



## Letter from the Rabbi

### Florence and Venice: Two Thousand Years of Jewish Life November 2010

Dear Haverim,

Last month, I wrote about Jewish history and life in Rome. Whereas antiquities and the Vatican dominate one's visit there, Florence is the Renaissance city "par excellence." Biblical Judaism is well represented by statues of David – at the Academia, the Uffizi Gallery and in various piazzas. Nearby Livorno takes pride in its Modigliani, Montefiore and Disraeli families, as well. Today, there are 1,000 Jews in Florence and one of the most visited sights, the Church of San Croce, was designed by a Jewish architect, Nicolo Matas, in the 1850's. It was actually a re-design of this 14<sup>th</sup> century church and what one notices immediately is the large Magen David/Star of David motif on it. Most locals and tourists assume that it's for Jesus the Jew or a Near Eastern symbol of two interlocking triangles joining heaven and earth, but actually Matas incorporated it in his design because he was a Jew. When he was selected, through an architectural competition, no one knew his religion, but they soon discovered it when he asked for Shabbat as a day off! Entombed in this church are Machiavelli, Michelangelo and Galileo, but under the steps in front – in violation of both Jewish and Christian law – lies Matas himself!

Florence is also known for the great cultural patrons, the Medicis, and, in their palace, hangs a portrait of humanist and scholar Elijah Delmedigo. In 1430, one hundred Jewish moneylenders were invited to Florence and, with the Medicis, financed the work of the Renaissance. While the Medicis treated the Jews well, once again the Catholic Church did not, and a ghetto was established in the worst part of town. While Jews have lived in Tuscany since the Judean exile in 70 CE (where they spoke a Judeo-Florentine dialect), it wasn't until the 17<sup>th</sup> century that life improved, when cultured, affluent Jews arrived in Florence in significant numbers. They built community institutions, including a magnificent synagogue that was modeled on Byzantine architecture and was meant to match the beauty of Florentine churches. It was a way of saying that we Jews have arrived. No longer restricted to a ghetto, Jews still lived in one neighborhood – rich and poor alike. They created a community of great scholarship and mutual aid and eventually liberalized traditional Judaism with a synagogue organ, occasional mixed seating and a "living in two civilizations" culture that interwove Italian and Jewish life.

Today, the community has been reduced in size from a high of 3,000 to only 1,000 (300 Jews were killed in the Shoah) and most of the rest have emigrated. The big issue today, sadly, is an intra-community fight, provoked by Chabad, criticizing the non-Hasidic Orthodox synagogue for not being sufficiently kosher or traditional. It's absurd, but one block apart are two synagogues and two food stores/restaurants in competition in a dwindling Jewish community. A century ago, one of the greatest Biblical scholars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Umberto Cassuto, was Florence's rabbi. Today, in this magnificent Renaissance city, overflowing with incredible art and culture, the Jewish community struggles to survive and fight itself.

Venice is a magical city, unusually beautiful and relatively untouched for hundreds of years. It's a thousand years old and Jews have been there almost from the beginning. Venice was settled when mainland residents fled invading barbarians. Jews became important to the economy almost immediately and dominated trade with Mediterranean countries and the Middle East. Sadly, the first European ghetto was established in 1516, on the second day of Pesach, and the Jews were forced to take out long term leases with rents that were increased by 33%. "Geto" means foundry in Italian and

the old foundry was the site of this new ghetto, in a swampy malaria-filled neighborhood. The Doge (Duke) was forced by the Church to move the entire Jewish population there, which grew over the years from 1000 to 4000 people, building, as in Rome, tall unsafe buildings to house everyone. All windows facing outward were blocked off and the walls were built higher and higher to cut the Jews off from the rest of Venice. Jews were forced to wear red hats and engage in the traditional money lending and shmata businesses. They were taxed excessively, their books were burned and they even had to pay for the Christian guards who locked them in at night.

Still, Venice became a great center of Jewish culture and trade. Jewish merchants from all over Europe and the Middle East came to the ghetto to deal in spices, jewels and silk, crypto-Jews from Spain and Portugal re-established their identities and, two decades after Guttenberg, the first printed Pentateuch was published in 1516, followed by Biblical commentaries and the Talmud. (The format in which the Talmud is still published to this day had its origins in Venice.)

While there was widespread Christian illiteracy, the only free school in Venice was Jewish. Jews spoke a Judeo-Venetian dialect in order to keep economic and political discussions confidential and they practiced a more lenient Judaism than in much of Europe. (Travel by gondola was permitted on Shabbat.) Their Judaism embraced the surrounding culture, even if that culture rejected them. Most famous among Venetian Jewry was Leone Modena – a rabbi, scholar, poet, composer, playwright and gambler! – who translated the Torah from Hebrew to Italian as a young child and Italian poetry to Hebrew by age 13.

Ironically, the ghetto protected its Jews from the Christian mob violence that was so prevalent in Europe and the government prevented the Church from expelling the Jews because nobles needed Jewish money lenders and merchants.

In 1797, the ghetto was liberated and, after 1848, ghetto walls were dismantled throughout western Europe. Italy's first Prime Minister after unification was a "community organizer" and a Jew – Luigi Luzzatti, a cousin of (half-Jewish) Fiorello LaGuardia. An active Zionist, Luzzatti served in the Italian Parliament for 50 years.

Visiting Venice and passing the Rialto, one's mind turns to "The Merchant of Venice" and the debate over whether, given the anti-Semitism of the time, Shylock was a sympathetic or despicable character (or both). Clever, affluent and angry, he demanded that his humanity be recognized ("Hath not a Jew eyes..."), but ultimately, he was overwhelmed by the power of church and state.

The spirit of Shylock hangs over the ghetto. Its five synagogues – Levantine, Spanish, Italian and two German – were once filled with faux and real marble, beautiful wood, silk and silver, but today some are closed and others are shabby. The most beautiful place for Judaica is an art gallery in the ghetto owned and staffed by Israeli artist Michal Meron. Her work ranges from primitive art to Kabbala, and from scenes of Venice to Israel. She and her husband explained to me that they moved from Yafo/Jaffa to Venice because of the economic situation in Israel and because her husband was born in Livorno and wanted to return to Italy.

Our guide to the ghetto also had a fascinating, but painful story. She's Jewish on her father's side, but that means nothing to the Jews of Italy. She identifies with Judaism and teaches it to her children, but the Jewish authorities don't recognize patrilineal descent. I explained the Reconstructionist and Reform position and how we would certainly recognize her as Jewish. At that moment, two Jews from New York and one from London entered the conversation (uninvited) and coldly said – "you're not really Jewish, that's Jewish law – but you can always convert!" Like Disraeli, who considered himself "the blank page in the (Christian) bible between the Old and New Testaments," our guide felt spiritually homeless. Calling the Pope "a stupid right-wing nut" and the Orthodox rabbinate something similar, she was angry and alienated – more for her children than for herself. Five hundred Jews in Venice, a

high intermarriage rate and no recognition of patrilineal descent or even empathy – who needs anti-Semites? The Jewish community is killing itself!

Even more, in Venice, as in Florence, the same Chabad provocation exists. American Chabadniks have come in, just as in Florence, and, by offering free Shabbat meals to tourists and “real Judaism” to locals, have split a Jewish community of fewer than 500 people!

Venice is one of the most beautiful cities that I’ve ever visited. I loved walking its streets, taking a vaporetto from dock to dock, strolling on the beaches of Lido and listening to the competing “orchestras” at night in Piazza San Marco. But, once again, the joy of being in such a lovely city and country is partly tempered by memories of medieval anti-Semitism, denied economic opportunity and a legacy of scapegoating and manipulation. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, so that there is some comfort today in seeing Doge and Pope swept aside by a more tolerant, democratic Italy.

My hope is that, even in a tight economy, all of us will find a way to expand our experiences through travel and that, when we travel, we also “travel Jewishly” – visiting historical sights and sites and meeting our fellow “landsmen” everywhere. Whether we visit Mexico or New Mexico, York or New York, Paris, France or Paris, Texas, may we seek out our people and our story, so that we may become more connected Jewishly and humanly.

***B’shalom,***

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Arnold Rachlis". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned to the left of the typed name below it.

Rabbi Arnold Rachlis