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Italian Jews: A Surprising and Understudied Influence in the Enlightenment

Abstract

The experience of Italian Jews during the Enlightenment is deserving of much more attention. Not only did Italian Jews such as Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, a man born in a ghetto, later embrace a form of secularism, but his works and others written by his peers made an impact on the Italian Enlightenment and seemingly contributed to the practice of toleration that appeared in sporadic installments throughout Europe. While the Jewish experience in Europe hails from a long tradition of persecution, with sporadic and incomplete periods of toleration at various points in its history, it is clear that through a promotion of a new version of toleration and the incomplete but definite shift towards secularization and assimilation, Italian Jews directly contributed to one of the most important movements in European history.

Keywords

Italy, Jews, Italian Jews, Enlightenment, Tolerance, Assimilation, Judaism, Secularism, Catholicism

Martinez: Italian Jews in the Enlightenment

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ITALIAN JEWS IN THE ENLIGHTENMENT: A SURPRISING AND UNDERSTUDIED
INFLUENCE

BY

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Italian Jews in the Enlightenment

He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies; and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.¹

Shakespearean character, Shylock, gives this impassioned defense during a trial set in sixteenth-century Venice. A Jewish moneylender involved in a civil dispute with the Christian protagonist, Shylock's character is an archetypal figure of what had been a common perception of Jews during the time of Shakespeare's writings in the sixteenth century. *The Merchant of Venice* displays prominently the larger theme of the age-old struggle between Judaism and Christendom, and being written by an author from the latter, this play's portrayal of Shylock embodies many of the negative stereotypes associated with European Jews. Characterizing Shylock as a moneylender, while a common occupation for Jews of this period, served to illustrate how Christians often saw Jews as greedy, corrupt, and uncompassionate.² The antisemitic nature of the play is not hidden to even the most casual observer.

However, this section of the play, Shylock's defense, was one of the first, perhaps unintentional, public condemnations of what is now understood to be antisemitism. This "enlightened" concept of Jews holding common humanity would not become uniform throughout Europe for centuries, and arguably still suffers from lack of uniform acceptance in certain regions throughout Europe and the rest of the world. While Shylock's plea for basic

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group, 2010), 58.

² Cecil Roth, "The Background of Shylock," *The Review of English Studies* 9, no. 34 (1933): 148.

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human decency would go unheeded in this play, the principles inherent in Shylock's cry can clearly be seen in European Jewry's participation in the European Enlightenment.

While a study on European Jewry in the Enlightenment could be and has been a worthwhile subject of study throughout academia, the broad sweep of such a topic is much too complicated for the scope of this research. The intricate nature of the geographic region, time period, and social status of Jewish figures in Europe during this movement is deserving of a much lengthier monograph. Additionally, it seems any study of the Enlightenment finds English, French, and German subjects especially interesting, and thus has covered these areas and their developments in much detail. Italy, on the other hand, does not figure so prominently in the historical spotlight, and Italian Jewry's participation in the movement even lesser so.

Failing to examine Italian Jewry's participation in the Enlightenment, with Italy home to the oldest Jewish community in Europe, is unfortunate. It is especially unfortunate since it is clear that Italian Jews not only played a role in promoting Enlightenment ideals, but they did so to direct and permanent consequences to their own communities and their non-Jewish contemporaries. Nicholas Terpstra notes that the movement was, "simultaneously transformative and reactionary, egalitarian and elitist, [a period] of resistance and of acculturation."³ While other countries will be considered tangentially to provide context, Jews in the Italian Enlightenment receive more specific, deserving scrutiny. The goal of this research is to bring more attention to Italian Jewry's contributions to a crucial period of European intellectual history by examining the evolution of the concept of tolerance, both inside and outside of the Jewish

³ Nicholas Terpstra, "De-Institutionalizing Confraternity Studies: Fraternalism and Social Capital in Cross-Cultural Contexts," in Christopher Black and Pamela Gravestock, eds., *Early Modern Confraternities in Europe and the Americas: International and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Aldershot, 2006), 277.

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community, as well as how calls for tolerance in the Enlightenment shaped the Jewish community's perception of assimilation.

Background and Context

Before considering Italian Jews and their contributions to this intellectual movement, it is important to provide some brief historical context to the overall effects Jews experienced during the eighteenth century. As the revolutionary Enlightenment ideals spread throughout Europe, Jews often experienced increased persecution from both religious and government authorities. Italian Jews experienced a brief moment of relief when Pope Clement XIV relaxed restrictions on Jewish integration in Christian communities, but his successor, Pope Pius VI, only reintroduced the discrimination.⁴ Though popes of this period most prominently influenced the Italian Jews in their region, discrimination of Jews had been and continued to be relatively consistent throughout the rest of Western Europe, often the result of an effort to combat the anti-religious sentiment that was birthed in the Enlightenment. Frank J. Coppa notes that a struggle ensued between liberalism and traditionalism in Italy, and popes notably dealt with this intellectual struggle.⁵ With the Jews safely confined to the ghetto at various stages in Italy during this period, attention was at times diverted away from the Jewish community to the more pressing concerns of revolutionaries threatening to overthrow traditional authority.⁶

⁴ Geoffrey Symcox, "The Jews of Italy in the Triennio Giacobino, 1796–1799," in *Acculturation and Its Discontents: The Italian Jewish Experience Between Exclusion and Inclusion*, edited by Myers David N., Ciavolella Massimo, Reill Peter H., and Symcox Geoffrey (University of Toronto Press, 2008), 155.

⁵ Frank J. Coppa, "Anti-Judaism in the Church: From the French Revolution to the Mid-Nineteenth Century," in *The Papacy, the Jews, and the Holocaust* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 42.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

While the struggles Jews experienced throughout this period will receive greater attention in this study due to the rather consistent nature of the antisemitic practices of Europe during this time, one must also recognize that viewing Jews strictly as victims does not do justice to the breadth of the Jewish experience. Indeed, some of the most remarkable figures considered in this study found a relatively respected status in various positions of authority, specifically the Court Jews of the northern regions in Italy and the Austrian territories. Philosemitic views (an idealized view of Judaism that is the converse relationship to antisemitism) are certainly useful in bringing the negative experiences of Jews to light, however, one must not let a viewpoint become exclusive enough that it skews historical understanding.⁷

Additionally, viewing Jews solely as victims does not take into account the negative actions taken against Christians by the Jews. Jonathan I. Israel asserts that “it is as true to say that Jews exploited Christians as it is to maintain that Christians oppressed Jews.”⁸ Though hostility born out of a discriminatory culture should be placed in its proper context, Israel maintains that “Jewish activity was frequently detrimental to Christians and their guilds; just as Christian society was perennially striving to repress the Jews. Absolutist monarchy and mercantilism tended to protect and favour Jews only because both trends were themselves fundamentally at odds with many features of traditional Christian society.”⁹ This victim/perpetrator classification question is just another example of the complicated nature of this topic.

⁷ Mufti, Aamir R. *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 41; Mark Krupnick, "The Rhetoric of Philosemitism," in *Rhetorical Invention and Religious Inquiry: New Perspectives*, edited by Jost Walter and Olmsted Wendy (Cambridge, MA: Yale University Press, 2000), 356-357.

⁸ Jonathan I. Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism, 1550-1750*, 141.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

Definitions

It is necessary to note that while certain generalizations will be made to describe geographic and demographic trends, the concept of Italian Jewry during the Enlightenment is ultimately a complicated and multifaceted one. No unified Italian state existed in the 1700s, and more than a century would pass before such an accomplishment would come to fruition. Other than the geography of the Italian peninsula, there was little more to unify the regions of Italy before the nineteenth century. Indeed, when considering Italian Jewish contributions to the Enlightenment, one finds that experiences differ depending on geographic location and the time in which the involvement took place.

Recognizing such diversity in the Italian peninsula, one may question the validity of pursuing such an analysis. The purpose of considering a specifically “Italian” experience, however, is that while the peninsula was divided into over a dozen city-states and kingdoms, one unifying feature of this region was a gradual, if spasmodic, adoption of Italian as the common language. In fact, as the use of printing presses spread throughout Europe in the sixteenth century, Italian states were home to the majority with 56 presses in Italy.¹⁰ This strong history of publication figures prominently in the Italian Enlightenment and influenced the evolution of the Jewish experience as well.

In addition to recognizing geographic limitations and differences, describing someone as “Jewish” in eighteenth-century Europe does not always signify uniformity in character, culture, or even religious beliefs. Beyond the geographic, and thus cultural differences that affected

¹⁰ Jeremiah E. Dittmar, "Information Technology and Economic Change: The Impact of the Printing Press," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 126, no. 3 (2011): 1144.

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Jewish culture and identity, the basic differences between the two major Jewish subcultures, Sephardim and Ashkenazim, must be considered to fully grasp the role of Jews in the Enlightenment. Sephardic Jews, prevalent in predominately Muslim majority regions, including the Iberian Peninsula and the Middle East, developed a culture that interpreted the Torah in a more rigid, legalist manner.¹¹ Ignaz Maybaum contrasted the differences by stating, “To the Ashkenazic Jew Torah tended to become teaching and doctrine, while to the Sephardic Jew it became more and more a code, an unchangeable law.”¹² He further describes the differences between the two subcultures by claiming, “The Sephardic way of thinking has now permeated Ashkenazic Jewry and is to be found wherever Torah is understood in the Islamic way as a book, a legal code, excluding any addition, any correction, any reinterpretation in the light of the new historical period.”¹³

On the other hand, Ashkenazic Judaism is characterized as less mystical than the Sephardic subculture and more characteristic of a “homely, warm pietism” that allowed for a more liberal disposition.¹⁴ This liberal disposition is crucial to understanding the Jewish Enlightenment, for Maybaum claims that this new outlook resulted in greater participation in various intellectual movements throughout European history, including the Enlightenment, which is the primary focus of this study. However, later movements that were influential to Ashkenazic doctrine and culture include the movements of Romanticism, and Liberalism and Historicism.¹⁵ Based on these notable differences, it is clear the variations between Sephardic

¹¹ Ignaz Maybaum, "Sephardim and Ashkenazim," *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 4, no. 1 (1969): 30

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

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and Ashkenazic Judaism play a role in how the Jewish Enlightenment would differ based on these general traditions.

A testament to the complexity of the topic, the makeup of Italian Jews cannot be categorized by a single subculture, but rather a variety that included Ashkenazic, Sephardic, and Roman Jews, the latter considered the oldest Jewish community in Europe.¹⁶ Roman Jews are represented by a mixture of the greater Sephardic/Ashkenazic categories, as the long-standing Roman community became a popular destination for refugees of each subculture at various periods in European history. Most notably, a significant migration movement of Sephardic Jews occurred in 1492 after their expulsion from Catholic Spain.¹⁷ However, the geographic delineation between these two Jewish subcultures resulted in Southern Italy being more heavily represented by Sephardic Jews and higher proportions of Ashkenazi Jews being found in the north near the Austrian and German territories.¹⁸ Keeping the diverse perspectives of law and religion in mind, the diversity of responses to the Enlightenment becomes better understood as a cultural and geographic phenomenon at a general level.

Tolerance

The first major aspect of Italian Jewry during the Enlightenment considered in this research is the development of the concept of tolerance. The movement to encourage religious and cultural toleration is one of the most important in a series of movements taken at disjointed

¹⁶ L. Scott Lerner, "Narrating over the Ghetto of Rome," *Jewish Social Studies, New Series*, 8, no. 2/3 (2002): 8-9.

¹⁷ Bernard D. Cooperman, "Ethnicity and Institution Building among Jews in Early Modern Rome." *Association for Jewish Studies AJS Review* 30, no. 1 (04, 2006): 129-30.

¹⁸ Cooperman, "Ethnicity and Institution Building among Jews in Early Modern Rome," 129-130; Ignaz Maybaum, "Sephardim and Ashkenazim," *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 4, no. 1 (1969): 29-30.

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and unequal intensities by Jewish, Christian, and secular scholars alike in which one sought to promote a more harmonious coexistence with religious factions. Indeed, Todd Endelman claims that “beginning in the eighteenth century, the structures of state and society that fixed the place of Jews in the Christian West, clearly demarcating them from their neighbors, weakened and then dissolved.”¹⁹ He further notes that “the democratic and industrial revolutions, along with the spread of capitalism, liberal individualism, and religious toleration and voluntarism, revolutionized Jewish status and self-understanding.”²⁰

Viewing this concept in its historical context is crucial to understanding just how important any step towards tolerance was to the European Jew at this point in history. Jews certainly experienced cycles of treatment, from being relatively ignored to direct and intense persecution. Catholic authorities, political leaders (often one and the same), and the general population placed formal and informal restrictions on Jewish daily life. This could include everything from social pressure to live in segregated communities to forced ghettoization complete with curfew restrictions, occupation prohibitions, and even forced conversion in many cases.²¹ One would think expulsion would prove to be a more coveted method of removing what was clearly an unwanted part of the demographic, and indeed, expulsion was used in many instances throughout history, including Italian authorities who expelled thousands of Jews from Italy who were said to be the source of the plague.²²

¹⁹ Todd M. Endelman, "Conversion in the Age of Enlightenment and Emancipation." In *Leaving the Jewish Fold: Conversion and Radical Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*, 49-87. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Steve Siporin, "A Map to the World's First Ghetto," in *The Italian Jewish Experience* (Stony Brook, NY: Forum Italicum Publishing, 2000), 1-2.

²² "Genoa", *Jewish Virtual Library*, accessed December 5, 2017, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/genoa>.

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Since Jews did not have the same limitations on occupations such as moneylending, they were often allowed to remain in the country in order to play a crucial part in the economy and job market.²³ Perhaps the greatest Italian example of such a phenomenon is the Venetian Ghetto. Set up in 1516, this ghetto was a clear example of how Europeans, especially the countries that utilized a ghetto system, viewed Jews as both a source of “contamination” as well as an unwanted but needed aspect of the European economy by allowing Jews to remain in Venice but only under restricted circumstances.²⁴ Pope Paul IV similarly founded the Roman Ghetto in July of 1555 under the bull *Cum nimis absurdum*, effectively confining the Jews to restrictions mirroring those in the Venetian ghettos.²⁵ Their utility did not go unnoticed by Catholic authorities, however, and Bernard Cooperman claims that because Roman Jews took such a prominent role in gathering the taxes, the community became an integral part of “the papal fiscal administration.”²⁶ It is clear that political and religious authorities sought at least provisional connections to these potential “contaminants,” and thus, a begrudging, limited, and unofficial measure of tolerance appeared at various stages in Jewish history at the behest of economic stability.

Contextualizing the Enlightenment’s Tolerance

Once the values of the Enlightenment spread its captivating spell over the European intellectual class, tolerance would become reborn in its revolutionary and broader manifestation. No longer a method of retaining an unwanted but necessary demographic, toleration came to

²³ Kenneth R. Stow, *Theater of Acculturation: The Roman Ghetto in the Sixteenth Century* (University of Washington Press, 2001), 103.

²⁴ Steve Siporin, “A Map to the World’s First Ghetto,” in *The Italian Jewish Experience* (Stony Brook, NY: Forum Italicum Publishing, 2000), 1.

²⁵ Kenneth Stow, “The Roman Ghetto,” in *Anna and Tranquillo: Catholic Anxiety and Jewish Protest in the Age of Revolutions* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2016), 69.

²⁶ Cooperman, “Ethnicity and Institution Building among Jews in Early Modern Rome,” 132.

embody a more liberal perspective of the fundamental necessity of religious freedom. One of the more prominent promoters of this new concept of tolerance was Joseph II of Austria. After visiting prominent Enlightenment thinkers in France in 1777, the young monarch demonstrated the shift in thinking towards religious freedom. Responding to his mother's consultation on how to deal with Moravian dissenters, Joseph boldly encouraged:

Either complete freedom of religion, or you must drive out of your lands everybody who does not believe as you do . . . Has any one a right to abuse his power to such an extent . . . as to save people's souls in spite of them, to coerce their conscience? So long as men serve the state, obey the laws of nature and society, and do not defame Your Majesty—what right have you temporal rulers to interfere in other things . . . ?²⁷

Condemning the actions of his own coregent, Joseph demonstrated that tolerance had taken a new form from its previous conception. Denouncing the practice of “[saving] people's souls in spite of them” hits directly at Catholic practice of forced conversion of Jews.²⁸ This sentiment would become a legislative reality under his appropriately named Patent of Toleration and later Edict of Toleration.²⁹ These legislative acts not only tolerated the mere presence of Jews in Lower Austria, they “allowed Jews to have their prayer houses, meeting places, and schools,” and ultimately a primitive allowance for “freedom of worship.”³⁰ While only tangentially related to the Italian experience since the Italian territories under Joseph II's purview did not benefit as much from his enlightened thinking as his more central Austrian subjects, Joseph II's Edict of

²⁷ Saul Kussiel Padover, *The Revolutionary Emperor, Joseph II of Austria* (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1967), 56.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 150-151.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

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Toleration is an indication of the proximity of Enlightenment ideals that would directly affect the Jewish population of Italy.

Franco Venturi covers tolerance in its reimagined iteration in his *Italy and the Enlightenment*. In this work, he notes that in the struggle for coexistence, “It is not weariness with the religious wars but the desire for tolerance which is of historical importance.”³¹ Indeed, he claims that tolerance “eventually gave a new meaning to a series of conflicts which had begun as dynastic or religious disputes and which became transformed and widened until they drew together and involved all the elements of European life at the beginning of the eighteenth century, including that precious, forward-looking element which was contained in the moral reevaluation of tolerance.”³² Toleration, in general, is obviously a major aspect of the Enlightenment and thus provides valuable insight into how Jews perceived and received this newfound push for coexistence.

By the turn of the eighteenth century, “conferences, commissions, petitions published and unpublished over whether or not to tolerate Jews, and if so on what terms, abounded from Poland to Portugal, and from Hungary to Ireland.”³³ This movement was an outgrowth of what had been generally a time of peace for many Jews who had found a measure of success in even some of the most prominent positions of authorities. Israel notes an example of rising influence in the Jewish community, the Court Jews, and claims that “the age of the ‘Court Jew (1650-1713) mark the zenith of Jewish influence in early modern Europe.”³⁴ These Jews acted essentially as

³¹ Franco Venturi and S. J. Woolf, *Italy and the Enlightenment: Studies in a Cosmopolitan Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1972), 3.

³² *Ibid.*, 3-4.

³³ Israel, *European Jewry*, 119.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

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advisors, and “in the course of time, the Court Jews not only accumulated riches and honours but evolved a life-style to match.”³⁵ Due to their economic importance to many eighteenth-century governments, they were ultimately exempted from some of the “restrictions and curtailments which the Christian state imposed on the Jew.”³⁶ While, again, it is important to note that this level of influence and treatment was not uniform throughout all layers of Jewish social strata, that any Jew could attain this much influence in Europe at this time is a testament to an atmosphere ripe in Enlightenment ideals of toleration.

One explanation for the popular adoption of a more tolerant stance towards Jews that is postulated by many historians is the decrease in the population of Jews in Europe by the Enlightenment. By diminishing their numbers, and thus their social footprint on their social surroundings, Jews and their proportionate populations are a significant factor in the correlation of greater tolerance. Israel contrasts the seventeenth and eighteenth century by noting that “During the seventeenth century, not only was European Jewry steadily increasing but, almost everywhere where Jews were permitted to live, they were a rapidly growing proportion of the population,” whereas 1713-1750 was a period “of sharp deterioration in European Jewry’s demographic position. . . from the second decade of the eighteenth century onwards, the population of Europe as a whole began to burgeon once more so that . . . Jewish population growth now lagged well behind that of the rest.”³⁷

While Court Jews, their influence, and the conditions for tolerance were appearing throughout the continent, some of the loudest voices for a fundamental concept of religious

³⁵ Ibid., 116.

³⁶ Ibid., 116.

³⁷ Ibid., 195.

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freedom originated in Western Europe. One of the most prominent, later advocates for toleration during the Enlightenment was Voltaire. In his 1764 *Philosophical Dictionary*, he asks, “What is toleration? It is the prerogative of humanity. We are all steeped in weaknesses and error; let us forgive one another’s follies—that is the first law of nature . . . It is clear that every individual who persecutes a man, his brother, because he does not agree with him, is a monster.”³⁸ His assertion that he “who persecutes a man, his brother . . . is a monster” illustrates the increasingly negative perception of religious coercion—a landmark shift in European religious integration with direct consequences for European Jewry.

Italian Jews and Tolerance

With the tangential context of voices outside of Europe, it is necessary, at this juncture, to examine some of the major Italian Jewish figures prominent in this movement. One of the most important figures in this demographic was the Jewish physician, Benedetto Frizzi (Ben-Zion Raphael ha-Kohen).³⁹ Benedetto Frizzi’s polemic treatises demonstrate the agency Jews discovered in defining their own culture, in opposition to the commonly held perceptions of other non-Jewish Italians.⁴⁰ In his *Difesa Contro gli Attacchi Fatti alla Nazione Ebraica nel Libro Intitolato Della Influenza del Ghetto Nello Stato* (*Defense Against Attacks on the Jewish Nation in the Book Entitled The Influence of the Ghetto in the State*) of 1784, Frizzi counters the assertion that Jews and Christians must hate one another. He states, rather:

³⁸ Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. T. Besterman (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 387–89.

³⁹ Lois C. Dubin, “Medicine as Enlightenment Cure: Benedetto Frizzi, Physician to Eighteenth-Century Italian Jewish Society.” *Jewish History* 26, no. 1/2 (2012): 201.

⁴⁰ Benedetto Frizzi, *Difesa Contro gli Attacchi Fatti alla Nazione Ebraica nel Libro Intitolato Della Influenza del Ghetto Nello Stato* (Pavia: Nella Stamperia del R.I. Monistero di S. Salvatore, 1784), 46.

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Jesus Christ and the Apostles also made many provisions and innovations in the nascent religion; yet it is a duty of Christian morality not only not to hate, but to love the Jew by virtue of the great *Diligite*, who is the triumph and the greatest trophy of the Christian charity. Absurd and equally false is what one says, that it is customary for Jews to be derived from religion never to make an alliance with foreigners.⁴¹

This popular work demonstrates the ability of Jews, specifically Italian Jews, to push back against the negative stereotypes of their day. This example also shows the incredible ingenuity of Frizzi to utilize his Christian audience's own Biblical doctrine, doctrine outside of traditional Jewish canon, to argue for greater toleration of the Jewish people.

Benedetto Frizzi's call for tolerance is deftly argued throughout this work. His index indicates his twofold purpose in covering the topic. In the first chapter of this work, titled, "Of General Tolerance," he notes that "the speech was divided into two parts. 1. Tolerance in regard to the being of the moral man and his relations with theology. 2. That relating to being political and civil."⁴² This breakdown demonstrates an additional aspect of the Jewish contribution to Enlightenment, specifically the effect that liberal Enlightenment ideals had on theology and those who study it.⁴³

Schmuel Feiner claims, "The Enlightenment entered the world of traditional premodern Ashkenazi society bearing a contradictory message—a promise to abolish the restrictions on Jews and to take them out of the ghetto, along with a direct threat to their religious and cultural heritage."⁴⁴ This analysis is illustrative of the challenge many Jews faced in both embracing

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 187.

⁴³ Shmuel Feiner, and Chaya Naor, *The Jewish Enlightenment* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 6-7.

⁴⁴ Feiner, *The Jewish Enlightenment*, 7.

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Enlightenment ideals while still maintaining strong foundations in their theological tradition, and a significant movement of Jewish thinkers tended to forego the latter in favor of the former.

Feiner notes that those who embraced a form of “deism,” “expressed the desire for freedom and autonomy of individuals who evaded communal supervision and behaved in opposition to religious laws and moral norms.”⁴⁵ Abandoning traditional mores in order to more rationally adopt Enlightenment concepts was not always taken positively in the Jewish community.

A prime example of an Italian thinker who drifted towards more liberal thinking was Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto (1707-1747). Luzzatto finds prominent attention in the Enlightenment, though certainly under controversial terms. Luzzatto, while perceived in his time as somewhat of a provocateur and a dishonest receiver of visions, did author several prominent works that incited opposition and acceptance both inside and outside of the Jewish community.⁴⁶ Jonathan Garb describes the polarizing figure by noting that “at a very early age, Luzzatto composed in an astounding range of genres in addition to Kabbalah, including theater, logic, rhetoric, talmudics, and Jewish ethics (*mussar*).⁴⁷ The *Kabbalah*, a Jewish intellectual movement during the Enlightenment, is described by the Jewish Virtual Library as the “name applied to the whole range of Jewish mystical activity. While codes of Jewish law focus on what it is God wants from man, kabbalah tries to penetrate deeper, to God's essence itself.”⁴⁸ This movement was vigorously opposed by the Jewish community and is demonstrative of the greater factor of assimilation and its relation to the adoption of tolerance in the European social sphere.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Garb, “The Circle of Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto in Its Eighteenth-Century Context.” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 44, no. 2 (2011): 189.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Joseph Telushkin, “*Kabbalah: An Overview*,” Jewishvirtuallibrary.org, Jewish Virtual Library, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/kabbalah-an-overview>.

Assimilation

One cannot discuss toleration without discussing the push-pull factor of assimilation that ran concurrently with calls for toleration. It is undeniable that Jews were active in both recognizing and adopting new trends that came about during the Enlightenment. For example, Feiner claims that “assimilated Jewish women were at the center of some of the more sought-after salons,” though he notes that a “high wall of cultural and social variance was rising between East and West” as well as urban and rural communities.⁴⁹ However, reaction to the changes to long-held rabbinical and social culture was often swift in vitriolic condemnation.

One such example of the bitter, internal disputes in the Jewish community is one rabbi’s response to the proposition to use a new curriculum for the Jewish education system. This new system would have “included a foreign language, science, history, and geography,” but the rabbi in opposition vehemently denounced such a change.⁵⁰ Feiner describes his passionate opposition as “extremely aggressive,” noting that “he hurled invective” at the proposer, “calling him wicked, accursed, vile and worthless, stupid, oafish, simpleminded and vulgar, loathsome, and heretical.” The spread of academic liberalism undeniably affected the Jewish community, and while opposition was not uniform, resistance to traditional structures was certainly apparent in eighteenth-century Europe.

Luzzatto (also known as Ramhal) inspired his own virulent opposition, though, in many ways, it is certainly understandable considering the radical nature of Luzzatto’s beliefs. Supreme among these beliefs was Luzzatto’s claim that “a maggid (divine power) appeared to him in

⁴⁹ Feiner, *The Jewish Enlightenment*, 303.

⁵⁰ Feiner, *The Jewish Enlightenment*, 91.

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1727.”⁵¹ He further claimed that “this maggid revealed kabbalistic secrets to him, and at times actually dictated complete original kabbalistic works.”⁵² Luzzatto’s mystical tendencies were condemned to be Sabbatean heresy and he was accused of indulging in “matters of sorcery” by the Jewish community.⁵³ However, condemnation for his exceptional claims was not universal. Some members of the community hailed Luzzatto as a “righteous and upright” man who should be given the benefit of the doubt in his radical views.⁵⁴

Luzzatto further illustrates the tumultuous experience of assimilation in the Jewish community with his unique presentation of personal hygiene, namely, refusing (or perhaps being unable) to grow out his beard. Another Italian rabbi, Moses Hefez, printed on his manuscript an engraving of his personal appearance, with his beardless face and “his ample locks falling to his neck.”⁵⁵ His “unrabbinical” appearance is a testament to the changing nature of Jewish culture as influenced by secular, Enlightenment ideals, since Elliott Horowitz claims the image “hardly caused a stir” when it was printed in the first decade of the eighteenth century.⁵⁶ Luzzatto’s cleanshaven face, while not condemned wholesale, did receive some pushback from prominent rabbi, Joseph Ergas:

But let it be known to my respected colleague that I have heard from people who know him intimately that although this man [Luzzatto] is both learned and sharp-witted in esoteric as well as exoteric lore, the fragrance of pietism has not wafted over him. And I inquired whether he was married, and whether he regularly performed ritual immersion

⁵¹ Batya Gallant, “The Alleged Sabbateanism of Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 22, no. 3 (1986): 44.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

⁵⁴ Elliott Horowitz, “The Early Eighteenth Century Confronts the Beard: Kabbalah and Jewish Self-Fashioning,” *Jewish History* 8, no. 1/2 (1994): 96.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

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on Sabbath eves, and whether he was careful to avoid trimming his beard even with scissors, and concerning each I received a negative reply.⁵⁷

It can certainly be seen that secularization and subtle shift towards both liberalized education, theology and even personal appearance caused a mixed reaction in the Jewish community. However, it is also clear that the Jewish community made distinct, profound steps towards greater assimilation as influenced by the intellectual movement that had so taken the European continent by storm.

Conclusion

Italian Jews during the Enlightenment are deserving of much attention in historical research. Not only did Italian Jews such as Moshe Ḥayyim Luzzatto, a man born in a ghetto, later embrace a form of secularism, but his works and others written by men like him made a major impact on the Italian Enlightenment and seemingly contributed to the practice of toleration that appeared in sporadic installments by the increasingly enlightened general public. Limited forms of toleration in the centuries preceding the Enlightenment afforded Jews the ability to coexist with other Europeans in an otherwise persecutive environment due to their inherent value to the economy. However, once Voltaire, Joseph II, and other Enlightenment figures embraced a “reborn” form of toleration, Jews benefited from the new ideal and launched themselves into the discourse by advocating for their community.

The Italian Jewish experience is certainly a reflection of this sweeping movement throughout the rest of the continent. Benedetto Frizzi, the Italian Jewish physician, used his own literary works to not only cajole Christian writers to adhere to what he saw as their own

⁵⁷ Ibid., 96.

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charitable doctrine, but he boldly refuted the mischaracterization of many Jews as violent opponents to the Christian community.⁵⁸ His widely circulated research certainly made waves in the intellectual community. This toleration came at a price for many Jews. Urged on by radical rabbis and Enlightenment thinkers, many Jews were influenced to adopt more secularized theology and a more “Christian” appearance in order to help foster a culture of acceptance. While many Italian Jews embraced this strategy, the adoption was not universal, with the example of the rabbis in opposition to the cleanshaven Luzzatto and Hefez particularly demonstrating the continued importance of Jewish physical appearance to Jewish tradition and culture.

As has been noted above, the Jewish experience in Europe hails from a long tradition of persecution with sporadic and incomplete periods of toleration at various points in its history. The Jewish experience in Italy is no exception, with the notorious use of ghettos figuring prominently in the Italian narrative. However, it is clear that through the promotion of a new version of toleration and the incomplete but definite shift towards secularization and assimilation, Italian Jews directly contributed to one of the most important movements in European history, and echoes of Shylock’s plea for common humanity can be found in the voices of the Italian Enlightenment.

⁵⁸ Frizzi, *Difesa Contro gli Attacchi Fatti alla Nazione Ebraica nel Libro Intitolato Della Influenza del Ghetto Nello Stato*, 46.

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