RABBI LEONE DA MODENA
A CONTEXTUAL APPROACH: FREEDOM AND DETERMINISM IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY JEWISH THOUGHT

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INTRODUCTION

Rabbi Leone de Modena of Venice (1571-1648) has been of continuous interest to scholars of both Jewish and general history. It was not until 1946, however, that historians wrote about him with anything approaching what today would be called historical objectivity. Modena scholarship had been consistently marred by presentism and a tendency to see in Modena a friend or foe of whatever religious controversies were current for those writing about him.

In 1946, with Ellis Rivkin’s ground breaking dissertation on the first forty years of Modena’s life, historians began to use contextual methodology in their approach to the Rabbi. Scholars such as Bezaleel Safran, Mark Cohen, and Shlomo Simonsohn examined not only Modena’s writings, but also the times in which he lived and wrote. The result was a richer and more accurate understanding of the Rabbi and his times, as many of the mysteries and contradictions that intrigued earlier scholars were resolved.

Contemporary scholars have, nonetheless, given insufficient consideration to one of the most important aspects of Modena’s life: his role as Rabbi of Venice and the effect of that role on his writings and actions. Much of Modena’s writing was restricted by his position as a prominent leader of an important Jewish community. More importantly many of his ideas were determined by his role as rabbi: he had to address problems and threats to his people which a lay reader or independent scholar might tend to view as secondary personal goals. By considering Modena in his role as community leader, and by paying careful attention to the unique problems which faced Jews in Italy during the seventeenth century, this study will demonstrate a more complete picture of Modena and the era in which he lived.
A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF MODENA SCHOLARSHIP: THE EARLY PHASE

Two of Modena’s works, the anti-Kabbalah polemic Ari Nohem and Riti, a description of Judaic customs written to promote tolerance of Judaism, had the greatest influence of both Jewish and Christian Scholar’s perceptions of Modena immediately after his death.¹ Anti-Jewish Christians countered the favorable impression of Jewish customs in Riti by portraying Modena as a dissembler and a hater of Christianity. Those favorably disposed to Jews read, translated, and used it in the spirit in which it was written. For example, Richard Simon, a Catholic priest who defended Jews, translated Riti into French in 1674. In his introduction, Simon expresses for the Jews and for Modena in particular. At the opposite extreme is a voluminous anti-Jewish polemic published in 1683 by the Jewish apostate Giulio Morosini, previously Samuel Nahmias, a former student of Modena. In Via della Fede, Morosini portrayed Jews as hostile to Christians in order to undermine Modena’s presentation in Riti of Jewish customs that were not based on any anti-Christian bias.

A parallel tendency among Jewish scholars of using Modena’s works for partisan battles began in the 1730s in connection with the controversy surrounding Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto of Padua. Luzzatto encountered serious opposition from Jewish leaders all over Europe because of his kabbalistic teachings. When Modena’s work, Ari Nohem was quoted by the anti-Luzzatto forces as a source for arguments against the study of Kabbalah, the pro-Luzzatto forces countered that Modena’s ideas were poisonous and had even spread to the non-Jews.²

MODENA AND WISSENSCHAFT

From the Luzzatto affair until the start of the scientific study of Judaism, the Wissenschaft, interest in Modena lay relatively dormant. His Riti was reprinted with the usual pro and con reactions; he was mentioned in Hebrew bibliographies; some of his works were summarized in an encyclopedia published in 1753; and in 1754 it was claimed by the kabbalist, Azulai, that Modena had recanted his stance on transmigration of souls in an autobiographical work called Life of Judah. During this period European Jewry was too occupied with Napoleon’s effort to define the relationship between Jews and the state to engage in much else.³
Interest in Modena was revived in the nineteenth century with the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. This era ushered in the haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, and the beginning of Reform Judaism. Once again, Modena’s stand on Kabbalah was used in a partisan way. Those who had an interest in fighting Kabbalah suppressed suggestions that Modena may have recanted his stance late in life. His writing was an excellent source for understanding Jewish life in the late Renaissance and early Reformation periods went unevaluated. For example, Isaac Samuel Reggio of Gorizia (1784-1855), one of the founders of modern Jewish scholarship, who possessed a copy of *The Life of Judah*, knowingly suppressed personal facts of Modena’s life which would have cast the Rabbi in a bad light. Reggio wished to employ an unblemished Modena to fight the Kabbalah movement; Enlightenment scholars had an interest in promoting Modena as a proto-Reformed Jew and Modena’s opposition to the Kabbalah was falsely interpreted as anti-Talmudic. This tendency first appeared in 1846 when Samuel David Luzzatto labeled Modena “a hater of the sages of the Mishna and the Talmud more than the Karaites. He was more Reform that Geiger.”

Abraham Geiger, the father of Reform Judaism, continued what had become by then a tradition in Modena scholarship: he distorted Modena’s writings to legitimize his own positions with the works of a scholar from the seventeenth century. Geiger claimed that Modena’s stance against the Kabbalah was an attack on the entire Jewish oral tradition. Only because he was intimidated by the rabbis of his time, claimed Geiger, did Modena fail to attack the Talmud.

Geiger’s use of history as a justification for the Reform agenda was challenged by Heinrich Graetz. Graetz disdained the Reform movement and its misuse of Jewish history. Nevertheless, he, as much as Geiger, used Modena’s writings for partisan purposes and further destroyed any possible objective view of Modena. Graetz, in order to deprive Geiger of the precedent of a seventeenth century precursor to Reform Judaism, portrayed Modena as an unstable person with personal problems and numerous character flaws. Graetz asserted that there was no consistency in Modena’s views, and that therefore it would have been useless to use Modena’s works as proof of anything, much less to appropriate him as the “first Reform Rabbi.”

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to present a complete description of the politics of Modena scholarship up to the present time, the examples presented here demonstrate a marked tendency of Jewish historians to be so involved in debates, controversies, and trends of their times that the chance of an unbiased objective history of Modena was impossible. Scholars ignored manuscripts unless they supported their particular doctrine, and changing interpretations of Modena’s life and writings were subverted by a faulty scholarship based on an *a priori* approach to the subject.
A turning point in Modena scholarship came with Ellis Rivkin’s 1946 Ph.D. dissertation on the first forty years of Modena’s life. Rivkin’s work places Modena in the context of seventeenth-century Venice and the intellectual currents of that particular time. He successfully defended Modena against the nineteenth century charge of heresy, hypocrisy, and weakness of character, and presented the rabbi as a respected preacher, scholar, and poet. Relying on Modena’s autobiography, Rivkin portrayed him as having “suffered from feelings of frustration and failure.” Rivkin goes on to conclude “Modena had trouble applying himself conscientiously to tasks which required sustained effort.” For Rivkin, Modena’s works were second rate; he was a dabbler and only wrote to support himself. The weakness of Rivkin’s research is that he limited it to published sources and did not base it directly on available manuscripts. He also concluded anachronistically that Modena was a “democratic liberal who was tolerant of many conflicting points of view no matter how much he opposed them, as long as he could learn something from them.”

While Rivkin was working on his dissertation in the United States, Shlomo Simonsohn was writing on Modena at the University of London. Simonsohn, like Rivkin, used contextual methods to examine the texts and attributed the perceived contradictions in Modena as having resulted from the failure of previous scholars to place the Rabbi in the proper context. The major source of evidence of Modena’s supposed heresy is Kol Sakhal, which contains a heretical attack on the validity of the Oral Law. The authorship of Kol Sakhal has always been a matter of debate. Tradition attributes it to Ibn Raz who was a known heretic and who lived in Spain in the fifteenth century. Modena published Kol Sakhal and attached his own attack on its heretical ideas in Shagath Areyh. Scholars such as Geiger who had an interest in proving that Modena questioned Oral Law, tried to prove that Modena himself wrote Kol Sakhal. Those who viewed Modena as a defender of Rabbinic Judaism accepted that Modena published the heretical work not as its author but in order to refute it. Simonsohn did not deal with the authorship of Kol Sakhal but instead set out to present Modena as a “humanistically inclined liberal,” whose supposed self-contradictions were imagined by nineteenth-century scholars. Such scholars, Simonsohn felt, viewed Modena from their own perspective saw contradictions, heresy and lack of character where these things did not exist.

After publishing their ground breaking works on Modena, Simonsohn and Rivkin turned to other projects. Other scholars continued the study of Modena in the 1970s. New archival information about and new studies of Venetian Jewish history appeared. Scholars such as Benjamin Ravid, Reuven Bonfil, David Ruderman, Paul Grendler, and Brian Pullan in the 1970s and Daniele Carpi, Mark Cohen, and Yacob Boksenboim in the 1980s, carried on Simonsohn’s and Rivkin’s research.
The most recent studies of Modena have attempted a more objective approach. The nineteenth century doctrinal controversies no longer elicit attention from historians. There are no longer political connotations to debate over the Kabbalah, and while the fights between the Reform and Orthodox branches of Judaism still rage, they are fought over issues such as the question of "who is a Jew." Modena is no longer of interest as an example or proof of any particular contemporary school of thought or practice. Historical interest is now centered on a more modest curiosity of what can teach us about seventeenth-century Italy.

For example, Modena’s Rabbinic Responsa are a source of information on Jewish life in seventeenth-century Venice. His responses to problems posed to him as a Rabbi are of value for historians interested in the cultural milieu, and they also reveal much about Modena himself. In one case, Modena was asked to respond to charges that he had preached in a Sabbath sermon that it is permitted for a Jew to go about bare-headed. He responded that, although he never advocated that Jews make a practice of removing their head coverings, it was important to distinguish between custom and law. Modena proved that covering the head amongst Jews was a custom and therefore its observance should be relative to time and place. He then went on to assert that the connotation of uncovering the head is different for the various Jewish communities. For Levantine Jews, an uncovered head is an act of disrespect, or chutzpah; for Ashkenazic Jews, the opposite is true. In Christian Europe it is respectful to remove one’s hat in certain circumstances.12

Modena also made the point in his response to the question of head-covering, that it was important for the Italian Rabbinate of Ashkenazic origin to take a stand and explain their position on this issue and others like it. It was unacceptable, wrote Modena, for his community to stand idle while it came to be accepted that the Levantine Jews were more observant, and therefore more God-fearing, than those Jews of the Italian Rite.13

There are several important points to be derived from this particular Responsa. It provides interesting evidence of conflict within the Ghetto due to the influx of Jews from all over the world. Modena’s writing reveals his sensitivity to a holier-than-thou attitude amongst certain sects within the community. Furthermore, the responsum shows the element of threat to Italian Rabbis posed by charges that they were lax in their religious observance.

Deciding a point of Jewish Law by reference to “time and place” is also an innovation. To Modena, Scriptural commandments and Rabbinic ordinances were to be distinguished from customs. Jewish customs varied according to the origin of the community. Jews
appropriated customs from their host cultures, and historical circumstances were to be considered in deciding matters of custom. This historical perspective was unusual in Modena’s time and can be seen as an early example of historical thinking in Jewish history.14

MODENA, KABBALAH, AND THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

Another aspect of Modena’s Responsa on the head-covering issue is its statement prohibiting use of the Kabbalah in deciding Jewish Law. He quoted and then dismissed out-of-hand a passage in The Zohar that mentions covering the head.15 It is Modena’s war against Kabbalah that continues to determine much of the interest in Modena among contemporary historians.

Modena’s generation was steeped in the study of the Kabbalah, and Modena himself studied Kabbalah from an early age.16 To understand his later opposition to mystical studies it is first necessary to distinguish the strains of Kabbalah and to examine their role in the climate of seventeenth-century Italy. Several possibilities have been advanced to explain this aspect of Modena’s thought. It has been suggested that he may have had personal reasons for turning against the particular form of Kabbalah which came to Venice with the arrival of Israel Shrug. Shrug, who came to Italy from Safed Palestine, claimed to be a student of Issac Luria (1534-1572) who founded a school of kabbalistic studies based on The Zohar. Before Shrug’s arrival, Italian Jews generally studied the interpretation of Kabbalah based on Moses Cordovero.17 Modena may have felt personally threatened by Shrug’s growing popularity, especially among Modena’s own followers. Much of what we know about Shrug is from Modena’s writings, in which he accused Shrug of being a charlatan.18 It has also been suggested that Modena may have turned against mysticism because of the death of his son, who became ill due to his father’s experiments with alchemy. These are unlikely explanations. Although there was some connection between alchemy and Kabbalah, it was essentially a tangential one. It is difficult to believe that Modena, who lived in an era in which Kabbalah flourished, and who himself studied it, would have so falsely conflated the two separate disciplines. Similarly, it is unlikely that Modena would turn against a major intellectual trend of his day because of a personal rivalry with one of its adherents. In fact, Modena’s war against Kabbalah reveals the core of the man and his times.

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Historians have often characterized the Renaissance as an era in which medieval Aristotelian scholasticism was rejected and Platonism was revived. It is more accurate, however, to say that Renaissance philosophers were concerned with synthesizing Platonic doctrine, Christian theology, and Aristotelian philosophy.\(^{19}\) The label of “Platonist” applies to a wide variety of Renaissance thinkers, each of whom contributed something different to the history of philosophy. What they held in common was a search for a philosophic tradition, a “philosopha perennis.”\(^{20}\) This common tradition is demonstrated by the tendency of Renaissance Neoplatonists to attribute apocryphal writings of late antiquity to pagan figures such as Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, Pythagoras, and Orpheus. Platonic philosophy, based on human reason, was seen as an essentially revelatory knowledge that predated Plato.\(^{21}\) Platonic philosophy was a continuation of pagan theosophy, and Christian and Jewish theology were seen as being in fundamental agreement with both.\(^{22}\)

One of the more fascinating aspects of the Italian Renaissance was the unprecedented level of intellectual intercourse between Jews and Christians. Partially as a result of this attempt to find common roots of knowledge between Pagan theology, Greek philosophy, and Christian and Jewish doctrine, dialogue developed between Jewish and Christian intellectuals. Until the end of the fourteenth century, Jews had translated many important non-Jewish philosophical works into Hebrew. Beginning with the fifteenth century the reverse was true; there was a growing desire among Christians for access to Jewish works.\(^{23}\) The desire for synthesis led Christian scholars to develop a curiosity about Kabbalah. Through Jewish translators and instructors, thinkers such as Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), Egidio da Viterbo (1465-1532), and Reuchlin (1455-1522) gained access to Jewish mysticism.

Pico’s name is closely connected with Kabbalah among Christians, and he was the first to attempt to create a Christian Kabbalah. He adapted the kabbalistic method of interpreting the Scriptures by finding hidden meaning in the literal word to find hints and references for support of Christianity. Fundamental Christian doctrines such as the “Messiah who has come” were substituted for the Jewish doctrine of the “Messiah who will come.”\(^{24}\) One kabbalistic technique, gematria, is to interpret meaning in Scriptures by analyzing their numerical equivalents, and Christian kabbalists used this method to find sources for belief in the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, and Jesus as Messiah.

Mainstream Kabbalah, or theosophical Kabbalah, is concerned with the divine structure of the universe. It postulates the existence of divine powers, called sefirot, which emanate from God to this world. Man, by performing the divine commandments, or mitzvot, exerts influence on the heavenly realms.\(^{25}\) By contrast, ecstatic Kabbalah, sometimes referred to as a lower form of Kabbalah, is more concerned with mystical experiences not necessarily induced by performance of the mitzvot.\(^{26}\) It is more anthropomorphic and makes use of divine names of God in order to reach mystical experience.
The first clash between kabbalists occurred when Abraham Abulafia (1240-1291), who taught mystical-ecstatic Kabbalah, was criticized by Abraham ibn Adret (1235-1310) of the theosophical school. Adret objected to Abulafia's excessive prophetic messianism and Abulafia countered with the charge that the theosophic mysticism of Adret, with its concern with the sefirot, was dangerously close to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The result of the controversy was that the practitioners of ecstatic Kabbalah, unwelcome in Spain, migrated to Italy and to the Levant, where they flourished in a Moslem environment.27

It is easy to understand how both forms of Kabbalah, with their system of practice designed to influence the divine realms, would appeal to the Renaissance mind with its marked interest in magic. This interest was woven into a fabric in which Kabbalah, magic, science, and philosophy formed the basis for a system of thought by Christian scholars such as Ficino and Pico. Simultaneous with Christian interest in magic, and somewhat influenced by it, Jewish scholars also began to delve into the mystical arts. Conceptions of magic previously rejected by Judaism were rediscovered and works on magic by Christians were published in Hebrew.28

Another factor in this cross-fertilization between Judaism and Christianity, and the resulting interest in the esoteric disciplines in both communities, was the growth of the printing industry.29 Previously rare manuscripts became more accessible. Modena, who worked in publishing, was intimately aware of the growing availability of controversial works on magic and Kabbalah. As leader of a community, he was also aware of the power and possible danger posed by this trend.30

It is by understanding Modena in his role as rabbi that his rejection of the Kabbalah can be best understood. Although a common interest in esoteric studies fostered cultural and intellectual exchanges between Jews and Christians, there was also a dangerous side to this exchange. Kabbalah, as mentioned above, was used by many Christian scholars as proof for various Christian doctrines. It was also used to entice Jews to convert to Christianity. In fact, some Jews did not need much enticing, and used Christian interpretations of Kabbalah as justification for becoming apostates. Some apostates became the most vocal advocates of Christianity and preached to other Jews of their conversion. Apostates were not always uneducated in Judaism and some used their new-found religion as a way to advance in Gentile society. For example, Paul Ricci, a prolific writer and kabbalist, became physician to Maximilian I as well as Professor of Greek and Hebrew at the University of Pavia.31 Even Modena was offered a professorship on the condition he convert.
MOcENA AS RABBI OF VENICE

The most salient fact of Modena's life was his position as a chief rabbi of the Ashkenazim of Venice. This aspect of Modena's life has not been sufficiently considered even by the most recent research. The contradictions and the mysteries surrounding him are no longer problematic when one views Modena primarily in his role as a responsible leader of a community during troubled times. A good source for such a view is found in his Responsa which have been compiled into Ziknei Yehuda. Many of these rulings illustrate Modena's great concern for the maintenance of traditional Rabbinic Judaism in the face of threats both from within and without the Jewish Community.

The Venetian Jewish Community was unusual in its composition. Jews from all over the world were establishing sub-communities in the ghetto. In an introductory statement to Zeknei Yehuda, Modena warned of the danger posed to the Venetian Jews by fragmentation of the community. In the past, lamented Modena, Jews were able to reach consensus by majority opinion. This became increasingly impossible in Venice: "It happens consistently here in Venice, where the community is divided into many sub-committees, that any agreement reached by majority reverts consistently to disagreement among various factions." This fragmentation was especially worrisome to Modena because it had repercussions for the Jews in their relationship with the Gentile government. Referring to those Jews who chose to use the non-Jewish courts and thus further undermine the unity and self-government of the Jewish community, Modena stated: "How great is the sin of those who embarrass their brothers in front of the Gentile governors by entering into judgement on money and criminal matters in non-Jewish courts."32

Although the first ghetto was established in Venice in 1516, it was not until the start of the seventeenth century that this geographical constraint was a way of life for Italian Jews. This period also marks a general repression of Jews as the Catholic Church attempted to curtail the Reformation. The free flow of learning between Jews and Christians which marked the earlier period of the Renaissance closed as the Church began to suspect that Jewish studies influenced Protestants and Humanists.34 It is wrong, however, to view this withdrawal from shared learning from one side only. Jews also began to withdraw into themselves. Modena, who in many ways represents the quintessential Renaissance Jew, viewed the ghetto favorably. In a letter to a friend in Verona, Modena called the Venetian ghetto "a sign of the ingathering of the exiles."35

Scholars have often equated rationalism with enlightenment and mysticism with obscurantism.36 In this view, Kabbalah would represent a Jewish withdrawal from the Gentile world and Modena's opposition to it would tend to create a perception of him as an early enlightened Jew. This view has left Modena scholarship in a constant state of confusion with nineteenth-century reformists claiming him as one of their own, and recent
scholars pointing to evidence to contradict that interpretation. This debate was the result of an incomplete understanding of what Kabbalah meant in the context of the Renaissance and what it came to mean during the Reformation and early Counter Reformation.

In Italy during the early sixteenth century, Kabbalah was part of a Renaissance trend of syncretism. As mentioned above, scholars tended to sift through pagan, early Christian, Jewish, and Neoplatonic sources for the purpose of creating a sort of metaphilosophy. Kabbalah as studied by both Jews and Gentiles was the opposite of obscurantism. Its aim was to open both societies to each other. There were those who recognized early the danger in opening the mystical writings of Judaism, not only to Gentiles, but to the average Jew was well. In Modena’s lifetime the danger became acute and apparent, and Modena in his role as Rabbi of Venice was well-placed to see and experience the danger first-hand.

The job of defending Rabbinic Judaism became increasingly difficult as the Oral Law came under attack, not only from the Catholic Church, which at various times issued orders to burn the Talmud, but also from some Protestant scholars such as Buxdorf who ridiculed Jewish religion because of its belief in the divine origin of the oral interpretation. Added to these challenges were a divided community, increasing disrespect of rabbinical authority, the conversion of Jewish Kabbalah to a Christian Kabbalah which was then used to convert Jews to Christianity, and the influx of those, such as Marranos, who were particularly vulnerable to Christian argument against Rabbinic Judaism.

Those Marranos who chose to return to Judaism carried with them the baggage of a confused Christian past. Many of them struggled not only with a worldly threat from the Inquisition when they returned to Judaism, but within themselves as well as they sought to understand the implications of their own Christian past. Venice was a refuge for many of these people because they could practice Judaism in the ghetto openly. However, the process of a large number of people moving from one faith to another had painful implications for the communities to which they came. Many of them were wealthy and took up places of prominence in their new lands, and some were intellectuals who had an impact on the culture of their times.

Modena was directly involved in a number of controversies involving Marranos. Once again his Rabbinic rulings provide an important source for understanding the challenges facing the Italian Rabbinate of the seventeenth century. Two such cases stand out. The first involved a request for a decision from Modena in the case of a Marrano who wanted to marry a divorced woman even though he had heard from another woman in Safed, who came from his family’s ancestral town, that his father was a Cohen. Modena answered emphatically that the marriage would be illegal. He quoted the Beit Yoseph: “If a forced convert should testify that one of his brethren is a Cohen, we can call him first to the Torah and we do not fear that perhaps his mother is not Jewish, since all forced converts know the law.”

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The most famous case involving a Marrano in which Modena played a key role was the case of David Farrar of Amsterdam, who was accused by the Rabbinate of heresy. Farrar, a scholar and prominent merchant, had returned to Judaism and, after moving to Amsterdam from Salonika, began to engage in polemics with Christians. Problems began when a controversy arose in Amsterdam concerning a ritual slaughterer whose adherence to Jewish Law was questioned. Farrar, in defiance of the rabbis, ruled that the meat in question was permitted and publicly advised his followers to use it. Further complications arose when Farrar preached in the synagogue that practical Kabbalah was no longer effective.

We know of Modena's involvement with the Farrar case from a letter sent to the rabbis of Salonika who had asked Modena's advice in the matter. No mention of Farrar's defense of the ritual slaughterer was made in this letter. Instead, Modena defended Farrar and pointed out that the former Marrano is a "good man of many good acts who was the first to establish a synagogue in Amsterdam and who dons the tefilin and tzitzit and who is strict to fulfill the rulings of the sages." Farrar's attack on Kabbalah was also defended by Modena, and this marked the beginning of the latter's open stance against Kabbalah.

Modena's disagreement with the Rabbinate in the case of Farrar did not indicate a generally lax attitude toward the power of the rabbis in communal affairs. We know from other recorded controversies that Modena was a zealous advocate of rabbinic prerogative. His defense of Farrar represents both a concern for the integration of former Marranos back into mainstream Judaism and a growing sense of the danger that Kabbalah posed to Jewish life.

**Conclusion**

Historians have generally shared the view of Modena as a complicated and often inconsistent figure. *Life of Judah*, Modena's autobiography, is the source of much of this perception. Indeed, there is much in this self-revelatory work that is disturbing to one searching for consistency. For example, Modena revealed himself as an "obsessive" gambler. He listed among his accomplishments the distribution of protective amulets, in spite of his preaching against mysticism. Also disturbing to some historians, is Modena's constant mention of money. By viewing Modena in the context of his times, these problems disappear. For example, in the case of gambling, it has been pointed out that in Modena's day, that particular form of recreation was acceptable and that it was common for Jews and
Christians to socialize in casinos.\(^4^6\) It has been maintained that Modena’s involvement with the amulets predates his move into the anti-Kabbalah camp. Finally, his obsession with money reflected the difficulty he had in making a living from his writing, teaching, and rabbinic role. One can also question the wisdom of looking for consistency in the case of Modena, who wrote so much over so long a period of time.

The extent to which Modena was an interesting and unusual person reflects the fact that he lived in an unusual time and place. In a sense he was the consummate “Renaissance man.” His variety of interests, including poetry, and preaching, as well as the standard Renaissance style of learning based on grammar and rhetoric, place him squarely in an era which began well before his generation.\(^4^7\) And like the previous generation, he exemplified the characteristic tendency toward Jewish and Christian socialization and intellectual cooperation. However, he also represents the pulling away from each other and the general tendency in both groups toward introversion. Modena’s own intellectual development symbolizes the Renaissance giving way to the Counter-Reformation. Both communities were interested in each other in terms of learning and philosophy, but interest tended to sour when Jews became Christians and new Christians reverted to Judaism. Just as Renaissance Hermeticism failed to create peace between Catholics and Protestants, similarly it failed to reconcile Judaism with Christianity.\(^4^8\)

Modena was first and foremost a rabbi. One can almost feel his pain in a letter he wrote to Ben-Tzion Tzarfati in 1605 concerning the matter of an Ashkenazic Jew who was about to convert to Christianity. The rabbi appealed to Tzarfati for help in this matter, even though “the danger is great and it is proper to do nothing, whether big or small.”\(^4^9\)

None of Modena’s published works are of ground breaking significance. He did not establish a new approach to learning, either by forging a new methodology or by codifying the existing body of law. His arguments against the Kabbalah are often superficial. For example, in *Art Nohem*, Modena devoted much effort to the argument that the *Zohar* could not have been written by Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai since it quoted authorities who lived after his time.\(^5^0\) This is an unconvincing argument since it had long been held by adherents of the *Zohar* that Bar Yohai taught his precepts orally to his disciples who in turn taught it to their students until it was finally written down by a later generation of disciples. Modena’s learning, like much Renaissance scholarship, was broader than it was deep.\(^5^1\) This says less about Modena’s intellectual gifts than it does about the fact that his polemics were aimed at the immediate goal of distancing the Jewish layman from the study of Kabbalah. One almost gets the feeling that Modena only half-heartedly believed in his own arguments.

This habit of polemical argumentation aimed more at achieving a desired goal rather than delving deep into the core of an issue is also apparent in Modena’s anti-Christian work, *Mogen Veherev*.\(^5^2\) In it, Modena advances a historical argument for the rise of Christianity and poses various arguments against the Trinity, Virgin Birth, and incarnation. Yet he is
respectful towards Christianity in general and has some very charitable things to say about Christian society and culture. Once again, one is left with the impression that Modena was more concerned with steering Jews away from Christianity than he was with disproving Christian dogma.

Just as many of his arguments against Kabbalah are superficial, much of his anti-Christian polemic seems aimed towards a limited goal. Modena lived in turbulent times for Jews, and his role as rabbi limited him in ways not sufficiently recognized by historians. Changing conditions in general society created changing relations between Jews and Christians. New aspirations and adaptations within Jewish society to meet these challenges created tensions. Modena embodied much of this turbulence and it is that which should give him continuing importance in modern studies.

In our times, we are faced with similar confusion as cultures meet and ways are sought to understand the dynamics of multi-cultural societies. We have much to learn from seventeenth-century Venice as experienced by Modena. The various Jewish communities of Italy during the Renaissance were engaged in a unique relationship with their Christian hosts. Never before were conditions for a shared cultural environment so ripe. It must be remembered that this era pre-dates the racial anti-Semitism of the nineteenth century, and as the religious anti-semitism abated for this brief time in Jewish-Christian relations, so did many of the barriers to cultural exchange.

This situation changed by the time that the Counter-Reformation was at its height. There was no longer the free and easy exchange of ideas and culture of the previous generation. Modena's life and times correspond to an era in which Jews and Christians withdrew from each other. While Modena in many ways continued to represent the Renaissance-style Italian rabbi, he also became the product of the ghettoization of Italian Jewry.

Historians still interested in Modena should use his writings as a source for understanding the dynamics of the changes that occurred in Jewish-Christian relations from the end of the Renaissance to the beginning of the Counter-Reformation. These changes are a reflection of the general trends of those times.
NOTES


3 Ibid., 28.
4 Ibid., 43.
5 Ibid., 59.
6 Ibid., 91.
7 Ibid., 108.
8 Ibid., 174.
9 Ibid., 173.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 177.
12 Ibid., 181.


22 Ibid.


26 Ibid., 64.

27 Ibid.


30 Ibid., 271.


32 Modena, *Zeknei Yehuda*, 172

33 Ibid.

34 Shlomo Simonsohn, “Halacha and Society in the Writings of Leone da Modena,” in *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth-Century*, 436.

35 Ibid., 437.

36 Ibid.


39 There is a scriptural proscription for a Cohen to marry a divorced woman. The issue here was whether or not marranos retain the genealogical knowledge of their ancestors.

40 Modena, *Zeknei Yehuda*.


42 Ibid.


44 Adelman, “Rabbi Leon Modena,” 275

45 It is questionable to use Modena’s auto-biography for proof of inconsistency. It is possible that Modena used his diary for self-expression and therapeutic purposes, not expecting it to be published. For a discussion of early modern autobiography see Natalie Zemon Davis’ “Fame and Secrecy: Leon Modena’s Life as an Early Modern Autobiography”.


48 Ibid.


53 Adelman, “Rabbi Leon Modena.”

54 For a discussion of the transition from the form of anti-Semitism of the early modern period in Europe to that of the racially based anti-Semitism of the late modern period, see Hanna Arendt’s *Antisemitism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1951).
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