in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries" in *Gli Ebrei e Venezia* ed. Gaetano Cozzi, 301-315.

of language. It would seem that Leone's pride in his grammatical abilities extended to the realm of comparative studies and even to the much debated *questione della lingua*.

In this instance, however, the issue was not the merits of writing in the vernacular vs. Latin, but instead the merit of Hebrew versus Italian, a theme already discussed in his poem entitled *Kinah shemor*. It has been suggested, supported by the letter that he wrote to a friend stating that Jews could write as well as Christians, that it could be a discussion of the merits of Judaism versus Christianity.¹⁹⁹

Whatever the case may have been, Leone's fluency in both languages enabled him to translate²⁰⁰ many popular Italian texts into Hebrew, his language of preference. Thus acting as a conduit for the Christian majority's culture of his time, we note that Leone translated one of the most popular books of the sixteenth-century *Fior di Virtù*. He also composed what Adelman qualifies as a literary masterpiece entitled *Chi nasce muor*.²⁰¹ Adelman adds that Leone was connected to many owners, publishers and proofreaders of Hebrew publishing houses.²⁰² This may, he posits, help us understand the volume and variety of Leone's output at this juncture.

Benjamin Ravid's discussion of the Jewish presence within the Venetian printing world is useful in our appreciation of the extent to which Jews and Christians worked culturally together. Ravid explains, for example, that the 1571 ban on publishing came at the end of a two-year grace period appended to the termination of the five-year Charter renewal process. Ravid's examination of earlier bans, particularly one in 1548, is very

¹⁹⁹ Adelman, 297.

²⁰⁰ Amusingly, Adelman writes of a twelve-year-old Leone translating an epic chivalric poem *Orlando Furioso* written by Lodovico Ariosto (1474-1533). The poem, known for certain erotic passages, would seem an odd choice for young Leone, but Adelman explains that Leone worked on his translation while living in Ferrara, Ariosto's city, and took the opportunity to insert his own humour into the Hebrew version, 223.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 233.

insightful. It demonstrates that the Venetian prohibition on Jewish publishing “was not instituted after the adoption of the new harsher papal Counter-Reformation attitude toward the Jews, which commenced in 1555, but preceded it.”²⁰³ Importantly, Ravid also situates the Venetian prohibition prior to the 1553 burning of the Talmud. Yet, despite this policy, Ravid also argues that there is evidence of a lively, if covert, participation by both Jews and Christians in the publishing world. Indeed, for a long time, Jews had little choice but to interact, as the main publishers of Hebrew books were Christian-owned houses.

There was, nevertheless, a Jewish publishing industry. Leone was known to have published with several important figures, such as Solomon and Abraham Haver-Tov. This father and son team once worked for leading publishers such as Alvise Bragadini, who is an important figure in Hebrew printing, as he published a version of Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* in 1550.

This decade was a busy one for Leone not only professionally, but also personally. Four children were born in rapid succession. Isaac, born in 1593, was named after Leone’s deceased father. Next came Abraham in 1595, who died during the outbreak of a smallpox epidemic. Then a girl, born on Chanukah in 1596, died seventeen days later. And another daughter, Diana, born in 1598, was named for his mother Rachel-Diana, who had died the year before.

²⁰² *ibid.*, 294.

²⁰³ Benjamin Ravid, “The Prohibition Against Jewish Printing and Publishing in Venice and the Difficulties of Leone Modena” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 135-153.

Despite a clearly dispassionate stance when dealing with infant mortality (not unusual for that time²⁰⁴), Leone displayed emotion in *The Life of Judah* for the deaths of his adult sons Mordechai and Zebulun, as well as of his parents. This offers insight into his different levels of attachment. Indeed further evidence arises when Leone sadly missed his mother, but took solace in the fact that she had heard him preach publicly, a role in which Leone took great satisfaction. In this instance, it should be noted, it is public recognition that provides comfort to the private man.

It is perhaps in quest of an enhanced public image that Leone left Venice again in 1604, accepting a position as the private tutor to Joseph Zalman's children in Ferrara. Or it may have been to meet the financial needs of his growing family, as this new job paid one and a half - times more than all his duties in Venice.²⁰⁵ Whatever the case may have been, Leone's status in his new surroundings was virtually that of a rabbi.

Yet neither the salary nor his heightened prominence could appease his loneliness. This period marks the first time that Leone begins to traffic in amulets,²⁰⁶ a practice he would indulge in for the rest of his life.²⁰⁷ Significantly, Leone's time in Ferrara, which extends until 1607, goes unrecorded in his autobiography, despite several critical successes that brought him to the attention of Christian theologians.

One memorable instance is Leone's defense, in 1605, of Jewish money-lending before the Papal legate to Ferrara, Cardinal Orazio Spinola. In this case, Modena was

²⁰⁴ See Philippe Ariès. *Centuries of Childhood. A Social History of Family Life*. Trans. Robert Baldick. (New York: Vintage Books, 1962). John Boswell. *The Kindness of Strangers. The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1988). Christiane Klapisch-Zuber. *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Venice*. Transl. Lydia Cochrane. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985)

²⁰⁵ Adelman, 355.

²⁰⁶ We note that Leone had already begun a life-long gambling habit as early as 1594 and that by 1603 he was also pursuing the "vanity of the craft of alchemy" (Cohen, 102). In the following chapter we shall discuss in greater detail Leone's gambling and his interest in popular religion and the occult.

asked to present expert opinion to the legate in a dispute between a Jewish moneylender and a Christian nobleman. The following excerpt is taken from Leone's account:²⁰⁸

Modena: I believe that not because the text of the above cited chapter of Deuteronomy says: "Thou mayest not lend upon interest to thy brother, etc; unto a foreigner thou mayest lend upon interest; but unto thy brother thou mayest not lend upon interest, etc". And by "stranger" certainly none other than the seven nations are meant. The others are considered brothers, and how much more so because at times the Talmudists accept the Christians as Edomites and, a little above, in the same chapter: "Thou mayest not abhor an Edomite, for he is thy brother, etc."

Spinola: So since the Christian is a brother you are not able to take interest.

Modena: No, Sir; but if the Christian would treat us as brothers and would allow us to live as citizens and subjects, and not prohibit us from engaging in the conversation of the market, the purchase of real estate, many types of trade, and in some places, such as Venice, the mechanical crafts and place upon us an infinite number of other prohibitions, the Jews would be obligated to recognize them as brothers. But if they treat us as slaves...they permit us to do what should not be in order to live and survive, that is, to charge them interest.²⁰⁹

Apparently Leone's interpretation won the legate over and the dispute was settled in favour of the Jew. It is interesting to see that Leone was clearly opposed to money-lending itself, but tolerated the practice as this was the only way that Jews could survive economically, given the professional restrictions placed on them by the Christian majority. As noted, despite an elevated status, Leone chose to return to Venice, where he once again sought to pursue his bid for a position within the rabbinate.

²⁰⁷ Adelman, 361.

²⁰⁸ Adelman indicates that this account was part of an unpublished work that Modena was writing in defense of rabbinic Judaism in 1627. The censors prohibited the work. Please see Adelman's endnote 114 on page 976.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 371.

Upon his return in 1607, Leone became involved in a remarkable project with several scholars and publishing colleagues. This was the reprinting of a new edition of the *Haggadah*. Modena took on the Judeo-Italian translation of what is now known as the Venetian *Haggadah* of 1609.²¹⁰ This edition was to innovate in its use of pictures as a didactic tool and its translation into a variety of vernaculars so that Jews of different backgrounds and knowledge-levels of Hebrew could follow the Passover ritual and prayers.

The need to restructure such a central document of Jewish piety would arguably indicate a low level of Hebrew literacy among a significant portion of Venetian Jewry, most probably the *Marrano* population. One wonders if the introduction of pictures and vernaculars was a didactic tool borrowed from the Christian majority, which undertook a similar approach in disseminating documents for popular consumption? Moreover, how may we interpret this movement towards the popularization of the *Haggadah*? Was this a conscious effort to enhance observance of traditions among a specific group? And if so, how was it received?

There seem to be no substantive studies²¹¹ which address the issue of variations in Hebrew literacy levels, the transmission of documents, or the means by which local rabbinical authorities took stock of such a challenge.²¹²

²¹⁰ Benjamin Ravid, "The Prohibition Against Jewish Printing and Publishing in Venice and the Difficulties of Leone Modena": 135-153. It is interesting to note that there is an MS of the Venetian *Haggadah* at the National Library of Canada. It is included in the Jacob M. Lowy Collection which includes five centuries of Hebrew and Judaic *incunabula*.

²¹¹ In *The Broken Staff*, Manuel also alludes to the dearth of studies on Hebrew printing by stating the following: "the pivotal role of the printing houses in the diffusion of Hebraism is yet to be fully appreciated," 35.

²¹² Mark Cohen and Theodore Rabb alluding to this notion of "universal male literacy" among Jews in "Modena and the History of his Age" (Cohen, 15) stipulate that mainstream studies of literacy in the early modern age have yet to take into consideration Hebrew literacy. Curiously though, Cohen and Rabb do not consider that *Marrano* immigrants had, in many cases, little or no knowledge of Hebrew.

Leone's activities in this period also extended into meeting and discussing Hebraic matters with visiting Christian Hebraicist scholars, Protestant theologians and English ambassadors such as Henry Wotton (1568-1639). It is important to remember that Venice had resumed diplomatic relations with England as of 1602 and was also seeking an alliance with France after the death of Henry III and the accession of Henry of Navarre.

As has been noted earlier, interest in Jewish traditions stemmed in great part from King James' Biblical project, which had begun in 1604. This is the period during which Leone penned the *Riti* at Wotton's request, mentioned in Chapter One. Another instance of Leone's interaction with his Protestant colleagues is described below.

The intriguing encounter between a famous Venetian rabbi (sought to be Leone)²¹³ and Thomas Coryat (1577-1617), is recorded by the author in his travelogue entitled *Crudities*. According to Coryat, he engaged in a disputation, in Latin, with a "learned Jewish Rabbin"²¹⁴ regarding *Daniel* 11: 37-45, which reads as follows:

The king shall pay no respect to the Gods of his ancestors, or to the one beloved by women; he shall pay no respect to any other god, for he shall consider himself greater than all. He shall honor the god of fortresses instead of these; a god whom his ancestors did not know he shall honor with gold and silver [...]

He shall come into the beautiful land, and tens of thousands shall fall victim, but Edom and Moab and the main part of the Ammonites shall escape from his power. He shall stretch out his hand against the countries, and the land of Egypt shall not escape. He shall become ruler of the treasures of gold and silver, and all the riches of Egypt; and the Libyans and the Ethiopians shall follow in his train. But reports from the east and the north shall alarm him, and

²¹³ For more information on this hypothesis, please turn to Adelman's analysis , 403-5.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 403.

he shall go out with great fury to bring ruin and complete destruction to many.²¹⁵

Coryat's citation of the passage is both a provocation and an attempt at conversion. This was a frequently disputed passage in theological discussions. According to Coryat, the rabbi's response, and Coryat's subsequent debate, culminated in a confrontation between Coryat and some forty to fifty Jews who surrounded the Protestant, possibly threatening him with violence. Coryat is saved, so the story goes, by jumping into a nearby gondola ferrying, coincidentally, Sir Henry Wotton and his secretary.²¹⁶

This passage speaks on many levels to a new image of Jews as portrayed in mainstream literature. Beyond the usual motifs of the Jew as moneylender or perpetrator of the blood libel, with the rise of Christian Hebraic scholarship we note a new role for the Jew, that of interlocutor. The Jew now is given a voice through which he may express his own, different opinions.

To Coryat, the Jewish "rabbin" is a noted scholar, a formidable debater, and a staunch defender of his religion. The rabbi is not dismissed, he is engaged in a lively dialogue. Moreover, the final image of the group of Jews surrounding Coryat and threatening him, flies in the face of traditional motifs where Jews are powerless and emasculated. Here, Jews band together, resist conversion and force the author to leave their space. As Adelman states,

This image of the Jews standing up to fight for the honor of their religion is not the standard picture of ghetto life, but clearly in 1608 the Jews of Venice must have felt a lack of restraint when facing cantankerous Christians, at least a

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 404.

²¹⁶ *ibid.*, 404.

Protestant from England who had entered the ghetto. It is also striking that this hostile reaction of the Jews did not prevent Coryat later on from presenting descriptions of Jews in a favorable light.²¹⁷

The following chapter shall, through a textual analysis of the *Life of Judah*, explore other aspects of Jewish identity.

²¹⁷ *ibid.*, 405

Among the new discoveries made with regard to man, we must reckon, in conclusion, the interest taken in description of the daily course of human life.²¹⁸

—Jacob Burckhardt.

Chapter Four: Judah's Life

4. 1. Structure, Tone and Provenance.

This final chapter discusses three general themes running throughout Leone's autobiography: the private, the public and the super-natural. The manner in which Leone has chosen to portray these three aspects is critically reviewed, culminating in a closing discussion regarding the relative modernity of Leone's thought and what this might imply regarding early modern identity.

First published in Hebrew by Daniel Carpi in 1985, the 1988 English translation of the *Life of Judah* is based on what has become known as the Ambrosiana Manuscript.²¹⁹ The folios located at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan comprise at best, the original, or as Cohen posits, likely a first generation copy of a now destroyed copy. Importantly, neither Cohen nor Howard Adelman's detailed bibliography²²⁰ of primary sources indicate the existence of a more authoritative manuscript.

In fact, it would now seem that a 1911 edition,²²¹ once relied upon by scholars, has been essentially supplanted by the more recent Carpi/Cohen scholarship. Cohen's

²¹⁸ Burckhardt, 259.

²¹⁹ Cohen, 284. The Ambrosiana MS was first discovered in the 1960's.

²²⁰ Adelman lists the following copies: A nineteenth century copy once owned by Mordecai Samuel Ghirondi at the New York Theological Seminary of America, 1152; another copy whose location is now unknown was also located at the Jewish Historical Museum in Warsaw, 1156.

²²¹ This edition was published by Abraham Kahana, based on an 1857 hand-copied version of the text, partially published in Italian under the title *Il Cortiere Israelitico* (1863-1865). Mark Cohen refers to

contention that the Ambrosiana MS was definitely authored by Leone Modena, and thus likely the more accurate of these two sources is supported by careful and detailed orthographic study.²²² The most authoritative version of the autobiography would thus appear to be the Ambrosiana MS.²²³

Cohen and his colleagues of the Princeton seminar have filled the methodological gap left by the 1911 edition and by post-Enlightenment scholarship.²²⁴ The result is not only the first complete English translation of the *Life of Judah* but also an edition supported by strong introductory essays, footnotes, endnotes and a series of postscripts addressing the critical paleographic matters cited above.

Cohen, Ravid and Adelman's numerous explanations of Modena's frequent use of Biblical allegory, for instance, illustrate the quality of this well-annotated edition. One example they provide is a cross-reference to Leone's introductory comment: "Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life" in this world.²²⁵ Here the reader is referred to in *Genesis* 47: 9. The Biblical passage reads as follows

Jacob said to Pharaoh "The years of my earthly sojourn are one hundred and thirty; few and hard have been the years of my life. They do not compare with the years of the life of my ancestors during their long sojourn."

Moses Soave as the original copyist. He writes that "Kahana used Soave's handwritten Hebrew edition," xvi.

²²² Cohen's attention to the details of the MS is convincing. He counters Carpi's claim that Modena's grandson may have been the copyist of the Ambrosiana MS (inferred from the uniformity of the handwriting) with cross references to the following: Isaac's penmanship as a young man that demonstrates an evolving and non-compatible style; noticeable change in penmanship towards the end of the document (indicative of the author's aging and declining health); references to ink colours, annotations and interpolations are all explained quite satisfactorily. The reader will note that this latter point is discussed in more detail with regards to the interpolations on the MS further in this section.

²²³ Cohen argues that, given several glaring omissions and the lack of critical material supporting the Kahana edition, that the text cannot be taken as authoritative. This perspective is supported by Carpi as well.

²²⁴ The work of the seminar is discussed in the introductory section, at chapter 1.

²²⁵ Cohen, 75.

To Leone's readers, who were well-schooled in Biblical reference and allegory, this allusion was meant to signal that *The Life of Judah*, though in itself quite sad, was nothing compared to the challenges his ancestors, and, by inference, the entire nation of Israel have faced. This reference does nevertheless reveal a mixture of both humility and self-aggrandizement. While trying to refrain from wallowing in his own tale of woe, Leone chose to display his considerable knowledge and skills. Indeed, as Cohen's analysis of the many interpolations of the Ambrosiana MS indicate, Leone crafted his narrative in a very deliberate manner deploying his best style and erudition. Leone's personality does indeed dominate despite his self-effacing efforts.

Other notable aspects of the *Life of Judah's* structure include the sequence of Leone's entries, which are spaced at several months' interval, timed usually around a festival or holy day on the Jewish calendar. Yerushalmi's statement that in Jewish thought, the *cadence* or pace of historical time is determined by ritual and text may indeed be applied to Leone's text.

Most events in the *Life of Judah*, whether private (death, illness, births, marriages) or public (expulsions, discussions, sermons), are therefore within or at the very least frequently tied into Biblical or Talmudic terms. For example, a birth is prophesized either through Biblical divination or through other esoteric means (such as horoscopes). And so time, in *The Life of Judah*, is very much Jewish time.

Finally, two issues that Cohen discusses in footnotes require further review. One refers to the interpolations (mentioned above) and to the fact that the document, itself, seems written in one continuous hand and ink. While Carpi found this suggestive of the

possibility that Leone's first posthumous editor, his grandson Isaac, recopied the manuscript, Cohen, on the other hand, interprets this as further evidence that Leone was busily perfecting his style, continuously including details, shaping the total document for effect²²⁶ and, importantly, for a future readership.

Significantly, Cohen notes that Leone did not intend to have his text published. If that was indeed the case, then one wonders why Leone would bother with such elaborate editing as illustrated in the many interpolations, or the attention to stylistic questions?

One response may be that while Leone did not want the *Life of Judah* to be published, he wanted it passed down to family and students, as indicated in the introduction to his autobiography, and so may well have wanted to demonstrate his polish for posterity to appreciate. Still, it is tempting to wonder if he had a broader readership in mind? Did he anticipate that the document might still be published, without his approval (as was the French version of *the Riti*)²²⁷? Whatever the truth may be, it is clear that Leone wrote with a readership in mind. The pride with which he recounts his lineage is but one of a number of revealing indicators. Leone wanted future readers to see that there was both money and *renommé* in the Modena family tree. Leone wanted to reader to know that he inherited a *patrimoine* that destined him to take pride of place in Venetian society. That he met innumerable challenges in trying to do so, was Leone's particular fate and perhaps one of the chief lessons he wanted to impart to his students and future

²²⁶ Indeed Cohen makes a strong case for Leone's authorship by first submitting that the words found on the margins of the notebooks were clearly additions or revisions, as they appear in a different ink colour than the body of the text, 288. The marginalia range from personal comments about the people in his family or those to which he refers in a particular entry, to adding to his list of the twenty-three professions that he held another three, which Cohen sees as reflecting "the mentality of a proud writer continually updating his curriculum vitae," 289

²²⁷ Adelman, 449-459.

readers. That despite all the opportunities, the individual's choices are his responsibility alone to assume.

4.2. Thematic Overview

Three spheres preoccupy the author in the *Life of Judah*: the private, the public and the supernatural (interacting with the natural). As noted earlier, it is the co-existence of all three elements within Leone's recorded words that makes this document most interesting.

For although the divine order permeates the entire text, the fact that Leone believed his life as an individual was worth recording suggests he possessed a developed sense of himself, and of his place in the world around him. By asking us to look at his life and his work, Leone is asking us to consider his character. The question is, why?

Clearly, something drove Leone to write about himself, despite knowing in his lifetime that many of his teachings were already widely reproduced and distributed throughout the *diaspora*. Furthermore, the fact that his musical compositions were copied and diffused was not evidently enough either. His writings, particularly the *Riti*, virtually guaranteed that his name would survive among Gentiles, but that was not enough.

Perhaps, by examining more closely the contents of the *Life of Judah*, we will find some insight into Leone's motives for choosing such an unusual form of self-expression and commemoration. And to that end, it is perhaps best to begin by examining Leone's personal world and the extent to which he chose to disclose his inner life.

There are three main aspects of Leone's life that stand out in the document: Leone's marriage to Rachel; an odd life expectancy among male members of the Modena family; and, finally, Leone's struggles with gambling, depression and constant physical discomfort.

The *Life of Judah* thus reveals considerable details of Leone's family life, his personality and his doubts. The first portrait, that of his family, offers substantive biographies of Leone's ancestors, their standing within the various Jewish communities in which they resided, and Leone's re-fashioning of their legacies.

In a passage describing Leone's grandfather's death, for example it is revealed that he left behind four male children, of whom two were rabbis. One of them was murdered managing a pawnshop in Mantua, while Leone's father struggled to choose between entering the family business or studying Torah.²²⁸

In these biographical descriptions of various family members, Leone also refers to the women who married into the family and to several Modena daughters. In doing so, Leone leaves a record of early-modern Jewish women. In certain instances, he provides considerable information about their activities, their education, their mobility and, interestingly, the impression men of that time had of them.

One such intriguing personage is Fioretta, the wife of his grandfather's second oldest son, Rabbi Solomon of Ferrara. Leone writes that she was "very learned in Torah and Talmud, as was her sister Diana."²²⁹ Leone's entry mentions the following:

²²⁸ Cohen, 80.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

Fioretta went to the Holy Land at the end of her life, and when she passed through Venice, I conversed with her and found her very expert in Torah.²³⁰

Beyond questions one might have regarding levels of literacy among Jewish women of the early modern period,²³¹ surely such a level, as Fioretta's, with Torah and Talmud, was not common. That Leone would think his aunt's skills worth noting is also significant.

Another source of pride for Leone is his family's various religious activities and interests. Of note, Rabbi Abtalion, another son, who was himself knowledgeable in Torah, *Gamara*, as well as secular matters. Leone states "there was no one like him in his generation."²³²

This assertion is stamped with a divine seal of approval, as Leone writes that Abtalion conjured the prophet Elijah, who "revealed himself to him", a sure sign of favour. Abtalion's unique status positioned him as the voice for his community when in 1580-1581 relations with the Christian majority reached a critical juncture. Such was Abtalion's stature, according to Leone, that he was able to converse with Pope Gregory XIII, "in Latin, in defense of Gamara."²³³

In noting the interaction between his uncle and the Pope, Leone introduces a theme which shall recur through the autobiography, that of the interaction with the "Other", the Christian majority (whether the Roman Church, or Protestant clergymen, or Christian Hebraists).

²³⁰ *ibid.*

²³¹ Ravid and Aldeman refer in the endnotes to two key passages in Roth, 44-58 and Shulvass, 159-168.

²³² Cohen, 79.

“The Other”, in Leone’s writing, also shapes identity. The Christian “Other” who dialogues with a Modena family member or with Leone, somehow confirms, or reinforces (through this interaction) something special about them. Additionally, this sense of “specialness” may be read in Leone’s description of his family’s piety, particularly the extent of their Talmudic training and their interest in mystical practices.

Gentiles, however, are not all treated in the *Life of Judah* with reverence or respect. Indeed, in the beginning of the *Life of Judah*, in the genealogical section, the first appearance of a Gentile is that of the deceiving, corrupting Gentile who tricks Leone’s second oldest uncle, Shemaiah, into engaging in a dangerous practice of alchemy. Leone tells us

...he thrust a sword into Shemaiah’s belly, killing him, and stole all the silver and gold and ran off. This happened the night of the burning of the leaven (before Passover).²³⁴

(Incidentally, Leone also provides a glimpse into the Venetian legal system when he writes that the murderer was captured three days later and was “quartered.”²³⁵ The autobiography records several more instances of the Venetian justice system at work).²³⁶

Leone’s father, the eldest boy of his family, was a learned man who took charge of the family business and seemed to have some success as a business man (Leone writes:

²³³ *Ibid.*, 80.

²³⁴ *ibid.*, 79.

²³⁵ *ibid.*

²³⁶ The arrest is recorded on 117; Zeb’s murder is described at 221; Leone’s grandson Isaac’s arrest at a publishing house is recorded at 221- for more contextual information, see comments in chapter three about the prohibition of printing Hebrew books.

“at the age of thirty, when the brothers wanted to divide their father’s estate, he showed that it had more than doubled.”)²³⁷

As previously noted, Isaac married twice, once to Peninah, who bore him five sons and four daughters, but died in 1568 after the family fled from Bologna to Ferrara. Leone’s mother, Isaac’s second wife, Rachel, was a widow with a nine-year-old son. After consulting with his spiritual counselor, who foretold of marital problems, Isaac changed Rachel’s name to Diana. Leone was the product of this union. Of interest is Leone’s description of his father’s physical and personal characteristics in the following passage:

...he was of average height, with a strong, slender body, and for the most part healthy. He had a dark complexion and a short beard. He was wise in practical matters and in Torah, which he had learned in his childhood, and careful about observing the details of commandments and customs of administering his household. He loved his neighbors, was close to his relatives, and loved his wife, whom he honored more than himself. He was neither wasteful nor stingy, but was watchful concerning his money. Yet he did not shut his hand in time of need. He was generous in giving charity, did not like playing games of chance, and was trustworthy in his business dealings.²³⁸

Leone’s description reveals nothing out of the ordinary, except that Isaac was a good man of good temperament, who kept kosher, loved and respected his wife, gave to charity, and was well respected. In other words, Isaac was a good Jew. It is no doubt significant that Leone directs his reader to the fact that his father was in many respects quite a different man than him. Isaac’s affection for his wife was not something that

²³⁷ Cohen, 80.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

Leone knew himself, particularly in his latter years. More remarkable though is Leone's statement that his father, unlike his son, was not a gambler.

Why was it so important for Leone to describe his father in this manner? Is it because his father did not become a rabbi, a status highly valued in the Modena family? Surely, Leone's description of how Isaac's brother Shemaiah, who remained secular (and continued in the pawnbroker business), and met a terrible fate, underscores the Modena preference for more rabbinic pursuits? Could it be said that Leone is trying to apologize for his father's life by demonstrating that a secular career does not prevent a man from being a good Jew?

Or is Leone making sure that his father's memory survives, in the shadow of his two, highly public, rabbinic uncles, or even of Shemaiah, who died brutally but nevertheless publicly? It is hard to say, but quite compelling to consider.

As for Leone's own life, not surprisingly he recounts with great dramatic flair the story of his birth in the breach position. This is a sign, interpreted as meaning that he would "witness toil, anger, strife and trouble; only evil continually."²³⁹ Leone emphasizes for our benefit that the reverse position is indicative of reversed fortunes.

We learn of childhood illness and injuries, all described as presaging impending sadness and turmoil. One such incident arose when his family moved to Bologna to set up a small pawnbroker's shop.

Here Isaac is portrayed as not just a man of means but also a man of some standing, as he took it upon himself to open a *Mikveh* within his home for "women to make their ritual ablutions." On the day the bath was declared fit for cleansing, Leone and

his friend Gershon went to play near the water, and Leone fell in, where he remained for an hour only to be miraculously saved by a servant girl.

Cohen notes that the detailed recounting of this near-drowning episode fulfilled an omen (predicted by the *Mishnah* reading for that day), which described “one whose dead is laid out.”²⁴⁰ Adelman and Ravid interpret this episode as suggesting that Isaac had significant means: he employed servants, and he had a home large enough to accommodate a ritual bathing area. Thus, beyond the mystical connection between Leone's accident and the reading of the day, he also communicates to his reader that the Modena family had destiny (the fulfilled omen), rank (the position in the community to open a bath to others) and means (a home large enough to accommodate a public bath, and many servants to tend to the members of the household).

Since the matter of Leone's choice of a wife was canvassed in a previous chapter, it is more useful to observe Leone's comments about his wife towards the end of the *Life of Judah*. These entries offer insights into more than daily domestic relations within the Modena household. That Leone chose to record the ups and downs (mainly the downs) of his marriage, confers an uncommonly personal meaning to this relationship.

Within the contemporary Christian tradition, discussions of marriage and domestic life, though not unusual, were generally shaped by dogmatic concerns and reveal little of a personal nature.

²³⁹ *ibid.*, 82.

²⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 83.

*The Golden Legend*²⁴¹ and other writings such as penitentials offer portraits of spiritual marriages where chaste couples abstained from sexual relations as a form of devotional practice. The *Book of Margery Kempe* is one such example written in the fifteenth century²⁴² that describes a chaste secular marriage (and this after the conception of eleven children).

Dyan Elliott's study *Spiritual Marriage and Medieval Wedlock*²⁴³ explains that those Christian hagiographic writings that discussed marriage, did so in order to emphasize the link between women's chastity and female vocational practices, particularly those more ascetic forms of piety.

There is, however, no corollary within the Jewish textual tradition for someone such as Leone to have drawn from, except for Biblical and Talmudic texts.

Leone's motives for writing about his marriage, particularly the portrait he paints of the couple's elder years, are therefore not easily explained. The following passage, where Leone writes of Diana's failing health, for example, is quite remarkable in its detail and in the very subject, his wife:

During that Purim [March 20, 1639] my wife began podagra or gout in her legs, and from then until now, she has been walking with a slight limp in the house. Her arms also began to swell from this, and increasingly old age overcomes us, with accompanying poor health.²⁴⁴

²⁴¹ Jacobus de Voragine. *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*. Trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

²⁴² Clarissa Atkinson and other Kempe scholars have also qualified this text as the first English autobiography. *Mystic and Pilgrim. The Book of Margery Kempe*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

²⁴³ Dyan Elliott. *Spiritual Marriage and Medieval Wedlock*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

²⁴⁴ Cohen, 152.

In another instance, one year later in May 1641, Leone wrote, (with remarkable candour) how the marriage became further strained. The passage is long, but worth our consideration:

...my wife assumed a strange mood, and she began to quarrel with me and make me angry. This has been and will be the destruction, ruin and desolation of my money, body, honor, and soul until this day. If I were to live another hundred years, I would not recover from any of those four things. God is the one who knows whether she fought with me for no reason, when I had committed no wrong and there had been no evil deeds or transgressions on my part. I cannot write about how foolish she was, or of how from day to day I was led astray by her wheedling from failure to failure and from evil to evil. I can only give an outline. We quarreled all day long [...] I would grow angry and shout and act foolishly. My blood would boil, my heart would flutter, and my insides would churn up....²⁴⁵

Interestingly, here Leone links the onset of his asthma and physical decline with the growing tensions with his wife. Illness is, in Leone's mind, somehow caused or at least aggravated by the constant clashes. This episode, which is only momentarily broken by the aging couple's visit to their daughter Diana in Padua, culminates in Leone being told by his doctor that he is dying.

However as "prayers were offered up"²⁴⁶ for him, Leone somehow pulled through. Leone later again mentions his physical susceptibility in conjunction with his mental outlook. He writes that in January 1642, because his wife "did not stop causing him grief day and night"²⁴⁷ this caused him to become angry with himself, "lose

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 154-55.

²⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 155.

²⁴⁷ *ibid.*

control,”²⁴⁸ and return to “the sin of Judah.”²⁴⁹ The blame for gambling, in Leone’s psychological universe, is shifted onto his wife.

This passage reveals more than a description of the decline of Leone’s marriage. It offers an intimate portrait of the interactions between husband and wife, and by doing so suggests that Leone drew an inference between his frustrating sentimental life and his self-destructive behaviour. By hoping the reader would sympathize with him and potentially forgive his excesses, Leone reveals to his modern reader a self-reflective side. Further it is highly tempting to interpret Leone’s insight into the relationship between his sentimental life and his excesses as also reflecting a decidedly secular or profane frame of mind. In Leone’s portrait of his marriage and his internal life, there is no hand of God, no divine force at work, just two old married people aggravating each other and one seeking to compensate for the frustration.

In reading about the twilight years of the marriage to Rachel, there are also a substantial number of details regarding the physical ailments²⁵⁰ that afflict the aging couple. In fact, the *Life of Judah* is replete with such medical data.

In addition to recording each birth and death, Leone tells us that the Modena children from his father’s generation and his own were turned over to wet-nurses, not an unusual practice but one that does indicate a certain economic class. We read, for example, that in 1629 Leone’s daughter gave birth to a girl,

[...] and we turned her over to a wet nurse at great expense. She named her Richina, may she be blessed above all women in the house. May God, the Father of orphans and

²⁴⁸ *ibid.*

²⁴⁹ *ibid.*

²⁵⁰ Leone writes, for example of *petechiae*, 96.

the judge of widows, have compassion upon her and her brother and mother. She died afterward at the age of ten months.²⁵¹

More physical ailments and injuries are recorded in another instance. Here, the young Leone while in Ferrara “pierced his hand falling from a rock and a certain woman gave him oil used to treat the wound.”²⁵² He subsequently contracted smallpox. In this brief passage not only is there an allusion to treatment but also, possibly, to a folk remedy. This, interestingly, is an instance where Leone records a woman acting as a healer.

In later passages, it is male doctors who diagnose. This is illustrated in one entry where Mordecai, Leone’s son, fell ill in 1617:

I tried frantically to cure him, but could not find a remedy. I saw no sign of benefit in any of the many medicines that I gave him. Finally, in the month of Elul, his illness grew worse. I had eleven doctors, Jewish and Christian, consulting about his malady, some during personal visits and others through correspondence. He wished very much for the remedies of the aforementioned priest Grillo, having seen of his treatment of others. But, as it differed from the ways of all the other doctors, I was afraid to treat him accordingly. Only close to his death, to satisfy his wishes, did I allow him to take them.²⁵³

In this section, while describing how Mordecai was treated by both Jews and Christians, Leone informs his reader that it is the folk remedies of (an alchemy practicing) priest-friend of Mordecai’s which finally brings him temporary relief.

²⁵¹ Cohen, 133.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁵³ *ibid.*, 111-112.

Other symptomologies include Leone being “seized by stomach pains, shortness of breath and persistent thirst”²⁵⁴ while travelling to Ferrara to see his daughter Esther.

Leone’s latest bout comes on the heels of Rachel having an accident, described below:

One Friday night while getting out of bed she fell down and struck her shoulder against the corner of the wall. For about a year she could not extend that arm. On top of that, during the winter she developed a kind of gout in the other arm, so that she could not use either one. Finally, God had mercy on her and on me, and after Passover, without the care of a physician, except for the True Healer, she was able gradually to stretch and move her arms sufficiently to perform necessary tasks.²⁵⁵

Of further interest to medical historians is the fact that Leone suffered from pulmonary infections and asthma, and that his wife had repeated incidents of gout or *podegra*. Furthermore, Leone seems to have suffered his entire life from stomach pains.²⁵⁶

Beyond the physical causes of these ailments, some of which are obvious, others seem to be more psychological in nature. Leone himself seems to have made that connection, as noted with regard to the stress he records experiencing in 1641, and throughout the later years of his marriage.

One is tempted to wonder, much in the way that psychologist Erik Erikson²⁵⁷ did in his study of the journals of the young Luther, if Leone’s symptomology is revelatory of an inner conflict. Purely on the evidentiary level, there are multiple instances in the *Life of Judah* where Leone experienced remorse after periods of stress related to his gambling.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

²⁵⁵ *ibid.*

²⁵⁶ Leone writes of stomach pains at 153; he suffers from abscesses, has pulmonary infections (155), asthma, 155; finally in one particularly emotional entry he writes “my bowels, my bowels, I writhe in pain,” 111.

No doubt, Leone's autobiography is great fodder for those with an inclination towards the psychological interpretations of historical sources. A clinical description of Leone's case would likely discuss the references to his unusual birth position, the frequent familial movement and exiles, the incessant travel where young Leone was "schooled" in other people's homes. His adolescence characterized by an isolated existence and the death of his fiancée, would be another critical developmental phase marked by trauma. Leone's gambling, mentioned multiple times, as caused by family events and stresses, would be indicative of on-going unresolved personal issues. Thus, as the subject of a psychological inquiry, *The Life of Judah* has substantial merit.

Finally, another striking element in Leone's record of family births and deaths, is life expectancy. For while on the one hand Isaac died at the age of seventy two in 1591²⁵⁸ and rabbi Abtalion (his uncle) died aged eighty-two years old in 1611²⁵⁹, Leone's grandfather, his uncle Shemaiah, his sons Zeb and Mordecai all die relatively young and violently.²⁶⁰ Although early deaths are more typical of the life expectancy for that time, the contrast between the relative longevity of a significant number of the male Modena and the rather violent "snuffing out" that others experience is surely unusual. At the very least, given the attention that Leone himself pays to these more violent and macabre deaths, would lend some weight to the proposition that there was indeed an odd rate of mortality amongst the male members of the Modena family.

²⁵⁷ Erik Erikson. *Young Man Luther*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1962).

²⁵⁸ Cohen, 93.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁶⁰ In 1529-1530 poison was put into the bandages used to treat his father, after he fell from a mule, 78; uncle Shemaiah was murdered, as was his son Zeb in 1628 at just "thirteen days short of turning twenty one years," 121. Zeb also had a tombstone inscription that bore the details of his death, 221; finally Mordecai succumbs to what seems to be some sort of chemical poison (perhaps lead poisoning) from alchemy, 111.

Leone also accords a lot of attention to the premature deaths of his two sons. Zeb is described as physically good-looking, a youth appreciated by all, even by “Christians and Turks”. Strikingly, Leone tells us that young Zeb’s bloodstained clothing was placed upon his coffin during his funeral, a vivid image of the violent and shocking nature of his death at the hands of fellow Jews. Although Cohen notes in the excursus to his translation that the murder of Jews by other Jews was not as unusual as might be thought, the record indicates that Leone and his surrounding community reacted with shock to the manner in which the young man was assailed. To Leone, however, the fact that Zeb was attacked by co-religionist was significant.

Perhaps as an indication of the gravity of the taboo that had been broken, or simply as an expression of the sheer horror at such a public and violent death, placing the soiled clothing on the coffin suggests that the family wanted to expose their pain and the manner in which their son was killed. Mordecai’s death is also the cause of significant grief, and is reminiscent of his great-uncle Shemaiah’s (who also dabbled in alchemy with a non-Jewish cohort).

From the record, it thus appears that the Modena men were either very long-lived for their times, or cut down through violent means; no middle road seemed to have existed.

Finally, it should be noted that Leone provides a physical description²⁶¹ with the death of every male in the Modena family. Our impression of the departed is thus further informed by the images that Leone’s descriptions provoke. It is tempting to read into

²⁶¹ One text where the physical is glossed on par with the character and the intellect is, of course, Castiglione’s *Il Cortesiano* (London: Penguin Books, 1967). Here the renaissance beauty esthetic is discussed as one of the attributes facilitating social success.

these biographies further evidence of the influence of a personalizing Renaissance humanistic style on the text.

Curiously, one wonders why the male members of the family receive detailed physical descriptions while the female members receive more uniform or standardized commentary. Comments such as “she was a good wife”, “a good daughter” leave little for the reader to consider, the exception being Leone’s description of Fioretta’s intellect. This is in contrast to learning, for example, that young Zeb was fair and handsome, that his funeral was watched by Christians and Jews, and that his tombstone bore the details of what happened to him.

Indeed, as the above indicates, searching for consistency and rationality in Leone’s choice of subjects is not always an easy task. Turning now to Leone’s portrayal of his public persona will reveal similar complexities.

Leone’s public life is prominently featured throughout the *Life of Judah*. As discussed in chapter three, the autobiography describes his various teaching assignments in Venice as well as in the homes of prominent Jewish families in Mantua, Ferrara, Padua and even Florence.²⁶² Throughout the numerous descriptions of these sojourns, Leone emerges as a traveler.²⁶³

This constant movement is certainly one of the remarkable features of Leone’s life, no doubt requiring a certain adaptation and flexibility on Leone’s part (and his family).²⁶⁴ Consider how Leone’s life as a teacher and rabbi was not just public for the

²⁶² A city to which Leone said he was allergic, 106.

²⁶³ One of a number of similar traits that Leone has with Petrarch, as will be discussed later.

²⁶⁴ It is also important to note that Leone’s various travels frequently entailed prolonged periods of separation from his immediate family, therefore raising another question as to what the emotional impact of such change and ruptures had on Leone’s mood and outlook.

purposes of his professional activities but was also lived publicly, in that he (and his family) were frequently hosted in another family's residence. Although not an uncommon type of arrangement for rabbis at that time, this lack of privacy no doubt controlled his actions. It also must surely have shaped his thoughts.

At the very least, it is safe to say that the line between the private and the public was frequently blurred when Leone traveled or accepted assignments in another city,²⁶⁵ arguably creating confusion and a need for psychological compensation (or balance) between both aspects of his life.

Leone's life as a teacher seems also to have been a mixed blessing. While it provided him with an income and shelter, it also burdened him and took him away from his own interests. One such instance arose when he took employment with the Ashkenazic Torah Study Society in Venice in order to raise money for his daughter's dowry. Leone deemed this assignment as "burdensome."²⁶⁶

The public side of Leone's life is also notable because of the extent of his relations with the Christian majority, the "other". As already mentioned, particularly regarding the publication of the *Riti*, Leone certainly relished such interactions with both Protestant and Catholic clergy and diplomatic representatives.

Importantly, very public interactions were recorded from the Christian perspective, as well. As previously noted, the famous passage in which Thomas Coryat records his debate with "a certain rabbi" serves to provide, as Peter Berek writes, insight for Coryat's English readership into Jewish identity. Ever since the banishment of Jews

²⁶⁵ The Cohen edition notes that the pattern of residency in the Venetian ghetto was one of over-crowded, high-density living.

in 1290 and their readmission in the seventeenth century, Jewish identity in England was ill defined, and existing as an incomplete conceptual notion in the minds of the Elizabethans. As Jews were readmitted into England, the effects of *Marranism* and their crypto-Judaism only compounded an already opaque perception. Berek states that, for a time,

Jews were figures from narrative rather than experience, whether the narratives were derived from the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament or medieval legends of Jewish villainy.²⁶⁷

Yet, another example offering a very different picture of the cultural interaction between Jews and Christians that arose in the Venetian context is, as discussed previously, the Sarpi-Modena connection.

If, contrary to Adelman's recalcitrance on this matter, there actually was substantial personal interaction between both men, then what can be ascribed to this association? Did Leone play a role in shaping Venetian political discourse? Was he in turn shaped by it? Certainly Fishman reads the relationship with Sarpi as suggesting that Leone, as a Jew, held a privileged (and perhaps unique) position in the social hierarchy.

To what extent did this possible interaction affect the parties? In Leone's case, we may wonder if it cast him in any different (distrusted) light in the eyes of his own peers? Both issues are indeed quite difficult to assess.

²⁶⁶ Cohen, 115.

²⁶⁷ Peter Berek "The Jew as Renaissance Man" *Renaissance Quarterly* 51 (1998): 128.

Certainly members of the Jewish community knew of his various associations. Many occurred in public, as when the brother of the king of France came to hear Leone preach in the synagogue of the Sephardim, an event Leone records in great detail.²⁶⁸

Interestingly, despite the pleasure Leone appears to derive in recounting this event, he also reveals a certain guilt and even confesses that he fears being perceived as boastful. One cannot but wonder if this annotation was the result of a comment or critique leveled against Leone, at the time.

The public sphere in *The Life of Judah* includes Leone's gloss on numerous institutions that characterized Venetian society. Leone's record of the arrest of his grandson and several junior colleagues at the printing press²⁶⁹ discloses, for example, one significant aspect of the relationship between the Jewish minority and the Venetian authorities, and that is the Jewish community's relation with the legal system.

In fact, Ravid posits that this incident describes the core of Venetian-Jewish relations. It demonstrates the cyclical impact of Charter negotiations and the periodic official restriction of Jewish activities (such as printing) which was in contrast to the existence of a covert policy of tolerance among members of the publishing industry for such activities.²⁷⁰

It is also an example of the many interactions that various members of the Modena family would have with the authorities, whether through arrests,²⁷¹ or through the

²⁶⁸ Cohen, 128, 131.

²⁶⁹ Please see Ravid's article on the prohibition of Jewish printing.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

²⁷¹ Several instances come to the fore, such as the time Zeb spent five days in jail, 117; or when he was forced to serve at a trial, 118. Interestingly, Leone also records that he worked hard with Magistrates and the Council of Ten to revenge Zeb's brutal death, 121. This discourse, suggestive of more than mutual recognition between Jews and secular Venetian authorities, implies actual cooperation.

investigation of a crime (such as the various murders that occurred in the family). The cycle of these interactions may be traced back to Leone's father, Isaac's, imprisonment at the request of Cardinal d'Este in 1578-79, "because of a debt of fifteen hundred *scudi* that had already been repaid."²⁷²

Interactions with Venetian institutions and with the Christian majority in general are, despite the pride that Leone derives from his public discourse with theologians, often the source of a lot his misery, temptation, and distrust. The incident between Leone's son Mordecai and Grillo the alchemist-priest, who Leone clearly distrusts and blames for the harm that came to his son,²⁷³ comes to mind. The feud that Zeb had with some Christians, which resulted in his ultimate death, also stands out as an example of extremely unpleasant and mortally dangerous encounters between the two cultures.²⁷⁴

Finally, Leone unquestionably fears the formal Church institutions, despite all of his connections. This is evidenced by his record of the publication of the *Riti* in different editions, and Leone's concern over the requirements of the Roman Inquisition. Clearly Leone is still or feels that he is still quite alone when defending himself. It is almost as if he knows that none of his Christian contacts would defend him to the authorities if needed. Thus, despite his many contacts and, arguably, an esteemed reputation, Leone remained, as a Jew, in his own mind and perhaps indeed in fact as well, on the margins of Venetian society.

Finally, the *Life of Judah*, is a document of considerable merit for what it reveals about Jewish perceptions of the natural and supernatural in the early modern context.

²⁷² Cohen, 84.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 111, 108.

²⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 115.

With regard to the natural world, events such as earthquakes and plagues are framed within an overall divine order or design.²⁷⁵ Descriptions include information about Leone's ancestors, relocated after an earthquake. Leone notes that twice his family faced the plague, and yet remained for the most part unscathed by such disasters.

Leone describes how economic strife fell upon the Jewish community after each disaster struck. Greater duties and harsher terms were imposed by authorities in order to make up for economic downturns caused by these catastrophes. In an unusual passage, Leone even confesses that he feels fortunate, compared to some of his neighbours, for his family escaped these blights.

In the English edition, Cohen, Adelman and Ravid note that these descriptions recall the Jewish *topos* of the destruction of the Temple. Yet, as Yerushalmi informs us, there is more than the *topos* of destruction in post- Spanish expulsion writers, there is a notion of rupture with the Biblical or ritually known past. Thus, in Leone's time all these disasters are re-lived; and they are understood against the backdrop, of the ever-present knowledge that potential annihilation is possible.

Another feature that has not been canvassed is the insight that the autobiography lends in terms of the influence of popular religion and early modern revival of mystical traditions on Jews.

There are repeated allusions to alchemy and other forms of divination. As Cohen and Rabb state in their introduction to the Cohen translation, unlike his Counter-

²⁷⁵ The first earthquake described at 81 occurred in 1570, in Ferrara, when Diana was pregnant; the plague is described at 88 and, in 1631, 134.

reformation Christian homologues, the co-existence of a medieval belief system and popular religion²⁷⁶ was not conflictual for Leone.

Rather, it is when faced with the revival of ancient mystical traditions found in early-modern Zoharic *Kabbalah*²⁷⁷ that Leone mentions his rejection of such practices, yet does not hesitate to indulge and record multiple instances of bibliomancy. He further adds without any apparent conflict that he had his horoscope chart prepared by certain friends, some of whom were Christian.²⁷⁸

These practices undermine claims that cast Leone as (an insular) rabbinic Jew. Yet, was Leone a kabbalist? This is likely a question more appropriate for a specialist to deal with, but one is still struck by the juxtaposition (or syncretism) of different practices. Finally this lends a certain credibility to Fishman's broader thesis which holds that Leone was a commentator, an explorer, a rhetorician who engaged in polemic, rather than to Adelman's conclusion that Leone was first, last, and always, a medieval rabbinic Jew.

Perhaps Leone's particular form of piety reflects the larger changes that Judaism underwent in the post-expulsion context. As *Marranism* presented a challenge to orthodox rules and practices, the Venetian context, also distinct for its pluralism, likely played a critical role in shaping Leone's beliefs.

²⁷⁶ Popular religion is understood here as meaning non-institutionally sanctioned practices, such as alchemy, astrology, and trading in amulets.

²⁷⁷ Moshe Idel writes that the emergence, in the thirteenth century, of early Kabbalistic schools did not stir much controversy within their communities. He writes, "Kabbalah which emerged as a historical factor in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries in Provence and Catalonia, escaped stirring polemics and banishments... Two factors seem to have protected the emerging Kabbalah: first, unlike philosophy it was studied within families and limited groups, making no attempt to disseminate its tenets to larger audiences... The second, and more important, reason for the silent acceptance of Kabbalah in Provence and Spain was its deep affinity with certain rabbinic patterns of thought... I want here only to point out the difference between the abrupt break represented by Maimonides' rationalistic reinterpretation of the Jewish tradition and the slow and gradual articulation of some aspects of Judaism in the emerging Kabbalah", in *Kabbalah. New Perspectives*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 251-252.

²⁷⁸ Cohen, 110-111.

4.3. Why Leone? Possible Motives.

As observed, the *Life of Judah* is not, strictly speaking, devotional. It is highly personal with regard to its observations and the author's self-consciousness.

In fact, we need only remember that the genesis for the *Life of Judah*, (stated by Leone himself) was a personal tragedy, the death of Mordecai. Thus the very subject and motive with which the author begins his memoir is a personal, tragic event: death. Ironically, the memoir ends with the same sense of intimacy and tragedy as the last entries track his movements from one sick house to another, as old age creeps in. The reader, like Leone, watches and waits for the blank space, the lack of an entry, finally signaling death.

In recording the "essential and incidental happenings" of his life, Leone sees not just his own life or his family's, but the world around him. His scope is thus both narrow and broad. In reading his life and that of the community (and the ghetto), one senses the presence of the *diaspora* (noticeable through Leone's travels and through his references to Jewish communities abroad) and the larger political picture shaping both the Jewish community and the broader Venetian republic.

At first blush, the text appears written with a passive voice. Events are recorded as happening to Leone, in a style reminiscent perhaps of medieval Christian chronicles. A closer look, however, reveals that Leone was certainly not a passive actor in his surroundings. He may have recorded events as having divine or supernatural provenance, but he, Leone, was an active participant in the life of his community and in the broader politics of his day.

He may in fact, as we have seen in previous chapters, have been unusually active in the world around him. For in *The Life of Judah*, man plays an active role in the earthly realm. Man may be weak, tempted by vices (such as gambling) but he can also be strong, fighting off dangers (such as thugs on the road to Mantua, or possibly defending the brethren against a proselytizing foreigner as seen in the Coryat episode).

The individual, in Leone's record, is an actor engaged with his surroundings, with his contemporaries, with the institutions of the day, with society. As the noted legal scholar Robert Cover²⁷⁹ writes, Judaism is first and foremost a religion based on the language of obligations. Thus, performing one's duties as a good servant of God through one's actions or inactions is the measure by which Jews fulfil God's commandments. The contemplative life, the introspective life as reflected in Christian writing, is an essentially un-Judaic modality. Thus, it is not so much in his activities that Leone is atypical, it is rather in how he perceived his life- his self-consciousness- that appears to elevate this document beyond mere chronicle.

Leone's desire to be known for his character, to have us know who Judah really was, is possibly the most striking and unusual aspect of the document. It is therefore quite ironic that it is Leone the historical figure — the rabbinical Jew or the pre-cursor of Enlightenment thinking — who survived (until the recent Princeton seminar project) and not Leone the individual. Still, the question remains as to why Leone wanted to be known beyond his theological writings and beyond his reputation in the community.

Is, as Nathalie Davis posits, Leone's individualizing impulse reminiscent of the renaissance *topos* of *fama* — first touched upon by Petrarch several hundred years

before? Support for this proposition may be found in Leone's own comment to the effect that the purpose of recording his life, was not to follow some divinely inspired commandment or to impart teachings, but rather so that something of his life and thoughts might be remembered. Furthermore, Leone's inclusion of a list of his written works²⁸⁰, in the form of an annotated bibliography,²⁸¹ lends weight to the notion that he consciously wished to draw a distinction between his professional, widely published works, and his autobiography —the document that he chose as the testament to his life. Clearly then there was something that drove Leone to commemorate his life in such a manner.

Nathalie Davis is among those scholars who have read in Leone's work the influence of the Western autobiographic tradition dating back to St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Furthermore, Davis wonders about the impact that Leone's possible contact with Montaigne's essays or with (co-religionist and fellow gambler) Girolamo Cardano's *Vitae* had in his choice to write in the autobiographic form.

Certainly, the fact that the autobiographic form was not a normative choice for a Jewish author draws comparisons with exemplars of the day. Augustine's *Confessions* and indeed Giralomo's *Vitae* could well have been read or at least known to Leone, who was both active in the Venetian publishing world and in contact with diverse Christian scholars.

Yet, it is critical to note that Leone's *Life of Judah* was not, strictly speaking, the very first Jewish autobiography. Earlier exemplars existed. One such text, discussed

²⁷⁹ Robert Cover. *Narrative, Violence and the Law: the Essays of Robert Cover*. Eds. Martha Minow, Michael Ryan, Austin Sarat. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

²⁸⁰ Cohen, 124.

below, is the autobiography of Obadyah the Norman. Although quite rare, several Jewish medieval texts such as Obadyah's have been generally recognized as autobiographic in nature. As Joshua Prawer's article indicates,

Autobiographies written by Jews in the Middle Ages are even scarcer than those of their Christian contemporaries. One written earlier, the *Scroll of Ebiatar*, was written in the Levant and its purpose was polemic. Another that can be regarded as an autobiography, the *Scroll of Ahima'az*, was written in Byzantine Italy in the eleventh century but is more a history of a family than an autobiography in the strict sense of the term. Thus the *Scroll of Obadyah* takes its place as the first example of its genre.²⁸²

Indeed, the emergence of autobiography as a literary form in the West, is itself a matter of some debate. Unlike Davis, Prawer turns to Gilbert of Nogent's *Vitae* (written circa 1115-1121) as the first exemplar of the genre. It is important to note that these biographies were primarily didactic, serving as examples of piety to be emulated by the faithful.

In Obadyah's case, the focus is somewhat unusual. It records his conversion from Christianity to Judaism on the occasion of the first Crusade. That it survives as a record today is remarkable given Obadyah's relatively low, undistinguished birth ("he belongs rather to the mass of small anonymous knights, whose deeds are seldom known and never sung"²⁸³, Prawer writes). He was not a saint, a cleric, a mystic or a divinely-anointed ruler. There was nothing particularly remarkable about him, but the subject of his text was, no doubt, enough to warrant its preservation. Thanks to its survival, Obadyah's

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² Joshua Prawer, "The Autobiography of Obadyah the Norman, a Convert to Judaism at the Time of the First Crusade" in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 110.

Scroll, like Leone's *Life of Judah*, offers insight. This period, unlike Leone's context, is noted for another type of Jewish-Christian interaction, one characterized by persecutions and manifestations of extreme religious fervor, rather than by dialogue and exchange.

The reader should note that the source of Obadyah's conversion likely resides in his youth. Young Johannes grew up hearing told over and over again the story of the conversion of another Christian, the archbishop, Andreas in the city of Bari²⁸⁴ — an event that was clearly well-embedded in the cultural context in which the young Johannes/Obadyah grew up. Thus, not only had a conversion from Catholicism to Judaism occurred in his community, it had occurred at the highest level. Prawer posits that these unusual conversions were manifestations of "Messianic tensions" prevalent during this period. Judaism, the old religion, was seen as the one true religion guaranteeing salvation.

To some, such as Obadyah, the Biblical passage of *Joel* 2:32, which Prawer transcribes in its entirety, lent scriptural authority to those who believed that redemption was only possible for the true tribes of Israel, in other words for Jews. Contemporaneous rabbinic authority, such as Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency, interpreted the verse as

...relating to the future after the destruction of the four kingdoms; the changes in heaven will take place at the time of the last judgment. But the return of Judah to Jerusalem he connects with the prophecy of Zechariah (14: 2) on the gathering of all Gentiles in Jerusalem and their destruction by God.²⁸⁵

²⁸³ *Ibid.* 111.

²⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 114.

²⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 121.

Significantly, Obadyah's allusion to Joel, in a passage referring to the massacre of Jews during the Popular Crusade, is another unusual element in the document. Prawer notes that "descriptions of foreboding" are to be found in Western chronicles of the first crusades,

but a quotation from *Joel*, as far as I could check, is not to be found in other chronicles. Moreover he quotes *Joel* in the Latin version of the Vulgate which is followed by the original Hebrew text. For a man destined to priesthood there is, of course, nothing extraordinary in quoting the Vulgate, but Obadyah wrote for a Hebrew-reading public, and it is inconceivable that he just wanted to impress them with his Latin. This quotation must have had a special meaning to Obadyah in the context of time and space.²⁸⁶

Further into his textual analysis, Prawer posits that it was likely the force of the millenarian ethos (mentioned previously) that was found in "current eschatological interpretations" of the day that shaped Obadyah's exegetical choices. Prawer, for example, cites Obadyah's allusion to foreboding in *Joel*, and his repeated references to the appearance of a "celestial personality,"²⁸⁷ as signs of this apocalyptic scenario.

Yet, beyond the above passage (the curious allusion to *Joel*) Obadyah's text, though somewhat personal in recounting his conversion, does not reveal much about the personality of its author. Leone's, in contrast, involves self-reflection, self-awareness and, at moments, self-criticism.

Obadyah's Scroll thus seems more in keeping with medieval hagiographies, but written by the *religiosus* recounting his own experience and, in his case, also describing a conversion to Judaism. Obadyah's text, is likely closer to the designation coined by

²⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 119.

Richard Kieckheffer (with regard to the English late medieval lay mystic Margery Kempe's text) that of "autohagiography."²⁸⁸ As this term implies, it is the author's fear of not having his or her experience commemorated that motivates the self-commissioned biography. Yet unlike St. Augustine or Obadyah's, or indeed other *vitae*, Leone's autobiography does not recount a religious experience *per se*. And unlike Montaigne's *Essais*, Leone's autobiography also lacks a moralizing or guiding ethic. The question thus still remains open as to what possible literary influences may have had an impact on Leone's text.

As Leone had worked extensively in the Venetian publishing world and admits to being widely read in both Jewish and Christian authors, to what degree did this highly potent intellectual context influence him?

The possibility that his record is a Jewish version of the specific form of personalized Renaissance memoirs known as *ricordi* or *ricordanze* is one hypothesis that must be rejected.

As Gene Brucker explains²⁸⁹ the *ricordanze* had dual purposes. One was to pass along the author's experience and the other was to express a sense of family pride, a desire to display the accomplishments of one's own ancestors and to bequeath an honourable, perhaps famous, name to future generations. Within the Venetian context, however, the *ricordanze* does not appear to have had the same impact as within the Florentine milieu. Brucker explains,

²⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 120.

²⁸⁸ Richard Kieckheffer. *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).

²⁸⁹ Gene Brucker, ed. *Two Memoirs of Renaissance Florence. The Diaries of Buonaccorso Pitti & Gregorio Dati*. (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, 1967).

Venice with its relatively placid internal history, and its corps of noble families was deeply concerned about their and their city's past. Did Venetian patricians write memoirs, and if so, why have they not survived? Did they refrain from writing personal diaries because of their fear of the Inquisitional magistracy, the Council of Ten? Or was this caution rather the consequence of a system of training and education which stressed group action and achievement, and regarded individual striving for fame and glory with suspicion²⁹⁰

Another form of commemoration that had more currency within Jewish communities, was the ethical will.²⁹¹ Typically written by the family patriarch, ethical wills of that period went beyond mere enumeration of belongings and bequests. They were, in essence, books of wisdom and scholarly observations to be shared by future generations. Yet, despite the presence in the *Life of Judah* of a list of his possessions and an appended will, the document itself is deemed by leading scholars such as Davis, Cohen, Ravid and Adelman as being distinct from the more normative Jewish tradition of ethical wills. The question regarding the influences or sources that motivated Leone to innovate, by writing in an autobiographic form, still remains unanswered.

Nathalie Davis' speculation as to the confessional quality of Leone's writing is compelling, although there are shortcomings to such a comparison. For in the *Life of Judah* there is no Christian-inspired redemptive arc, no sense of personal rebirth or renewal after the confessing of sins or vices.

Unlike St. Augustine's confession, where the reader learns in full detail of youthful, profane excesses, before reading of the saint's later revelation and redemption,

²⁹⁰ Brucker, 12.

²⁹¹ Already mentioned at the beginning of chapter one.

there is no such transformation in Leone's work. The closest analogue might be found where Leone's admission of numerous episodes of gambling and his revelation of esoteric pursuits such as alchemy, are tinged by guilt, foreboding and shame. Whatever confessional quality exists, there is no divinely-inspired spark or flash of insight. There is certainly no reformed behaviour.

Rather, the confessional—or self-revelatory—quality to Leone's writing only reminds the reader of his weaknesses and his bad luck, thus reinforcing our impression of a weak or a troubled individual. Furthermore, there is no self-improvement or self-restraint. The confessional element in the *Life of Judah* (such as it is) is thus highly misleading and defies easy classification.

Perhaps, instead, if one considers the didactic (and originally stated) purpose of Leone's work as his true motive other inferences may be drawn. Certainly, the fact that Leone's faith never wavers, that his belief system remains intact throughout, adds credence to this hypothesis. Perhaps what he intended was to offer, through the example of his life, a cautionary tale to his students and to future generations?

In adopting the didactic hypothesis, consideration should also be given to the fact that the autobiographic form was a contextually-driven manner of self-expression. Indeed, self-portraits of this nature had considerable currency in the Italian context and specifically within Venice. As Burckhardt remarked many years ago

...the Italians were the first of all European nations who displayed a remarkable power and inclination accurately to describe man as shown in history, according to his inward and outward characteristics.²⁹²

Indeed, although the *Golden Legend* and the more secular *vitae* of emperors and kings continued to exist, attention to more individualized forms of writing is believed by scholars such as Burckhardt to have originated largely in the urban Italian secularizing context. Within the Venetian context, Burckhardt writes:

It is well known how speedily and unanimously in recent times the reports of the Venetian embassies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have been recognized as authorities of the first order for personal description. Even autobiography takes here and there in Italy a bold and vigorous flight, and puts before us, together with the most incidents of external life, striking revelations of the inner man.²⁹³

Seen through the Burckhardtian lens, Leone's *Life of Judah* is indeed replete with "striking revelations of the inner man" and perhaps, a modern man. If this is so, then instead of seeking to place Leone within an autobiographic tradition as does Nathalie Davis, it may be more effective to examine contextual factors first. Taken from this perspective, humanistic modes of self-consciousness, as well as the Venetian penchant for describing personal characteristics, offers a more plausible source of influence.

To that end, an interesting parallel may be drawn to another early-modern figure who defied easy classification, Francesco Petrarch. Just as the Sarpi-Modena connection is highly evocative, so is the possibility that Leone may have had contact with and been influence by Petrarch's writing.²⁹⁴

²⁹² Burckhardt, 244.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 247-48.

²⁹⁴ Furthermore, if one subscribes to Nathalie Davis's emphasis on the Western autobiographic tradition, then Petrarch's influence is an obvious factor there as well. For more information on the influence and intellectual lineage connecting Petrarch, Montaigne, Pascal and even Pope, please refer to J.H. Whitfield, 28 where he wrote that Europe spoke Petrarch's language until the eighteenth century. This was a

The reader will note, for instance, that the repository of Petrarch's writings (though not entirely complete) was originally destined to be in Venice (where he had been ambassador). The presence of a good portion of his writings in Venice, thus increases the likelihood of some contact between Leone and Petrarch's work.

Although many scholars situate Petrarch's consciousness within a medieval frame, others such as J.H. Whitfield, or even E.H. Wilkins suggest otherwise. They see his use of humanistic themes (such as *virtu*, fame and friendship), his re-interpretation of Ciceronian moral philosophy, his attention to man's interaction with the temporal world, and even his many eye-opening travels as suggesting a modernity, or more accurately, a non-medieval dimension to Petrarch's thought. As Whitfield argued, for instance, Petrarch's attention to his fellow man is a significant break with the medieval world-view. Friendship as such is a modern concept. He writes that,

The first step from a medieval to a civilized society lies in this re-establishment of the link between man and man by means of ideas and reflection.²⁹⁵

While Whitfield's remarks are quite compelling, Petrarch may paradoxically be seen as lodged in a medieval world-view, particularly in his conception of what was required to lead a significant, a meaningful life. This is particularly so when considering his autobiographic writings in the *Secretum*. In choosing to write in a highly self-expressive, self-conscious form, Petrarch turned to sacred text for inspiration. Yet, in relying on tradition, Petrarch's choice of Saint Augustine, that very flawed, reformed

language based on the revival of the notion of *virtu*, derived from Antiquity, and the importance therefore of man's conduct in the world.

²⁹⁵ Whitfield, 63.

sinner and highly human autobiographic writer, reveals a conscious effort to wrestle with his internal contradictions. Thus again, despite his medieval Christianity, there are echoes of modernity in the tone and substance of what Petrarch writes (particularly in the appended autobiography to his *Letter to Posterity*, where he recounts his life and his faith).²⁹⁶ To that end, Nicholas Mann²⁹⁷ writes that

Above all, however, in his perception of himself, in his acute awareness of his inner motives, and in his never-ceasing efforts to construct an image of himself for posterity, we might consider him the first modern man²⁹⁸.

It is ironic how the above passage could easily be used to describe Leone. As with Whitfield, Mann and Wilkins' observations on Petrarch, it is the self-reflective quality of Leone's work that stands in sharp contrast to his medieval rabbinic frame of reference. It is the fact that like Petrarch before him, Leone took great care to construct for posterity an image of himself. And indeed in that part of his life, at least, he was undisputedly a success.

Yet, it is critical to understand, that unlike Petrarch, there is no break or tension between the medieval worldview (the religious) and the modern (the secular) in Leone. Regrettably therefore there are limits to the comparison. For example there is no Petrarchian notion of friendship, as cited above, that may be read in Leone's writing. There is no novel conception, or more accurately, no reformulation of an ancient moral code, as with the Petrarchian-humanist revival of *virtu*. Petrarch displayed an awareness, even a struggle, regarding his conceptualization of the world around him and his purpose

²⁹⁶ Wilkins, 259.

²⁹⁷ Nicholas Mann. *Petrarch*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

within it; the same cannot be said of Leone. Framed within a Burckhardtian *optique*, there is indeed little evidence that Leone held a modern, or better yet, a non-medieval worldview.

Still, as has been discussed, Leone's chosen form of self-expression is not normative, nor are several of the highly personal themes that he addressed. The motive for such a choice and the cultural factors that influenced him thus remain open to speculation.

4. 4. Concluding remarks

To students of the early modern period, *The Life of Judah* is a document that defies easy assumptions as to periodization, historiographic classification and textual interpretation. It is, indeed, an exceptional man's exceptional record, written in an exceptional context.

From the outset, the genesis of the *Life of Judah* was a curious act. As discussed, conscious self-expression, particularly in the autobiographic form, was rare amongst Jews of the medieval and early modern period. Yet, here in Rabbi Leone Modena's autobiography, lies the highly personal account of a well-published, public man who lived a good part of his life in Counter-Reformation Venice.

The analysis of such a document is yet another delicate matter. It is, for the most part, contained within the highly specialized sphere of Jewish religio-historical scholarship. This is despite the fact that the document offers rich evidence of substantial interaction and exchange between Jews and Christians in the Venetian context.

²⁹⁸ Mann, 113.

Compounding these analytical challenges is the fact that amongst Modena specialists there is even further fragmentation. There are those who view the document as mere chronicle —as a document that simply bridges the gap to the rest of Leone's rabbinic writings. Such scholars therefore seek to reconstruct a rabbinical or theological portrait of Leone. Unfortunately, by adopting this perspective, which turns alternatively on Leone's orthodoxy or heterodoxy, the merits of the *Life of Judah* are eclipsed.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who limit their inquiry to the document itself in an effort to assess its own merits, and to glean insight into Leone's personality. For the most part this type of analysis focuses on establishing the document's literary or intellectual provenance. Nathalie Davis is one such scholar who, as we have seen, has contributed to this comparative field by drawing from standard exemplars in the Western autobiographic canon (beginning with St. Augustine and culminating with Montaigne), and by concentrating strictly on the autobiographic form. As a result, context-specific factors (such as Burckhardt's observations regarding the existence of a Venetian style of portraiture or of character description) are overlooked.

This textual approach unfortunately glosses over evidence in the document pointing to the extent to which Renaissance ideals filtered through socio-political structures and were adapted by different cultural groups. In other words, the real challenge in analyzing Leone's motives for writing an autobiography, is to reconcile the influence that a humanistically driven, pluralistic context had on the mind of a man steeped in the medieval rabbinic tradition.

It may also be said that many of the above concerns reflect larger questions related to identity: of the individual (Leone), the group (early-modern, post-Expulsion

Jews) and society (Counter-Reformation Venice). In the *Life of Judah*, we have what Carlo Ginzburg might call an expression of Renaissance self-fashioning transcending cultural barriers. The *Life of Judah* was, one would argue, written in reaction to shifting or changing cultural barriers.

As Manuel posits throughout *The Broken Staff*, the interaction between scholars from Jewish, Protestant and Catholic groups was lively, frequently open, and often provoking reciprocal exchanges (and, at times, distortions). Yet, this golden era, this dialogical period, was stymied, as Yerushalmi notes, by the post-Expulsion rupture in the Biblical and ritually-focused narrative. This provoked a profound crisis in Jewish identity.

Crypto-Judaism or *converso* piety not only cast a veil of suspicion on the newly-arrived refugees amongst their more established Venetian co-religionists, it also brought accusations of shifting religious alliances, and of Judaizing (an accusation made by Church Inquisitional authorities) for those Jews who publicly engaged in discourses on their religion.

Although Alpert's very recent scholarship poses a challenge to the widely-held hypothesis of rabbinical hostility towards *conversos*, the crisis experienced by post-Expulsion Jewry living in conflicted Counter-Reformation Venice was — at its core — one of identity.

Thus if, as Charles Taylor writes, personal identity is “by its very nature dependent on society,”²⁹⁹ then Leone's identity, forged in a highly volatile societal

²⁹⁹ Charles Taylor. *Multiculturalism and The Politics of Recognition*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) 34.

context, is likely quite difficult to categorize. Perhaps, though, the *Life of Judah* should be viewed as written in reaction to this changing, uncertain societal context. Leone had ample reason to compose, or to try to control, the manner in which he would be remembered. His written words had already once been distorted (as in the case of Gaffarel's version of his *Riti*); he had a rather checkered career in the rabbinate; and the many losses in his personal life did not foreshadow much possibility for commemoration.

The Life of Judah is thus likely the very human act of a man who, having known much uncertainty and self-doubt, wished to present a narrative that would reveal something enduring. The fact that we moderns recognize something of ourselves in this choice is, no doubt, Leone's true accomplishment.

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