

Intra-culture as Inter-culture: Gender, Class, and Nation in Jewish Venice

Amy Kaminsky

University of Minnesota

The day our group of NEH scholars, teachers, and writers went to the Jewish cemetery on Lido, Shaul Bassi pointed out to us that one reason that the Jewish community in Venice is reluctant to embrace reform or conservative Judaism is that these movements are associated with the United States. U.S. cultural hegemony is strongly felt and passionately resisted in Italy as elsewhere in Europe. A U.S. version of Judaism is simply not acceptable.

Many of the Jews in our group were taken aback by Shaul's comment because, although I dare say all of us fully understand the Italian desire to maintain cultural integrity in the face of the behemoth of U.S. culture, many American Jews feel not completely of our country. It surprises us to be seen as responsible for its actions and bearers of its values. Many of us, particularly those on the left, feel marginal to the U.S.'s increasingly exclusive Christian ethos and disposition, and we do not identify with its ever-more-right-wing politics. We feel sympathy and even solidarity with those who would resist a US-type consumer culture.

By the same token, we often put politics, language, and secular differences aside and feel connected to Jews beyond our borders. Even I, a minimally observant Jew, seek out Jewish neighborhoods, past and present, when I travel abroad; and I am warmed by the familiarity and connection I experience in a foreign synagogue. I feel more

connected at the root to European Jews than to U.S. gentiles. As Jews we are tied to each other through time and ritual and text. A shared geography, for many of us in the Diaspora, seems less important than this shared mythic, ritualized history. Yet as historians and anthropologists of U.S. Judaism have shown us, our Judaism is deeply marked by its cultural environment and unmistakably American.ⁱ

So when Shaul suggests to us that our joking about the selective orthodoxy of Venetian Jews is a kind of American imperialism, we are taken aback. We apologize, we realize he is right, but we still wish that a woman rabbi didn't seem like an oxymoron, and that counting women in the minyan were seen as a real solution to the problem of finding 10 adult Jews to pray together in Venice, because part of why we are here, even if we didn't realize it before we reached this place, is to help keep an endangered Jewish Venice from sinking into the sea, and our instinct (which is never more clearly revealed as a product of our culture than it is here) is to offer ourselves as a model of success. However, all the good will and innocent motives in the world cannot undo the fact that U.S. cultural hegemony is perhaps more powerful and certainly more insidious than its military might. As Jews who live in and who derive certain material benefits from being part of a dominant culture, we inevitably carry that culture, even if we feel marginal to it and, sometimes, endangered by it. We are its vectors, like it or not, its Typhoid Mary.

The conviction that knowledge is always located, always has a ground and a perspective, has become something akin to an article of faith (or, less provocatively stated, an axiom) of feminist scholarship. Nevertheless, I lost sight of this one clear epistemological truth in my approach to learning about Venetian Jewish history and

culture, and my sense of my relationship with that object of knowledge. In part, my very ignorance deceived me about my innocence. Since I came to this institute not knowing much of anything about its subject matter, I did not think of myself as either a possessor or maker of knowledge. I was, I assumed without thinking it through, free of epistemic power and of the responsibility incumbent upon those who hold that power. But authorized by the NEH and by an academic credentialing process that confers degrees, jobs, tenure, and rank, epistemic power is mine even if I don't (or didn't) acknowledge it, and I am responsible.

On the other hand, I assumed that my coming into this group, asking questions and having opinions about Venetian Jewry, was something akin to a right I had, by virtue of my standing as a Jew among Jews (and here I mean not as part of the subgroup of Jews participating in the institute, but among the Jews, past and present, of Venice.) I had to be in Venice to become aware that such standing is compromised by my being an American Jew in Venetian Jewish territory.

These now-too-obvious moments of insight, clarifying to me what should have been obvious from the beginning, suggest some issues and strategies for teaching and research. The strains of difference and power within the world of Jews, especially among Jews of the Diaspora, indicate that it makes sense to look within Italian Jewry for its own complexity and internal fault lines. The Venetian example is just one strand in the weave of history of Italian Jews, which in turn is connected to and different from the rest of European Jewish history.ⁱⁱ We can mine Renata Segre's work on the Jewish presence in Venice, Donnatella Calabi's analysis of the expansion of the Ghetto, and Riccardo Calimani's history for the inter-cultural nature of the Jewish community itself. The

waves of Jewish immigration into the Ghetto, beginning with the indigenous Jewish population and continuing on through the German, Levantine and Ponentine nations, present instances of competing intramural interests. The fact that the German, Italian, and Sephardic Jews, are called “nations,” the ways that the Christian authorities treated these groups differently as a way to prevent a united and therefore more powerful Jewish community with which to contend, the commercial rivalries among the different groups, their separate synagogues and distinct rites, all mitigated by constant interaction, blending of families, the breaking down of national and, eventually, linguistic boundaries, remind us of the differences within a marginalized community that is often perceived as monolithic by outsiders.ⁱⁱⁱ We can see the way difference is performed, constructed, and transmitted by looking to poetry and to court records, to self-writing and to treatises. We can, now, listen to the signs of difference within Jewish ritual music, thanks to Jonathan Malino, who captured the labor of love of Rabbi Rachetti, and to the rabbi himself, who not only explained to us that in northern Italy each community has its own tunes for chanting prayers, but who demonstrated how they sound.

Differences within Italian Judaism are not only ethnic and regional; they also occur along lines of class and gender. What was the relationship between rich and poor Jews? To the extent that there is a dominant Jewish Venetian group at any particular time, how do the others negotiate their position with relation to that group and to each other? How do in and out migrations affect the community at large? The ramifications of travel for business or family purposes is another area to explore. Leon Modena’s remarks about women who spent time away from their nuclear families in one city to attend to the needs of their families of birth living elsewhere, and of an aunt learned in Torah, are suggestive,

especially given 21st century assumptions concerning constraints on the women of earlier historical periods. Rheinhold Mueller finds a record of a woman moneylender, no name attached. Anonymous, again, was a woman; but she was there.

The gendered nature of Jewish life in the Ghetto as well as in post-Ghetto Venice has to do not only with the lives of women but also of the construction of Jewish masculinity in the face of the feminization of Jewishness by the dominant culture. Moreover, our knowledge of Venetian Jewish domestic life and social history in general requires that we attend to the production, performance, and ideology of gender. I look forward to reading Adelman's work in this area.

Calimani, whose history of the Ghetto is basic reading, however, simultaneously includes and trivializes material on women and gender. His account of Sara Copio Sullam makes her seem like a gullible dupe. The recent Italian edition of her writing, Deanna Shemek's work on her, and Will Wells's translation get us closer to the complexity of Sullam. Calimani also tantalizes (and irritates) me with an anecdote about class, sex, and gender in the 1600's, only to dismiss it as a curiosity without real historic interest. Yet this episode holds important clues to the texture of Jewish life of the period. Although Calimani characterizes it as the tale of an abandoned child, we can reread it as a story of gender and class: a Jewish servant gives birth to her child by the (also) Jewish master of the house in which she works. He takes the baby from her and leaves it where it is sure to be found, together with specific information on the time of birth, so the finder will know when the bris should be performed. The mother is told that the baby is a girl, even though it is a boy, and she seems to have had no part in the abandonment. The Ghetto leaders decide the child should be brought up there, with appropriate parents.

Does it surprise us that a Jewish man would make the family housemaid pregnant? (We might, for example, assume that a man so careful about making sure that his child would undergo the ritual of circumcision at the proper time would also have obeyed Jewish law proscribing adultery.) What does his lying about the baby's sex suggest? Would the mother have made different claims on the child had she known it was a boy? Did the father assume that losing a male child would have been a more serious matter? Did he worry that she might make inheritance claims if she had known the sex of the child? Or was this just a way of making it harder to trace the baby should she decide she wanted it back? How did gender and class interact to so disempower the mother? Why did the community leaders, presumably all men (but perhaps with wives who might have had the chance to voice an opinion, however privately) decide the child's future as they did? What does it mean that the child was meant to be found, kept healthy, and ensured the proper rituals? I want to know more: this episode is gives us an opportunity to begin to unravel the very stuff of the relations of power and intimacy in Jewish daily life. So this, perhaps, is where to begin.

ⁱ See, for example, Riv Ellen Prell, *Prayer and Community*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1989.

ⁱⁱ Gadi Luzzato Voghera, "Italian Jews," *The emancipation of Catholics, Jews, and Protestants: Minorities and the nation state in nineteenth century Europe*, Rainer Liedke and Stephen Wenderhorst, eds. (Manchester: U Manchester Press, 1999), 169-187 refers to the ethnic differences among Jews in Italy, and to economic differences as well (170).

ⁱⁱⁱ How Hebrew brings the groups together, which of them have maintained the language and to what extent, the development and eventual decline of Judeo-Venetian.