

Simone Luzzatto, *Scritti politici e filosofici di un ebreo scettico nella Venezia del Seicento*, a cura di Giuseppe Veltri (con la collaborazione di Anna Lissa e Paola Ferruta), Bompiani, Milano 2013, pp. VII-547.

by *Cristiana Facchini*

During the year 1608, the well educated English traveler Thomas Coryat reached Venice. His long journey through Europe had been immortalized in one of the most renowned works in English travel literature, *Coryat Crudities*, where a vivid description of the city, of its socio-political structure, and of its culture were given.

During the voyage that took him from England to Italy, Coryat met some prominent scholars, among whom the great philosopher Casaubon. While in Venice, he made certain to visit the Jewish Ghetto that, given the Venetian topographic diligence in positioning the social-religious components of its political body, was located adjacent to the dwelling of Sir Wotton, the English ambassador. Besides the description of certain aspects of the synagogue's service, Coryat also narrated a long theological discussion entertained with a Jew from the ghetto concerning the personality of Jesus. Coryat's interlocutor, whether real or not, becomes an emblematic symbol of a new confrontation between Christianity and Judaism. Many have advanced the hypothesis that the interlocutor could have been Leone Modena, one of the Venetian rabbis who animated the cultural life of the ghetto throughout the first half of the 17th century. The Jewish Venice, in addition to the presence of the notorious Leone Modena, known for his work of extraordinary success, *Historia de' riti hebraici*, destined to reach an extremely widespread circulation in Europe, included personalities of great intellectual substance especially from the years of the Interdict through the first half of the 17th century. Along with the fascinating and ephemeral personality of Sara Copia Sullam, the 'Ghetto's poetess' who had to defend herself from the accusation of disbelief in the immortality of the soul, Simone (Simcha) Luzzatto, another eminent scholar and rabbi, also belonged to the Jewish Venice. His Italian works now appear in the well annotated and edited edition by Giuseppe Veltri and his team, from the University of Halle-Wittenberg (Simone Luzzatto, *Scritti politici e filosofici di un ebreo scettico nella Venezia del Seicento*, a cura di Giuseppe Veltri (con la collaborazione di Anna Lissa e Paola Ferruta), Bompiani, Milano 2013, pp. 547).

Simone Luzzatto was born in Venice's ghetto in 1583 from a particularly wealthy family dedicated to commercial activities and to the political administration of the Venetian Jewish community. Precisely in his lifetime the Venetian ghetto was exposed to profound demographic tensions, caused by the migratory flow originating from the Ottoman dominions and from the

Iberian Peninsula. Sephardic Jews, *nuevos cristianos* and crypto-Jews settled within the narrow perimeters of the ghetto, certainly modifying its ethnic dimension, as well as its social structure and culture. Differently from many of his rabbinical colleagues of the time, Simone Luzzatto left behind few writings, both in Hebrew and in Italian. Although there were rumors among the Jews of that time confirmed by epistles, on his extraordinary competence with natural philosophy and mathematics, very little remains of his scientific heritage. Parts of Luzzatto's profound knowledge emerge with clarity in two Italian works that are now once again available to the contemporary reader.

In 1638 Luzzatto printed a text entitled *Discorso circa il stato de gl'hebrei*, which underwent a troubled gestation. We owe to Veltri both the meticulous reconstruction of the different stages of this text as well as of the discovery of a manuscript that reproduces, with a series of differences, its first part comprised of the in the first eleven considerations. Undoubtedly of apologetic nature, the *Discorso* distinguishes itself for its indisputable originality amidst the Jewish treatises, and it is not dissimilar from the previously mentioned Jewish-Italian masterpiece concerning Jewish rites written by Leone Modena. Subdivided in eighteen meaningful *considerazioni* touching upon a wide variety of themes and issues, the *Discorso* has been predominantly read as a modern appeal to religious tolerance based mainly on the principle of the Jews' economic usefulness. Admittedly, the theme of the instrumentality of the Jewish minority to the affluence of the state seems most recurrent in the subsequent essays. It also represents one of the hinges of the discourse on religious tolerance animating the European milieu between the 17th and 18th centuries. The treatise originated as a response to the crisis which broke out in 1636 when the Venetian Jewish community was seriously under the threat of expulsion.

The *Discorso* represented far more than a request for tolerance, better yet, it contains a series of diverse concepts regarding religious and political tolerance, while also attempting at a description of Judaism and its cultural and religious dignity. These themes, which may appear trivial to today's reader, characterize themselves for their conspicuous dose of courage in addition to reflecting the considerable freedom of expression granted in the territories of *La Serenissima*.

Among the many issues comprised in the eighteen considerations, the one regarding the concept of "collective guilt" can be considered truly remarkable especially given the great importance that it has played in Jewish history. The concept of "collective guilt" is analyzed by Luzzatto with competence and irony, and it will later appear in the rare defenses against the blood libel, written often by Jews under a pseudonym.

The *Discorso* had limited and polemic acceptance in the Italian milieu, while in Northern Europe its importance and significance were highly praised. Veltri traces its trajectory in the wake of the previous historiographical tradition. The *Discorso*, had been accepted, with sections translated into Latin, in the great bibliographical work published by the Christian hebraist Christian Johann Wolf (1727), who was often assisted by erudite Italian rabbis. Not surprisingly, this

text appears in the Dutch Jewish milieu where its arguments can be traced in Menasseh ben Israel and Spinoza. Successively, it assumed an eminent role in the works that the deist Toland dedicated to the “naturalization” of the Jews. In the German-speaking context, in addition to the use that Moses Mendelssohn will make of it, the *Discorso* appears in Herder’s works and, according to Veltri, also in Sombart’s.

Completely different is the case of the other text published for the first time after its appearance in 1651. This work, stemming from later contributions of Luzzatto, did not receive the required attention. We refer to the text entitled *Il Socrate ovvero dell’humano sapere. Esercizio serioso di Simone Luzzatto hebreo venetiano*. Few are the scholarly works that dedicated the necessary attention to this text, which has been analyzed chiefly by Jewish historiography. David Ruderman, certainly one of the most important contributions on the Jewish scientific culture in the modern age, placed this text within the 17th century line of thought. The American scholar insisted on the presence of themes connected to neostoicism and on the reception of Socrates in the Baroque and Renaissance culture. This fascinating text can be included in the scientific and philosophic debate of the early 17th century in which all the ancient and modern theories on natural philosophy are manifested in line with skeptic and Jesuit probabilism. If drawing exact conclusions about this second treatise may be considered premature, the publication of these two 17th century Jewish texts for the Italian audience highlights the extraordinary cultural integration of the Jews in the Baroque society and invite scholars to pursue this fascinating paths of historical research.

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