

The Italian Setting

Fifteenth Century Italian Jewry

Italian Jewry underwent a major transformation at the close of the thirteenth century. In 1291 the Church launched a two-year campaign for the total conversion of the Jews in Apulia.¹ About half the Jews were forcibly converted, and many were killed. Study in the distinguished academies of Bari and Otranto was brought to a standstill. Thus the Jewry of Southern Italy—an old Jewish community whose origins date back to the first century C.E.—was practically destroyed.² Survivors migrated northward, first toward Rome, where the Jewish community enjoyed some papal protection. From Rome Jews later migrated to other provinces in central and northern Italy, where they met refugees fleeing persecution and expulsions in France and Germany.

The Jewish population of Italy increased until the Black Death struck in the mid-fourteenth century, killing Jews as well as Christians, but then began to rise again when the mass destruction of Spanish Jewry in 1391, and the total expulsion of French Jewry in 1394, brought another wave of Jewish refugees to Italy.³ As a result, Italian Jewry of the fifteenth century comprised three diverse ethnic sub-

groups: the native Italian Jews, the Ashkenazic Jews of France and Germany, and the Sephardic Jews of the Iberian Peninsula.

Meanwhile Italian city-states tried to overcome an economic stagnation that had begun even before the Black Death. Land prices and land profits reached their lowest point in the late fourteenth century, land reclamation and colonization had come to a virtual standstill, and the demand for Italian exports such as wool had diminished considerably. The capital of major banks such as the Medici family's reached an unprecedented low, and industrial and commercial expansion of many city-states came to a halt. The lavish lifestyle of the ruling classes, and their constant engagement in military campaigns, drained capital even further, and expenditures in those areas reflected the widening gap between rich and poor.⁴

These Jewish immigrants to Italy did not come empty-handed or empty-headed. They brought capital, and they brought important financial skills either as moneylenders—the primary occupation open to them in France, Germany, and Provence—or as fiscal administrators and tax framers—typical occupations in Spain. Communes and princes turned to them. Jews were allowed to settle in locations from which they were previously either barred or expelled.⁵ Moneylenders were welcomed despite prior and longstanding opposition. Ecclesiastical authorities devised appropriate “dispensations” from canonic legislation to permit Jewish moneylending. Ironically, the major focus of anti-Jewish sentiment and legislation in Western Europe—moneylending—became the catalyst for the growth and creativity of Jews in fifteenth century Italy.

A new chapter in the history of Italian Jewry began. Population growth, geographical expansion, economic prosperity and cultural creativity during the fifteenth century reversed the decline this Jewry had experienced since 1291. Jewish settlements developed in a typical pattern: local authorities permitted individual Jews to settle and open a bank or pawn shop. Jews were legally considered aliens, so their right of residence was affirmed in special charters known as *condotti*.⁶ A *condotta* granted its holder a monopoly on moneylending in a specified region, spelled out the precise terms of his approved financial transactions, and defined the personal status of the recipient. The *condotta* also afforded a wide range of privileges to the Jewish banker: it extended protection over life and property, exempted the banker from local and regional taxes, permitted the holder to observe his Jewish faith both in private and in public, and allowed him to buy land for assembly (i.e., synagogues) and burial.

These combination business charters and residence permits reflect the underlying insecurity of Jewish life in Italy. *Condotti* were granted for a term of only three to seven years and could be easily revoked on the ruler's whim. City-states ruled by strong princes (e.g., Florence under the Medicis, Ferrara under the Este family, and Mantua under the Gonzagas) usually accorded Jews some stability and long-term protection. In short, Jews were tolerated in Italian city-states as long as the rulers deemed them financially beneficial—a typical medieval phenomenon. Yet changes in the power structure of a given city, the rising political influence of the clergy, and the impact of international politics on Italy, could undermine the very existence of the tiny Jewish settlement. Throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Jews lived under the fear of popular hostility, ecclesiastical missionizing, and expulsion.

Jewish settlements in Italy during the fifteenth century were extremely small: extended households consisting of the banker, his immediate family, his business associates, and other professionals—such as teachers, butchers, and physicians—essential to Jewish life. In Florence, for example, where four Jewish banks operated in the mid-fifteenth century, the entire settlement consisted of only 75-100 Jews. Similarly, the Jewish population of Mantua in this period did not exceed two hundred people, with another hundred Jews in the city's outskirts.⁷ The minute size of Jewish settlements accounts for the close proximity between Jews and non-Jews, and the difficulties of maintaining Jewish life. Ofttimes Jews had to depart from strict tradition and law to facilitate ritual observance itself. For example, women and children occasionally performed ritual slaughtering to provide meat for the dinner table.⁸

The development of the Jewish settlement in Arezzo after 1398-99 suggests that the Jews were originally invited to provide funds for the lower strata of Italian society.⁹ Their business, however, quickly extended upward, from paupers residing in rural outskirts of urban centers to dukes and princes of the city-states. As a result, the Jewish bankers succeeded in amassing considerable wealth, which soon fueled hatred and animosity. Franciscan friars established charity funds (*monti di pietà*) to replace private moneylending and openly called for Jewish expulsion.¹⁰ But neither widespread hatred, Franciscan harassment, nor even competition from Italian bankers could halt the success of the Jewish bankers.

The financial power of the Jewish bankers, coupled with their privileged status with the ruling power, served as the source of the

banker's authority within Italian Jewry. Concomitantly, the wealth accrued from moneylending enabled the Jewish bankers to live luxuriously, with the lifestyle and social norms of the Italian patriciate.¹¹ They built palaces and furnished them dearly, invested in luxuries such as cosmetics and high fashion, or retreated to country villas to relax from the oppressive conditions of the congested, small towns.¹²

Still, material opulence and sensual pleasures were not the major vehicle or self-expression among the Jewish elite. No less central was the celebration of Jewish festivals and life-cycle events within the extended households, inspired by the newly developed tastes and aesthetic norms of the Italian ruling classes. New Jewish creativity was fostered in the social arts—dance, music, theater—initially intended for the exclusive entertainment of Jewish audiences, and later for Christian rulers.¹³ Thus we find Jewish musicians and actors employed by the Gonzagas in Mantua, and Jewish dancers teaching Christian nobles.¹⁴

During the fifteenth century bankers played an important role in the development of Italian Jewish culture. Personally committed to the cultivation of Jewish learning and creativity, they established libraries of considerable size for their own use and extended financial support to rabbinic scholars, philosophers, artists, and poets. Employment in the household of a Jewish banker, either as a private tutor or as a manuscript copyist, was a highly lucrative and well-paid position, often secured by fierce competition.

The patron-client relationship between the Jewish banker and the scholar was fashioned according to the model of the Christian Renaissance humanists and their patrician and princely patrons.¹⁵ Renaissance humanism was a cultural, literary, and scholarly movement associated with the rise of the *studia humanitatis*, a well-defined cycle of academic disciplines consisting of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy.¹⁶ Its overarching concern was an “effective expression in speech and in writing, in verse and in prose, in Latin and in the vernacular languages, of any content of ideas, images, feelings or events.”¹⁷ Renaissance humanists derived their model of elegant expression from the literary sources of classical antiquity which they rediscovered, copied, and edited. They read classical authors directly in their original tongues and urged that such studies of primary sources be made the core of the art curriculum. Their approach to education emphasized a text-oriented, individual scholarship in contrast to the established tradition of interpretation typical of the Middle Ages.

The humanist cultural program was not a mere academic matter, but rather an ideal for practical application in civic life. Its pursuit of eloquence had concrete purposes: to move, to persuade, to excite, and to educate listeners and readers. Humanism, in other words, was intended for the public domain. Leonardo Bruni, the Florentine humanist-historian, expressed this view when he said that the *studia humanitatis* made the complete man. Likewise, Ermolao Barbaro, a Venetian noble, diplomat, humanist, Aristotelian philosopher, and cardinal, asserted that “*humanitas* is not a matter simply of externals, of ornament, it is a spiritual entity which produces in man the true man, the citizen, the man in his totality.”¹⁸ Renaissance humanism was thus an educational program to raise the moral and intellectual quality of the citizen (i.e., ruling) class. It attempted to turn citizens into statesmen and statesmen into moral men.¹⁹

Eloquence became an ideal for a way of life of the Renaissance gentleman—the *homo universalis*. He was expected to be versatile, sociable, well versed in classical letters, and ready to apply the lessons of the past to current problems. The education of the gentleman was entrusted to humanists, who earned their living as secretaries, librarians, and tutors of princes and patricians, thereby helping their patrons to assume responsibility in the civic life of Italy’s factious city-states. Nevertheless, the cult of elegant speech was not confined only to the ruling classes, but was cultivated as well among those townspeople responsible for welding the newly entered masses within the city walls into a genuine community.

W. Bouwsma describes this development as follows:

Rhetoric provided the cultural foundation for the new urban culture of 15th century Italy. It operated on every level of human interaction, both private and public. Businessmen had to learn to communicate persuasively with their customers, suppliers and associates; lawyers had to argue their conflicts of interests in courts; citizens conversed and corresponded with their friends in personal matters and sought agreement with their peers on questions of public interest; rulers had to maintain the support of their subjects; and governments corresponded with one another. Rhetoric was undoubtedly the core of humanist education and moral interpretation.²⁰

In Renaissance Italy humanism first competed and later coexisted with scholasticism, which had been introduced into Italy from France

in the mid-thirteenth century. The scholastic tradition was a systematic, reasoned attempt to reconcile Greek philosophy with the Christian faith. From the thirteenth century onward, the major trend within scholasticism was Aristotelianism. Aristotle's philosophico-scientific corpus determined the curriculum, analytic methods, philosophical vocabulary, and conceptual framework of the newly established universities in Naples, Salerno, Bologna, and Padua.²¹ Aristotelianism remained strong well into the sixteenth century, invigorated in part by new translations of Aristotle's works guided by humanist philology. While humanists and scholastics continued to debate their ideological differences in the realm of education and authoritative texts, most Italian scholars integrated the two programs to some extent.²²

By the second half of the fifteenth century, Italian Jews began to absorb Renaissance humanism, which provided the literary genres, the textual methods, and the educational aspirations for a movement of Jewish humanism.²³ Notable differences between Jewish humanism and its Italian paradigm still remained. Unlike their Italian counterparts who witnessed ideological and academic struggle between humanists and scholastics, Italian Jews did not consider humanism antithetical to scholasticism. Rather, they adopted the *studia humanitatis* as an integral expansion of an already existing curriculum of the secular studies which they inherited from Provence and Spain.

The study of philosophy and science began among medieval Jews already in the tenth century. Under the influence of Muslim culture, the Jews of Andalusia (Muslim Spain) cultivated secular studies including medicine, mathematics, biology, physics, astronomy, alchemy, and astrology. The scientific outlook influenced all literary activity of Jews in Muslim Spain. It inspired the study of philology and grammar, biblical and Talmudic commentaries, the writing of secular poetry, and the philosophical defense of Judaism. The crowning achievement of the rationalist tradition was systematic theology: the reasoned analysis of Jewish beliefs with an attempt to harmonize religious claims with the dictates of human reason. In this regard, scholasticism emerged in Judaism (and Islam) two centuries prior to its rise in the Latin West. With the Christian reconquest of Iberia, Jews brought with them the rationalist tradition to northern kingdoms of Iberia (Catalonia, Castile, and Aragon), and from there rationalism spread to Jewish communities in Provence and Italy.

Italian Jews began to engage in the study of the sciences by the

end of the twelfth century. This new scholarly interest is associated with R. Abraham ibn 'Ezra, the Spanish biblical exegete, philosopher, astronomer, and mathematician (1089-1164) who was active in Italy during the 1160s.²⁴ Italian Jewry was further drawn into the cultural orbit of Spain and Provence during the thirteenth century, when Provençal and Spanish scholars, among them Jacob Anatoli and Zerahya b. Isaac Shealtiel, settled in Italy (especially in Rome and in Naples) and spread the knowledge of philosophy.²⁵ They taught Maimonides' *The Guide of the Perplexed*, composed philosophical biblical commentaries, and collaborated with Christian scholars in translating Hebrew and Arabic philosophic texts into Latin. Collaboration between Jewish and Christian scholars further enhanced the impact of rationalism on the education of Italian Jews. By the late thirteenth century, the secular curriculum became an integral part of Italian Jewish education. Consequently, Italian Jewry became embroiled in the Maimonidean controversy that had recently engulfed world Jewry.²⁶

In Italy the Jewish curriculum of secular studies integrated two educational systems: the Judeo-Arabic, and the Christian-Latin. From the Christian-Latin schooling, Italian Jews adopted the seven liberal arts—the *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric)—and the *quadrivium* (arithmetics, geometry, music, and astronomy).²⁷ However, Italian Jews culled their knowledge of these sciences from Hebrew texts written by either Jews or Muslim authors. The seven liberal arts were preparatory to the study of philosophy—divided into practical philosophy (economics, ethics, and politics) and speculative philosophy (physics, metaphysics, and theology). The few students who excelled in the study of the secular disciplines and could afford the study of medicine pursued this study as well. By the early sixteenth century, some exceptional Jewish students were allowed to study medicine in Italian universities.²⁸ Italian Jews grafted onto this scholastic curriculum the humanist program consisting of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy.

Renaissance Humanism gave Judeo-Italian culture a flavor distinguishing it from its Jewish counterparts in Spain and Provence, although they also cultivated the secular sciences. For example, Jewish scholars in fourteenth century Provence studied rhetoric through Todros Todrosi's Hebrew translation of Averroës' commentary to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*; in Italy they studied not only that text but also Cicero's orations, which the Italian humanists regarded as the most perfect human speech. Similarly, while in Provence and Spain Jews studied Hebrew grammar, in Italy they studied Latin grammar as

well, and practiced the art of epistolography to cultivate eloquent prose. The ideal of elegant speech was equally cultivated through the art of poetry. Italian Jews absorbed the literary innovations of Dante (1265-1321) already in the early fourteenth century and composed Hebrew poems imitating his innovative verse written in the Tuscan dialect. In style, themes, and literary convention, Hebrew secular poetry in Italy arose as a fusion between the Spanish-Provençal and the Italian traditions.²⁹ Under the impact of humanism, Italian Jewish scholars also cultivated Hebrew poetics, by studying Aristotle's *Poetics*, thus replacing the Arabic poetics adapted into Hebrew modes in Muslim Spain by Dunash ibn Labrat (tenth century) and Moses ibn 'Ezra (d. ca. 1135).³⁰ Most noticeably, Renaissance humanism affected Jewish culture in the rise of new literary genres: histories of foreign nations, biographies, and Jewish historiography.³¹

Although stimulated by Renaissance humanism, Jewish humanism developed independently to serve specific Jewish needs. By enlarging the scope of Jewish education, Italian Jews could propose their own version of the Renaissance ideal *homo universalis*. For Jews, the *hakham kolel* (literally, the comprehensive scholar) was the wise man who was well versed in the liberal arts, the *studia humanitatis*, philosophy and medicine, as much as he was erudite in the rabbinic tradition. Similarly, Jewish humanism differed from its Italian counterpart in its attitude toward the past. Jews did not share the disdain of their contemporaries toward the immediate medieval past. Nor did they revel in the rebirth of classical Rome—the destroyer of Jerusalem.³² Indeed, Jewish humanists read classical literature with interest and enjoyed its literary merits. But to counter the appeal of classical antiquity, Jewish humanists praised the biblical past as a desirable model for emulation. The return to the glorious biblical era was the best Jewish, polemical retort to the cult of the ancients. Anti-Christian polemics also guided a Jewish humanist such as 'Azaria de Rossi to reexamine rabbinic chronology by employing humanist textual methods.³³

Humanist pursuit of eloquence was most evident in the emphasis of Italian Jews on the mastery of Latin and Italian; wealthy bankers often employed Christian tutors to instruct their children in these languages. Italian Jews practiced the art of rhetoric by writing model letters. Several collections of such model texts are still extant and recently published in critical editions.³⁴ They give us an excellent glimpse into the daily realities of Italian Jews and show that humanist ideals were widespread among Italian Jews regardless of their social status.³⁵

Native Italian Jews of the fifteenth century had a well-established tradition of harmonizing rabbinic Judaism with secular studies. Such openness toward the so-called “alien disciplines” contrasted with Ashkenazic Jewry’s long-standing hostility toward the secular sciences. By the second half of the fifteenth century, Ashkenazic Jews constituted a significant portion of the Jewish communities in Northern Italy. Their legal tradition spread rapidly, helped by the printing of the legal code *Arba’ah Turim* (*Four Columns*) by R. Jacob b. Asher.³⁶ Gradually the native Italian Jews adopted the Ashkenazic method of Talmud study and regarded the Ashkenazic legal authorities as their masters in addition to such Sephardic authorities as R. Isaac Alfasi and Moses Maimonides. Nevertheless, the opposition of Ashkenazic Jews toward secular studies necessarily resulted in communal conflicts and personal disputes.

In fact, the very ethnic diversity of fifteenth century Italian Jewry caused communal controversies. There were three major components: the native Italian Jews, concentrated in the Papal States and the north-central provinces; the Ashkenazic Jews from Germany and France, settled primarily in the northern and north-central regions; and the Sephardic Jews in the kingdom of Naples. Each group possessed its unique customs and rituals, traditions of learning, and political institutions, and each established separate synagogues. Encounters among the three groups brought personal conflict and ideological dispute.

Individualism inherent in the patronage system impeded communal organization and fueled incessant personal controversies among Italian Jewish intellectuals. Fifteenth century Italian Jewry was only beginning to consolidate its collective identity and to establish its own forms of communal organization. This process would gain momentum only by the early sixteenth century with the massive influx of refugees from Spain and Portugal after the expulsions of 1492 and 1497, the flight of Marrano Jews from the Inquisition, and the immigration of Jewish traders from North Africa and the Ottoman Empire. More population growth, and particularly the rise of the strong middle class of merchants and artisans, would minimize the political strength of the Jewish banking oligarchy and give rise to a more complex communal structure.³⁷

Rabbis, Scholars, and Community Organization

Both David and his father Judah bore the title “rabbi,” and each became embroiled in controversies over the scope of his rabbinic

authority. It is well known that the title carried a different job description in pre-Emancipation Europe than it does today. “Rabbi” signified not only scholarship and communal leadership in areas we consider “religious”—for example, life cycle functions and public worship—but judicial authority as well. Less well known but no less important was the rift between Ashkenazim and Sephardim. It arose from differences in the two groups’ communal structure: who bestowed the title “rabbi”; what authority did it convey; and how far did that authority extend? The debate about the meaning and scope of the rabbinate emerged repeatedly throughout the life of R. David ben Judah. To understand it a brief history of the rabbinate is in order.

The rabbinate evolved in the Second Temple era or shortly thereafter.³⁸ In the Land of Israel the Sanhedrin granted the title “rabbi” (*rabi*) and with it judicial authority.³⁹ In Babylonia each yeshivah granted the title “rav” (*rab*); judicial authority apparently depended upon the recognition given the individual rav and his yeshivah. Both titles acknowledge mastery of halakhah and mark the rise of rabbinic scholars as successors to the priesthood. Authority in Judaism ultimately stems from the revelation at Mount Sinai; the rabbinate was legitimized by tracing that authority up the generational chain through each who granted it to a successor, all the way back to Moses.⁴⁰ The granting of the title was called *semikhah*, usually translated as “ordination,” and the ceremony involved a laying on of the hands to symbolize the transmission of authority. Thus did rabbinic ordination convey legal, religious, and even sacramental import.

After the demise of the Sanhedrin, ordination in the Land of Israel fell to the Nasi and the rabbis of his yeshivah. The status of ordained rabbis then declined along with political and economic conditions in the Land of Israel,⁴¹ until the fourth century, when Jewish political autonomy ended and rabbis were no longer ordained there. The rabbinate continued and changed in Babylonia through the rise of the Gaonate in the seventh century, when a Gaon would ordain rabbis to offices with specific, well-drained authority.⁴²

The proliferation of Jewish communities in the Mediterranean basin and Western Europe during the tenth and eleventh centuries complicated the status of rabbis. They could no longer base their authority upon personal contact with accepted political or educational institutions in Babylonia or the Land of Israel, and no new institutions with such universal recognition had yet arisen. Furthermore, rabbis now had to contend with the rise of nonrabbinic leadership, including lay courts.⁴³

Nevertheless, there is some evidence that rabbis continued to be ordained in Western Europe in the eleventh century. R. Judah ben Barzilay of Barcelona mentions a writ of ordination (*ketav masmikh*).⁴⁴ Unlike the Palestinian ordination, this ceremony did not involve laying on of the hands, and the writ could be conferred by the city elders or the synagogue elders. The ordinee gained the title *rabbi*, assumed the social and legal obligations of the scholarly class, and became a judge (*dayyan*); but his authority did not exceed what the community was willing to bestow upon him in light of his scholarship. Alongside this practice, isolated cases of individual ordination continued to occur; for example, R. Isaac Alfasi ordained R. Joseph ibn Megash, who in turn ordained his own student.

The rabbinate then took different turns among the Sephardim and the Ashkenazim. Jews in Spain quickly developed strong communal organizations. Rabbis then became salaried community officials, whom community leaders selected from among the local scholars.⁴⁵ During the reign of Alfonso X (1221-84) a new position evolved, called *el rab* (the rav), with authority over all Jewish judicial matters in a given province. That title thereafter “designated crown-appointed chief rabbis or justices who enjoyed great social and political prestige.”⁴⁶

Each individual Sephardic congregation would employ not a rabbi but a *Marbiz Torah* (literally, teacher of Torah).⁴⁷ Paid handsomely and accountable directly to the congregation, the *Marbiz Torah* served as its judicial, spiritual, pedagogical, social, and moral guide. He enjoyed a wide range of authority: he adjudicated all civil suits between his congregants, arranged marriages, divorces, *yibbum* (levirate marriage), and *halizah* (the dispensation from levirate marriage), and supervised lay leaders in congregational administration. Most importantly, the *Marbiz Torah* taught Torah—to school children in the day school or Talmud Torah, to adolescents and young adults in the Yeshivah, and to the entire congregation through regular Sabbath and Holiday sermons. In fact, preaching was the *Marbiz Torah's* major vehicle to disseminate his views, exhibit his knowledge, and even rebuke his congregants for improper conduct. The *Marbiz Torah* was accorded profound respect even after his death.

In France and Germany, by contrast, Jews did not develop strong communal organization. Local communities and congregations would individually consult outstanding scholars according to daily need. As in talmudic times, rabbis dispensed their rabbinic services without pay, deriving their income from other sources. Scholars

who performed the functions of the Sephardic *Marbiz Torah* were called “rabbi.”

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, scholars customarily bestowed the title of rabbi upon those students whom they deemed worthy. Ordination enabled the student to open his own yeshivah, but the authority it conveyed was informal: it depended upon public recognition of the knowledge and wisdom of both the ordaining rabbi and, increasingly over time, the ordinee. In the fourteenth century the decline of Jewish status in France and Germany, particularly the persecutions and expulsions following the Black Death, necessitated the institutionalization of rabbinic ordination to ensure the quality of scholars.⁴⁸ The formal ordination of scholars by other reputable scholars was one attempt to safeguard against the decline of Jewish leadership. Rabbinic authority came to be secured through formal bestowal of the title *morenu* (our teacher).

Ashkenazic rabbinic ordination was evidenced by a certificate (also called a *semikhah*), signed by one or more rabbis, which served to introduce the ordinee’s credentials in each politically isolated community and to permit him to exercise a degree of authority dependent upon the community’s recognition of the signers’ reputations. That physical evidence was less needed in Iberia where on the one hand a rabbi’s authority had more limited and better defined geographic boundaries, and on the other hand that authority was upheld by the local civil authorities. In time a metonymy occurred: *semikhah* or “ordination” began to designate a rabbi according to the Ashkenazic method, as distinct from a rabbi according to the Sephardic method. Rabbinic ordination within this definition of terms stopped in Spain and was afterwards known there only by hearsay.⁴⁹ In contrast, ordination never fully disappeared in France and Germany, and began to reemerge in the twelfth century. By the fourteenth century, it again became a common formal procedure,⁵⁰ and when Ashkenazic Jews fled persecutions in fourteenth century Germany and France, they brought this institution with them to Sephardic communities.

Ashkenazic Jews migrated to Italy in increasing numbers during the fifteenth century.⁵¹ There the formal, public art of ordination developed under the influence of the Christian doctoral degree.⁵² Two Jewish degrees became common. The first was *Semikhah me-rabbanut* (ordination of rabbinate), which bestowed the title *Morenu ha-Rav* (Our Teacher, the Rav) and empowered the recipient to teach halakhah. Once ordained, rabbis could also adjudicate legal issues involving the full range of halakhah, from torts to contracts to

family law. They could perform life cycle ceremonies, and even (at least in theory) excommunicate. The community honored ordained rabbis with reserved seats in synagogue and yeshivah, presents on special occasions, tax breaks, and exemption from other communal obligations.⁵³ The second Jewish degree was *Semikhah me-Haverut* (ordination of membership), which bestowed the title *Haver* (member or colleague) of the group on scholars with the lesser rank of *talmid hakham* (literally, student of a scholar). The *Haver* could not teach halakha but did enjoy some social honors.

Sephardic talmudic scholars challenged Ashkenazic ordination. R. Isaac ben Sheshet (Ribash) disputed its claim to descendance from ancient rabbinic ordination in the Land of Israel.⁵⁴ Other Sephardic scholars, for example Don Isaac Abravanel, ridiculed ordination for imitating the Christian doctorate.⁵⁵ Unable to eradicate the Ashkenazic practice entirely, R. Isaac ben Sheshet limited its significance to the relationship between teacher and student: ordination permitted the ordinee to teach halakhah in public without the specific permission of his teacher.

Rabbinic ordination in the Ashkenazic tradition became common in Italy during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries under the influence of French and German rabbis.⁵⁶ By the second half of the fifteenth century, Italian scholars still debated the prerequisites for ordination, the halakhic rationale for it, and the privileges and benefits it bestowed.

In Florence, R. Benjamin of Montalcino, although himself ordained, advocated a narrow interpretation of rabbinic ordination, namely, that it accords no political authority whatsoever.⁵⁷ He argued as follows: First, ordination accorded political authority only in the Land of Israel when Jews had their own political government, which they did not currently have. Second, since ordination accords no political authority per se, authority must arise either from public (Jewish) consent or from the civil government. Third, the ordinee's jurisdiction can therefore extend no farther than the boundaries of the community or government granting him that authority.⁵⁸ The formal act of rabbinic ordination is but a public ceremony evidencing the competence of the ordinee to teach halakhah. This position reflected the current views among the French rabbis in Italy, including R. Joseph Colon, who was otherwise no great supporter of the Florentine rabbi.⁵⁹

R. Judah Messer Leon, R. David's father, took a different view, namely, that rabbinic ordination per se grants political authority

wherever the ordained rabbi may find himself. (See below in this chapter R. Judah's confrontation with R. Benjamin of Montalcino over this issue.) R. David inherited his father's view, and became involved in two public controversies, one concerning Moses Capsali, then the chief rabbi of the Romanyot community in Constantinople, and the other concerning R. David's rabbinate in Valona. Both are discussed below in Chapter Four.

R. Judah ben Yehiel Messer Leon

During the second half of the fifteenth century, the political climate of Italian Jewry was extremely unstable. Privileged members of the Jewish oligarchy with strong personalities and outstanding merits attempted to impose their personal authority upon all Italian Jewry, giving little consideration to the consent of the public at large. These assertions of power were not unusual in fifteenth century Italy but followed those of Renaissance Italy, in which princes and patricians ruthlessly pursued their personal ends regardless of the means. These assertions of power among Jews were also encouraged by the sharp differences in legal and social status within the Jewish community itself between privileged bankers, on the one hand, and their dependents on the other.

A most notable example of this civic individualism among Italian Jews was R. Judah ben Yehiel Messer Leon (ca. 1425-ca. 1495). "Messer Leon" is a title. "Messer" is a short form of *mio serro* ("my lord"). "Leon," meaning "lion," alludes to "Judah" through the well-known biblical reference of the lion as the metaphor for the tribe of Judah. R. Judah possessed a superb intellect, a strong personality, familial ties within the Jewish oligarchy, and widespread recognition in non-Jewish society. He was not only the foremost Jewish philosopher of fifteenth century Italy but also a rabbi, physician, poet, and orator. R. Judah thus came closest to embodying the Renaissance ideal of *homo universalis*.

Scholars have devoted attention to R. Judah ben Yehiel Messer Leon over the last twenty years. Daniel Carpi,⁶⁰ Robert Bonfil,⁶¹ Isaac Rabinowitz,⁶² and Abraham Melamed⁶³ have greatly increased our knowledge of R. Judah's life in general, his ties to the Italian scholarly community, his literary productivity, and his political philosophy. Yet much remains to be done. Many biographical details remain unknown, unreliable, or disputed. Much of what is known comes only from R. Judah's son R. David, and his highly stylized language raises questions of hyperbole. Similarly, R. Judah Messer Leon's immense

literary legacy has been studied only superficially and still awaits systematic research. In fact, modern scholars have often confused father and son; one of the R. David's compositions, *Shevah ha-Nashim*, has been incorrectly attributed to his father, and its crucial importance in the son's life has thus been completely ignored.⁶⁴

R. Judah so influenced his son R. David that a short survey of R. Judah's life is in order. R. Judah was born to an Italian Jewish family in the town of Montecchio sometime between 1420 and 1425.⁶⁵ His father, Yehiel, was a physician, from which we infer that the family was financially secure. No direct information exists concerning R. Judah's upbringing, but it is likely that he received a typical Italian Jewish education combining thorough rabbinic training and the secular disciplines.

R. Judah ben Yehiel distinguished himself at an early age. Before reaching his thirties he was ordained as a rabbi and most likely obtained a diploma in medicine in one of Italy's universities. His competence as a physician gained him fame among Christians as well as Jews. He was awarded the honorary title "Messer" in 1452 by the German emperor Frederick III during Frederick III's first visit to Italy.⁶⁶ Only two other Jews, also physicians, are known to have held the title "Messer" in medieval and Renaissance Italy, although many Jewish physicians entered the personal service of Italian dignitaries.⁶⁷ The title probably granted R. Judah Messer Leon some legal privileges; although their specific content is not known, it is reasonable to assume that R. Judah was exempted from the humiliating Jewish badge, as were other prominent Jewish physicians and the wealthy bankers. R. Judah Messer Leon apparently also held the knightly title *miles*, the highest social status held by a Jew in Renaissance Italy.⁶⁸ These accomplishments inevitably instilled in him a strong aristocratic consciousness.

In the early 1450s, R. Judah Messer Leon was invited to head a yeshiva, a Jewish academy, in the Adriatic seaport town of Ancona. There he began to write, ostensibly for the education of his students, but also for personal political reasons. R. Judah Messer Leon's early works, *Livenat ha-Sappir* (*The Sapphire Stone*) and *Mikhlal Yofi* (*Perfection of Beauty*), are entirely within the medieval scholastic tradition: not original, but commentaries on authoritative texts. The first is a grammar book based on Abraham ibn 'Ezra's work on Hebrew grammar;⁶⁹ the second is a compilation of excerpts from popular scholastic books on Aristotelian logic, primarily *Logica Magna* by Paul of Venice.⁷⁰

R. Judah composed *Livenat ha-Sappir* and *Mikhlal Yofi* to teach the first two arts of the *trivium*, namely, grammar and logic. The introduction to *Mikhlal Yofi* clearly demonstrates that R. Judah Messer Leon was concerned, perhaps even obsessed, with the ramifications for Jewish communities of the study of logic. R. Judah Messer Leon was familiar with the intense activity in fourteenth century Provence of Jewish logicians such as R. Levi ben Gerson (Gersonides), R. Calanimus ben Calanimus and R. Todros Todrosi. During this so-called Golden Age of Jewish logic, Jewish Provençal logicians produced numerous summaries, commentaries, and paraphrases of Aristotle. They knew of Aristotle primarily through the Muslim philosopher Averroës, whose commentaries on Aristotle were translated into Hebrew by the early fourteenth century.⁷¹

R. Judah Messer Leon was trained by Christian logicians. In the fifteenth century they criticized Averroës' interpretation of Aristotle and abandoned it for the *via moderna* in logic. R. Judah Messer Leon was convinced, moreover, that the Jewish Provençal logicians and their Italian followers had misused the art of logic to propagate heretical beliefs, contrary to the explicit words of a divinely revealed Torah. Therefore, R. Judah defended Judaism against "the philosophers among the people of our Law" not by banning the study of logic but by teaching it correctly. R. Judah reasoned that, properly grasped, Aristotle's philosophy, and particularly his logic, did not contradict the teaching of Torah, but actually proved the absolute superiority of divinely revealed Law over all other human wisdom.⁷² For forty years, R. Judah Messer Leon campaigned against those whom he accused of propagating subversive views and thereby corrupting the integrity of Jewish traditional society.

R. Judah Messer Leon's preoccupation with education as a preventive measure against heresy was only one manifestation of his efforts to influence the views and practice of Italian Jews. In 1455, while still in Ancona, he issued two decrees applicable not only to his local community but to other Jewish settlements as well. The first was addressed to the Italian Jews in the central and southern regions. It attempted to change the established ritual of female purity.⁷³ The second, addressed to the Ashkenazic academies of the northern regions, banned the study of both Gersonides' *Perush 'al ha-Torah* (*Commentary on the Pentateuch*), which R. Judah considered too philosophical and thus religiously subversive, and Kabbalah in general, which he considered both logically unsound and a nonrabbinic, and therefore inappropriate, innovation.⁷⁴ By these decrees R. Judah

Messer Leon attempted to establish his personal authority over all Italian Jewry. They provoked fierce opposition from his rabbinic colleagues who correctly surmised his attempt.

In order to understand R. Judah Messer Leon's initiative, we must place it in historical context. As noted above, Italian Jewry began to consolidate its collective identity in the second half of the fifteenth century through clashes between major ethnic subgroups. R. Judah Messer Leon was an Italian rabbi committed to the legal and theological heritage of Maimonides. Still, in his legal decisions he was increasingly influenced by Ashkenazic, non-Maimonidean, legal traditions. And R. Judah Messer Leon also understood the technological/cultural advances of the Italian Renaissance, such as the invention of movable type, and recognized the enormous potential of the printing press to influence Jewish culture.

The significance of R. Judah's two decrees now becomes evident. The first, based on the Ashkenazic legal codes and in particular R. Jacob ben Asher's *Arba'ah Turim (Four Columns)*—a code comprising Ashkenazic as well as Sephardic legal traditions—was intended to disseminate Ashkenazic rituals among the Italian and Sephardic Jews of southern and central Italy, and thus to secure the supremacy of R. Judah Messer Leon's position as a jurist, since he authored the decree. The second decree was directed to the northern Jewish communities, composed of immigrants from France and Germany, in which the study of either Gersonides' biblical commentary or Kabbalah was not yet common. However, R. Judah Messer Leon understood that the printing press could quickly change this state of affairs. Indeed, as R. Bonfil has noted, Gersonides' *Commentary on the Pentateuch* was published in 1476 and was then more accessible to these communities. So R. Judah engaged in a preemptive strike, with the ulterior motive of establishing himself as the supreme authority in Italian Jewry in terms of Jewish beliefs.

The very issuance of these decrees showed an immense sense of self-worth; R. Judah believed himself qualified to influence the destiny of Italian Jewry.⁷⁵ Those feelings were nurtured not only by R. Judah's formal recognition in Italian society but also by R. Judah's rabbinic ordination. Although we do not know who taught R. Judah or who ordained him, we do know that R. Judah held a distinct conception of rabbinic ordination: not merely as a formal act which publicized an already established communal consent to the candidate's juridical/political authority, but rather as the act of granting that authority regardless of communal consent.⁷⁶

The most critical response to Messer Leon's decrees came from Rabbi Benjamin ben Joab of Montalcino (then residing in Florence) who urged the elders of Ancona not to comply with the first decree.⁷⁷ R. Benjamin asserted that R. Judah's ordination granted only local jurisdiction, and criticized Messer Leon for not consulting with the authorities in the communities to which his decrees were directed. Finally, R. Benjamin doubly criticized R. Judah's method. R. Judah could have strengthened his political base by allying himself with wealthy members of each community, "since they can bestow benefits, keep their promises, and truly abide by them."⁷⁸ And R. Judah should have employed education rather than an outright ban which was effectively a form of curse.

Only one extant manuscript records the decrees of R. Judah Messer Leon and the opposition of R. Benjamin of Montalcino.⁷⁹ If the controversy occurred in 1455, as that manuscript suggests, then R. Judah Messer Leon correctly interpreted the impact of the printing press on Jewish culture, and followed Benjamin ben Joab's advice. In the next few years R. Judah allied himself closely with the most influential families in Italian Jewry, the Da Pisa and the Norsa, and invested time and effort in educating a generation of students. The large number of extant manuscripts of R. Judah Messer Leon's works attests to his popularity as a teacher of the *trivium*.

This controversy suggests that R. Judah Messer Leon perceived himself the leader of Italian Jewry. So does the title he bestowed upon himself: *Meor Hagolah* (Light of the Exile). R. David inherited that aristocratic consciousness. He referred to his father as *Rosh Golat Ariel* (The Head of the Diaspora of Ariel, "Ariel" being a synonym for the People of Israel), and to himself as the "son of the Light of the Exile." Titles like these do not designate any formal office; Ashkenazic rabbis customarily invented them to honor distinguished colleagues.⁸⁰

Like many scholars of the Italian Renaissance—both Jewish and Christian—R. Judah Messer Leon often relocated in order to pursue intellectual challenges and opportunities. Although interpretations of sparse data differ, it appears that R. Judah did not remain long in Ancona. He apparently lived in Bologna in the early 1460s, where his academy attracted students from other Italian city-states.⁸¹ One student, David ben Joab of Tivoli,⁸² later became the son-in-law of Yehiel ben Isaac of Pisa, the most important Jewish banker in Tuscany, a patron of scholars, an associate of Lorenzo de Medici, and a friend of Isaac Abravanel, and the Jewish financier and advisor to the royal houses of Portugal and Aragon. Although the precise family

tie is not known, the marriage of R. David ben Joab to the daughter of Yehiel of Pisa, Hanna, linked R. Judah Messer Leon with the most prominent Jewish family in Italy, further enhancing his social and political standing within Italian Jewry. R. Judah Messer Leon thus became a member of a closely knit Jewish oligarchy which guarded its integrity through planned marriages.

In Bologna, R. Judah Messer Leon wrote *Perush Mavo-Maamarot-Melizah* (*Supercommentary on Isagoge-Categories-De Interpretatione*), continuing his activities as an Aristotelian commentator of the Averroistic tradition. As an Aristotelian philosopher, he may have hoped to draw upon the resources of the renowned University of Bologna, a center of Christian theology and canon law.⁸³ But that university was hostile to foreigners, which may have prompted R. Judah's move to Padua by the mid-1460s. The University of Padua,⁸⁴ outstanding in the natural sciences and medicine, welcomed foreign students and teachers. After 1517 the University of Padua would formally open its gates to Jews as members of different "nations," along with Italians, Germans, Spaniards, or Poles.

In Padua R. Judah Messer Leon fully integrated the Aristotelian/scholastic tradition with Ashkenazic halakhah, a synthesis he would later transmit to his son R. David. R. Judah's scientific career reached its zenith on 21 February 1469, when Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III, during his second visit to Italy, bestowed upon R. Judah doctoral degrees in philosophy and medicine.⁸⁵ These degrees granted R. Judah all the customary honors and privileges, including the titles of *dignitas* and *nobilitas*, and two unique privileges as well: R. Judah was permitted to treat non-Jewish patients and to award doctoral degrees in philosophy and medicine to his Jewish students. He later awarded at least two degrees in philosophy: to Yohanan ben Isaac Alemanno of Mantua in February 1470 and to Baruch ben Jacob de Galis of Parma in June of the same year.⁸⁶

R. Judah Messer Leon's success as a physician may have limited the time available for biblical exegesis, but it did not minimize his allegiance to Judaism. On the contrary, R. Judah deepened his commitment to Ashkenazic traditionalism through his association with the famous Ashkenazic jurist, R. Judah Minz, who immigrated to Padua in 1467.⁸⁷

From Padua R. Judah Messer Leon moved to Venice for a short time, despite Venice's prohibition on Jewish settlement that remained in effect until 1509.⁸⁸ There R. Judah's second wife, Stella, the daughter of Benjamin ben Joab of Fano, gave birth to their son

David. (R. Judah already had a daughter, Belladona, from his first marriage to a woman whose name is no longer known.)

By 1473 we find R. Judah Messer Leon in Mantua, where he continued teaching through his academy and also began the formal education of his son R. David. R. Judah's relationship with the wealthy Mantuan Jewish bankers and textile merchants, R. Judah and Jacob Norsa, may have motivated the move. They were typical Jewish patrons of learning, ardent students of rabbinic tradition and secular studies. They highly esteemed R. Judah Messer Leon's work on grammar and logic and employed a young Provençal scribe, Abraham ben Mordecai Farissol, to copy these works for their personal library.⁸⁹ R. Judah also became involved in the family's textile business, apparently investing in it.⁹⁰ These ties further drew R. Judah into the small Italian Jewish oligarchy.

Another public controversy, this time in Mantua, shows R. Judah's continued fight against what he viewed as the misuse of philosophic knowledge. In R. Judah's employ was someone known to us only as R. David the Spaniard, apparently of Spanish origin. He taught Moses Narboni's translation and commentary of Alghazali's *The Intention of the Philosophers*, one of the popular texts for the study of logic, physics, and metaphysics among the Jews of the late middle ages.⁹¹ R. Judah grew increasingly dissatisfied with R. David the Spaniard, claimed that the teacher misused philosophy to propagate heretical views, and ultimately dismissed him from the academy. In retaliation R. David the Spaniard accused R. Judah Messer Leon of plagiarism and other intellectual dishonesty. R. Judah then found need to defend himself through a public letter to the elders of Bologna, where the accusations had spread.⁹²

R. Judah Messer Leon enjoyed a brilliant career in Mantua. He continued to write supercommentaries to the Averroist-Aristotelian corpus and completed a supercommentary on four books of Aristotle's physics.⁹³ In 1475-76 he published a manual on Hebrew rhetoric, *Nofet Zufim* (*The Book of the Honeycomb's Flow*), which became the first Hebrew book to be printed while his author was still alive. R. Judah's decision to publish *Nofet Zufim* demonstrates his openness toward Renaissance humanism as well as his unique political sensitivity, which we can appreciate by recognizing the political import of rhetoric.

Rhetoric, T. Todorov recently wrote

is a double discourse. It presents itself first as an inventory of the forms of language, thus an extension of grammar—as a